

Compassion Saves You Cash

The Case for Investing in
Community-Based, Culturally
Relevant Support for Migrant
Women Furthest from Support
in Newham



A report by the UK Women's
Budget Group and the
Women in Newham Network

**Compassion
and cultural
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Contents

Executive Summary	2
Key Messages	4
Recommendations	5
The Women in Newham Network	13
Building Networks	14
The Context: NRPF & NEWHAM	18
The Economic Cost of the NRPF Condition	20
The Cost of Inadequate Support from Non-Specialised Services	26
The Toll on Under-resourced Organisations	28
Strength in Place: The Newham Ecosystem	30
Reframing the Narrative: From Compliance to Compassion	32
The Role of Local Organisations: What Works	34
Conclusion	

Executive Summary

This report, produced by the UK Women's Budget Group in collaboration with the Women in Newham Network (WiNN), makes the economic and moral case for investing in early, community-based support for migrant women, particularly those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). These women are among the most marginalised in Newham, facing multiple barriers to support due to immigration status, poverty, and language or cultural differences.

Migrant women are disproportionately at risk of poverty and this hardship has an impact on children growing up. Tackling women's economic disadvantage through access to work with fair pay, adequate benefits, affordable childcare and better access to stable housing reduces child poverty as well and will have better long-term impacts for Newham's residents.

A network of grassroots organisations is currently delivering life-changing work and support in the borough for these women, often without sustainable funding or formal recognition. This report argues that the policy and funding challenge is not to build new systems from scratch, but to invest in what already works. This requires action at multiple levels. Locally, it means integrating specialist grassroots organisations into housing, health and safeguarding pathways; using council-owned assets strategically to support co-located services; and adopting a prevention-first approach to commissioning processes. Nationally, it requires addressing the structural drivers of destitution for migrant women, including the NRPF condition and restrictions on work for asylum-seeking women.

For funders, it means shifting from short-term project grants towards long-term, flexible investment in organisations and networks that deliver sustained impact and recognise that funding staff wellbeing supports resilience and enables participation in strategic work.

Taken together, the findings of this report show that compassion and cultural competence need not be in competition with fiscal discipline. They are forms of it. Investing in early, specialist, community-based support improves safety and stability for migrant women and their children while reducing avoidable public expenditure. In a context of rising demand and constrained budgets, this is not simply a moral argument but a practical one.

With a recently appointed Chief Executive and local elections in May 2026 promising a new Mayor and a refreshed cabinet, this is a critical time to re-examine the values and commitment of Newham as a Borough of Sanctuary: one that centres prevention, gender equity and collaboration with grassroots organisations rather than crisis and political fragmentation. The recommendations set out in this report provide a realistic and evidence-based route towards that goal.

Key Messages

Early intervention works and saves money.

Culturally competent, community-led support reduces demand on costly crisis services such as health, housing, and safeguarding.

Poor advice increases costs. Misinformed or generic support delays outcomes, worsens trauma, and leads to avoidable public spending.

Compassion is cost-effective. Trauma-informed care improves health, stability, and employment prospects, all contributing to broader economic benefits.

The infrastructure already exists. Newham is home to a vibrant network of trusted grassroots organisations. With the right support, these services can expand and thrive.

Networks strengthen impact. Collaborative platforms like WiNN improve coordination and collaboration between local organisations, statutory services and funders, and reduce duplication. They enable faster, more strategic responses during times of crisis but more crucially: are spaces where systems change partnerships can emerge.

Recommendations

1 Embed a Prevention-First, Gendered Approach to Migrant Women Across Local Services

Lead

Newham Council and Health Authorities

Recommendation

Embed a prevention-first, gendered and culturally competent approach to migrant women across housing, health, safeguarding and employment services, with named leadership and sustained investment in community-based provision. This means inviting specialist “lived, learned and experienced” women’s organisations into decision making spaces where budgets, commissioning priorities and policies are shaped.

Why

The report shows that migrant women with NRPF and insecure status experience hidden homelessness, exploitation and poor mental health, often avoiding statutory services due to fear and past harm. Specialist community organisations already prevent escalation into crisis, but their work remains marginal to mainstream commissioning.

How (cost-aware)

This can be achieved by redirecting existing prevention and wellbeing budgets towards early intervention rather than crisis response. Integrating grassroots women’s organisations into referral pathways reduces repeat presentations to emergency housing, safeguarding and health services and saves the state money.

2 Integrate Specialist Grassroots Organisations into Statutory Pathways

Lead:

Newham Council Housing, Public Health and Social Care

Recommendation

Formally integrate specialist, place-based women-led and migrant-led organisations into homelessness prevention, domestic abuse, immigration advice and wellbeing pathways as delivery partners, not informal add-ons.

Why

Evidence in the report shows that generic advice services often fail women with NRPF or insecure immigration status, leading to wrongful refusals, delays and further harm. Women are more likely to engage with trusted organisations that understand culture, language and trauma. Small organisations, for all their stretched capacity, still offer one-to-one relational support which by-passes the default digital route to access online systems – another barrier to widening inequalities.

How (cost-aware)

This requires service-level agreements and small commissioning arrangements rather than large new contracts. It reduces the cost of poor advice, avoids duplication, encourages co-location and shortens the time women spend in crisis systems.

3 Use Council-Owned Assets Strategically to Support Co-Located Women's Services

Lead:

Newham Council (Estates and Community Infrastructure)

Recommendation

Transform under-used council buildings, starting with Stratford Advice Arcade, into supported hubs for co-located women's and migrant services.

Why

The report demonstrates that holistic, co-located services remove practical barriers such as language, transport and repeated disclosure of trauma. At present, organisations like FCSS maintain council premises informally without support, while valuable space remains under-used or threatened with sale.

How (cost-aware)

Rather than acquiring new buildings, the council can repurpose existing assets with light-touch oversight, named liaison officers and fair rent arrangements. This increases social value without major capital spend and strengthens the local service ecosystem.

4 Delayed Settlement Deepens Gendered Poverty – and Increases Public Cost

Lead

Newham Council, with support from London borough partners and civil society networks

Recommendation

Newham Council leadership should:

- Publicly oppose the proposed Home Office Earned Settlement reforms, using its leadership, partnerships and – where appropriate – legal routes to register clear concern.
- Work collectively through London Councils, the GLA and national networks to advocate for safeguards and protections for women and children already within the immigration system.

- Assess and evidence the local impact of these reforms, including any increases in NRPF caseloads, temporary accommodation use, safeguarding pressures and associated costs.
- Continue to support access to specialist, accredited immigration advice, including provision delivered by grassroots and by-and-for organisations.

Why

Although settlement policy is set nationally, its consequences are borne locally. Longer and more conditional routes to settlement risk deepening gendered and child poverty, prolonging immigration insecurity and increasing reliance on high-cost crisis interventions, including temporary accommodation.

Without mitigation, these reforms could embed higher long-term costs for Newham, undermine prevention work and recovery pathways, and shift avoidable financial pressures onto already stretched local services. They may also destabilise specialist women's organisations and frontline staff who are supporting women through increasingly complex systems. Protecting fair and workable settlement pathways is not only an issue of equity — it is essential to sustaining local support infrastructure and managing public cost.

How (cost-aware)

The Council can strengthen monitoring and cross-borough collaboration using existing NRPF, housing and safeguarding data systems, alongside ethical and non-hostile data collection practices. Early evidence gathering and joint advocacy through established London networks can help prevent avoidable escalation in temporary accommodation and crisis spend, reducing longer-term financial pressure on local budgets.

5 Support Safe Progression Pathways and the #LiftTheBan Campaign

Lead

National Government with Local Authority Advocacy

Recommendation

Support reform of the asylum work ban so women can work legally and support themselves while cases are processed. Training (including ESOL), volunteering and pre-employment support are all essential building blocks to avoid destitution and exploitation whilst promoting belonging and dignity.

Why

Restrictions on work entrench poverty, exploitation and mental distress. Women seeking sanctuary are disproportionately at risk of poverty and this hardship has an impact on children growing up. Tackling women's economic disadvantage through access to work with fair pay, adequate benefits, affordable childcare and better access to stable housing reduces child poverty as well and will have better long-term outcomes for residents of Newham.

How (cost-aware)

Reform would reduce reliance on emergency accommodation and social security while generating tax revenue and easing labour shortages.

6 Recognise and Sustain the Women in Newham Network (WiNN) as Shared Infrastructure

Lead:

Funders and Newham Council

Recommendation

Invest in WiNN as shared, specialist civic infrastructure rather than a short-term project.

Why

Short-term, project-based funding undermines the prevention work that saves public money. Seek out networks, like WiNN, which are establishing and help them achieve generational impact by funding time and space for strategic work – not just service delivery. This is what changes systems.

How (cost-aware)

Fund coordination, facilitation and staff time rather than duplicating frontline services. Networks multiply the impact of existing funding and reduce fragmentation through specialism and collaboration.

7 Shift Funding Practice Towards Long-Term Stability and Prevention

Lead:

Independent and Trust Funders and Commissioners

Recommendation

Provide multi-year, flexible core funding to grassroots women's organisations and networks. Be positive about supporting budgets that allow staff time to be strategic and open to broader

success measures like safety, trust and confidence and commit to simplifying reporting bureaucracy.

Why

Short-term project grants force organisations into crisis delivery mode and prevent long-term planning and meaningful engagement in systems change work.

How (cost-aware)

Reducing administrative burden and supporting organisational stability increases service quality and prevents collapse of trusted provision that would be costly to replace.

8 Fund Staff Wellbeing as Part of Frontline Resilience

Lead

Funders and Commissioners

Recommendation

Include staff wellbeing and supervision (“care budgets”) as eligible costs in funding agreements.

Why

Trauma-informed work with migrant women takes a heavy emotional toll. Burnout undermines continuity of care and increases recruitment and training costs. This report documents burnout, staff turnover and organisational fragility caused by insecure funding.

How (cost-aware)

Small investments in supervision and counselling prevent higher long-term costs linked to staff sickness, turnover and service disruption.

9

Improve Local Data on Hidden Need and Women with NRPF

Lead:

Newham Council with WiNN Partners

Recommendation

Develop ethical, gender-sensitive data collection that captures hidden homelessness, NRPF exclusion and cross-service journeys.

Why

This report shows that women remain invisible in official data, leading directly to under-investment and policy blind spots.

How (cost-aware)

Build on data already collected by community organisations and avoid creating new systems. Shared indicators and narrative reporting can inform commissioning without increasing risk to women.

The Women in Newham Network

Building Networks

The Women in Newham Network (WiNN) was established in October 2024 with funding and resourcing from the Local Resilience Fund through City Bridge Foundation and Smallwood Trust. It came out of an earlier co-design process that showed there was a real need for supported local networking for organisations working with women furthest from mainstream support in Newham.

100% of WiNN members report complex, intersectional needs for ALL women service users.

The top 3 issues Newham women seek help for are:

- High Level advice (especially Housing, No Recourse to Public Funds and Immigration)
- Access to basic items (food, clothes, baby supplies)
- Mental Health support

WiNN brings together nine local women's organisations. Collectively, partners deliver a wide range of frontline and preventative services, from food provision and crisis support to advice, volunteering opportunities and campaigning for systems change. Partners currently receive between £40,000 - £60,000 over 4 years. Relational facilitation support is provided from a Smallwood Trust programme manager which involves co-ordinating four network meetings a year and assisting with pieces of joint work to maintain momentum between meetings. Emphasis has been placed on lessening grant-making bureaucracy by simplifying applications and having an annual review visit instead of traditional monitoring.

Given the scale of need in the borough, and the reality that many partners are delivering crisis services day to day, there are inevitable challenges in sustaining momentum and creating space for joint strategic work. The ambition to collaborate and to shift systems is strong; what is harder, and requires ongoing support, is carving out the time, capacity and shared focus to do this well and inclusively. A network is not a partnership but it is crucial to be able to support these spaces to bring organisations together and build the foundations for future collaborations.

Despite these constraints, WiNN is starting to generate tangible, positive outcomes that illustrate the power of collaboration rooted in shared values. As relationships deepen and collective priorities begin to coalesce, partners are finding practical ways to work together that improve access, reduce duplication and strengthen support for women.

Benefits so far:

- Becoming a Smallwood Trust Community Grants Partner and sharing an additional £100K for grants to individual women
- Increased trust and the development of warm referral pathways
- Stepping in to offer space to co-locate services in times of emergency
- Being invited to access legal aid from University House Legal Aid Centre
- Sharing access to quality refurbished digital devices and mobile phones
- Collaborating on contributing to research as a group commissioned by Newham Council
- Collaborating on developing a Women's Manifesto for Newham
- Attending campaigning training
- Collaboratively making decisions about reprofiling funds in the best interests of the network and beginning to develop a toolkit which will sit alongside the onward granting scheme

In its first year, WiNN is showing that networks are not a "nice to have" add-on, but essential civic infrastructure. Even with limited resources, the network is improving access to support, strengthening trust between organisations, and creating the conditions for longer-term systems change. With time, sustained investment and continued facilitation, WiNN has clear potential to deepen its impact and play a transformative role in how women in Newham are supported.

The Women in Newham Network

With support over 4 years from City Bridge Foundation and Smallwood Trust, our network meets regularly to share, support and collaborate.

Our work focuses on women from asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant backgrounds specifically looking at ways we can empower them to be more resilient, avoid destitution and have aspirations for a better future.

Access to Quality Advice and Services and Routes out of Destitution are our focus.

This is what we're bringing to women in Newham through this fund:



Alternatives Trust East London - developing our service users through more opportunities for volunteering, building mental resilience, confidence and routes out of destitution



Carpenter's Cafe - supporting our volunteers who deliver our food poverty project with training, providing IT and employability courses as well as social opportunities for our women service users



Families & Community Support Service - offering professional advice and advocacy around welfare, benefits, emergency housing and destitution advice



Heal Together CIC - supporting mental health & wellbeing amongst Somali women, advocating for health equality, developing more strategic partnerships



Magpie Project - Sustaining our Family Support team who provide high quality advice to mother's living in temporary accomodation with children under 5 years old



Newham Community Project - Extending our Women's Hub which provides empowering activities from financial literacy, employability skills and help to leave abusive relationships



Shpresa Programme - Supporting a shared resource of an Albanian advice worker to plug our community into local services in Newham



Skills Enterprise - Sustaining our Project Co-ordinator to continue facilitating digital literacy work and develop more strategic partnerships



Southeast & East Asian Women's Assoc. - Developing a culturally-specific toolkit and training for SEA women to help them navigate a pathway to independence after escaping abusive employment or personal relationships

The Context: NRPF & NEWHAM

Many migrants in the UK are subject to a “No Recourse to Public Funds” (NRPF) condition, which blocks access to benefits like Universal Credit, housing support, and publicly funded childcare. For women on spousal or dependent visas, this often means total financial reliance on a partner. If that relationship ends, they may be left without income or immigration status, at risk of destitution and homelessness.

Though no exact figure exists, the House of Commons Library estimates over four million people in the UK are living with NRPF¹. In 2023, over 3,500 people applied to lift this restriction - 63% of them women - highlighting its disproportionate impact². Research suggests that women are disproportionately affected by the NRPF condition. They often face compounded vulnerabilities, including exposure to gender-based violence and exploitation³. The lack of access to public funds exacerbates these risks, making it imperative for support services to address their unique needs. It is conservatively estimated that over 10,000 residents in Newham are subject to the NRPF condition, which may include up to 4,000 children and young people⁴.

Local authorities must step in when NRPF households face serious harm or homelessness. In 2022/23, the cost of this support rose by 22%, reaching £77.6 million across just 82 councils⁵. Despite this duty, many women avoid seeking help due to fear of detention, deportation, or family separation under hostile environment policies - leaving them unsupported and invisible in official data.

Newham is one of the most diverse and dynamic boroughs in the UK. 69.2% of its population identifies as belonging to Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups and there are over 100 languages spoken in the borough⁶.

In a national climate marked by increasing hostility towards immigrants — reflected in divisive rhetoric, restrictive policy proposals, and the rise of anti-immigration parties such as Reform UK — Newham stands out as a borough that remains proudly welcoming and inclusive. This reputation is one of its greatest strengths. However, it also brings additional responsibility: to ensure that the borough’s multicultural residents and the organisations that support them are protected and adequately resourced. Sustained investment in these networks is essential if Newham is to continue to thrive as a place of safety, opportunity, and belonging for all.

However, Newham is also one of the most deprived boroughs in London, with 38% of residents living in poverty after housing costs; significantly higher than the London average of 25.9% and the national average of 22%⁷. This hardship disproportionately affects children, with 44% of Newham's children living in poverty, compared to 32% across London and 31% in England⁸. Newham ranks first in England for barriers to housing and services, reflecting serious challenges in access to affordable, secure accommodation and essential support services⁹. These indicators highlight the urgent need for targeted, inclusive policies and investment in locally rooted support systems.

While it faces high levels of deprivation, Newham is home to a network of vibrant, committed grassroots organisations that are already doing extraordinary work to support women who are furthest from mainstream services, including those subject to NRPF restrictions.

These organisations, often founded and led by women with lived experience of immigration control, domestic violence, and poverty, provide a vital safety net and a ladder out of crisis. This report recognises and celebrates their existing work. It does not propose building new structures from scratch. Instead, it shows how modest investment in what already works can deliver outsized economic and social benefits.

Removing barriers such as lack of suitable premises, precarious funding, and inflexible reporting requirements would allow these organisations to reach even more women and scale their impact significantly.

This report draws on a mixed-methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a fuller picture of the economic and social impacts of inadequate support for migrant women in Newham. Insights were gathered through a collaborative workshop between the Women's Budget Group and the Women in Newham Network (WiNN). WiNN contributed frontline expertise and experiences, case studies, and organisational data. These were complemented by secondary data from official statistics and national research, allowing for triangulation of findings and broader contextual understanding.

While the moral case for supporting women with NRPF is compelling enough on its own, we recognise that in the context of stretched local authority budgets, a strong economic argument is also essential. Investing in early, culturally competent support can prevent crisis escalation, reduce long-term costs across housing, health, and safeguarding services, and ultimately deliver better outcomes at lower public expense.

Our approach prioritises connection, compassion, and cultural understanding. This report outlines how and why this approach works, what gaps exist, and how funders and policymakers can act.

The Economic Cost of the NRPF Condition

The NRPF condition places significant economic burdens on both individuals and public services. Migrants with NRPF status are excluded from most public welfare services, creating barriers to accessing housing, healthcare, and social support. This often leads to greater vulnerability, higher risks of homelessness, exploitation, and poor mental and physical health.

Estimates suggest that lifting the NRPF condition could generate a net gain of £872 million over ten years. This figure reflects the long-term social and economic benefits of enabling vulnerable migrants to access public support, including improvements in housing stability, health outcomes, and productivity¹⁰. The analysis demonstrates that the benefits of reforming the NRPF policy far outweigh the costs of providing public services and social security benefits, underscoring the economic advantages of allowing migrants to access these resources.

The financial impact of homelessness due to NRPF is stark. A report by Crisis UK estimates that the total public sector cost of supporting a person experiencing homelessness in England is approximately £38,736 per year. This includes costs related to housing, health services, criminal justice, and mental health interventions¹¹. For women with NRPF, these costs often go unrecorded, as support is frequently provided informally by community organisations, leading to hidden financial burdens. The hidden costs of homelessness are further evidenced by the insight that, of the 226 women who stayed at Glass Door winter night shelters between November 2023 and April 2024, only 11.5% were recorded on CHAIN (Combined Homelessness and Information Network), a multi-agency database recording information about people sleeping rough in London¹².

The Centre for Mental Health (2024) estimates the annual economic cost of mental ill health in the UK at £119 billion, with migrant women facing immigration control at heightened risk for conditions such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety, caused by prolonged exposure to violence, uncertainty, and destitution¹³.

These figures highlight the significant economic toll that the NRPF condition imposes on both individuals and society, reinforcing the need for policy reform and better support for this vulnerable population.

Repercussions of Delayed Settlement

The Home Office consultation on earned settlement proposals closed mid-Feb 2026, with revised Immigration Rules potentially introduced through secondary legislation as early as spring or summer 2026. The government plans to increase the “standard qualifying period” for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) from 5 to 10 years. That means making repeated applications for limited leave to remain, without a break in leave, until being allowed to apply for ILR after that period. The government says this period may be reduced or increased, according to how people are judged to have contributed. If there are any missteps by an individual in this process, settlement routes could range between 3 and 30 years.

For women already on precarious immigration paths — including migrant survivors of violence, refugees, asylum-seekers, and lone mothers on low incomes — these changes risk deepening insecurity rather than reducing it. Southall Black Sisters has highlighted that lengthening the wait for settlement and tying eligibility to “clean” records, earnings and contribution markers can trap women in harmful situations, especially where no recourse to public funds or economic exploitation has been part of their lived experience¹⁴. Debt, benefit claiming, or minor criminalisation are often consequences of poverty, gender-based abuse or exploitation — yet under the proposed criteria these very factors could penalise women and push them further away from safety and stability.

These dynamics entrench both gendered and child poverty while shifting costs from national systems onto local authorities and the voluntary sector. It is also important to recognise the impact on specialist women’s organisations, particularly those led by and working with women with lived and learned experience of intersectional disadvantage. Many frontline staff are themselves subject to restrictive and hostile settlement regimes; further tightening of immigration policy risks destabilising this workforce and weakening delivery in areas where statutory provision is already insufficient. Protecting pathways to settlement is therefore not only a matter of equity for service users, but of sustaining the local infrastructure that supports women and children most at risk.

The Work Ban and Women Seeking Asylum: Trapped in Destitution

In the UK, asylum seekers are generally prohibited from working while their claims are processed, a period that can extend for months or even years. This policy impacts women in specific ways, who often arrive fleeing gender-based violence and find themselves trapped in poverty and exploitation due to the work ban. According to Women for Refugee Women, 10% of surveyed women were forced into sex work, 38% entered abusive relationships to survive, and nearly half lacked access to basic necessities like sanitary products. The report also highlights severe mental health consequences, with 85% experiencing anxiety or depression and 43% feeling suicidal. Despite 98% expressing a strong desire

to work and contribute to society, the current policy leaves them vulnerable to further harm and exploitation¹⁵.

Allowing women seeking asylum to work would not only reduce their vulnerability but also generate economic benefit. It could ease pressure on the asylum support system, increase tax revenues, and help address labour shortages. The Lift the Ban Coalition estimated that giving asylum seekers the right to work could generate £42.4 million per year in net gains to the UK economy through increased income tax and national insurance contributions. While not gender-specific, these findings underscore the potential financial benefit of a more humane and enabling approach to asylum policy¹⁶.

Asylum Seekers in Newham – an Accredited Borough of Sanctuary

Newham is among the UK's local authorities supporting the highest numbers of asylum seekers. As of 2024, the borough accommodated 1,397 individuals seeking asylum, placing it near the top nationally in terms of support provided¹⁷. This significant responsibility highlights the importance of local policies that not only meet basic needs but also promote dignity, safety, and opportunity - particularly for women, who face heightened risks under current restrictions like the work ban.

The Cost of Inadequate Support from Non-Specialised Services

Migrant women with NRPF status often face significant barriers to accessing appropriate support. The complexity of immigration rules and the lack of specialised advice services lead to delays, misunderstandings, and wrongful refusals of support. Many generic services, including housing, legal, and welfare advice, do not have the necessary expertise to navigate the specific needs of individuals facing immigration control, leading to missed opportunities for protection and support.

For women in crisis, particularly those fleeing domestic abuse or at risk of exploitation, inadequate or misinformed advice can have catastrophic consequences. These women are often:

- Denied access to shelters due to immigration status
- Given incorrect advice about their entitlements under domestic abuse or trafficking exemptions
- Left in abusive homes or exploitative work situations due to a lack of support

This failure to provide early, appropriate support leads to further harm, including escalating physical and mental health crises, increased reliance on unsafe informal support networks, and irreversible damage to families and children. Policymakers and funders must recognise the need for early intervention (and the costs involved when it is not provided) and support and fund organisations accordingly.

Generic advice services often fail to identify special conditions, such as the Domestic Violence Rule or trafficking indicators, and miss legal pathways to safety or settlement. These failures not only put the individual at greater risk but also place a financial burden on the system by prolonging vulnerability and increasing the need for emergency interventions.

Inadequate or delayed support from non-specialised services results in hidden costs that are borne by the public sector, including:

- Increased health and legal costs, as individuals continue to face crises without resolution
- Higher rates of re-traumatisation, which lead to long-term mental health issues and social instability
- Greater reliance on emergency services, such as homelessness shelters, police interventions, and mental health crisis teams and greater pressure on the community members and organisations to help given they have very little resources.

Compelling data exists on the economic benefits of offering free specialist legal advice. It was estimated that in 2023, such advice saved the UK government approximately £9,100 per case, against an average cost of £3,300 per case. This translates into a return of £2.71 for every £1 invested¹⁸. These findings underscore the potential for significant public sector savings through early legal intervention, particularly in areas like immigration, housing, and social security. In the context of supporting women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) in Newham, investing in accessible legal advice could not only alleviate individual hardships but also reduce long-term costs for local authorities and public services.

Investing in specialised support for migrant women with NRPF status is a cost-effective strategy. Southall Black Sisters found that supporting migrant victims of violence with NRPF status can save local authorities £18,024 per woman over three years, factoring in the costs of accommodation, health services, and legal support¹⁹. Furthermore, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's report suggests that providing appropriate support could result in £2 billion in social savings over 10 years, due to reductions in emergency interventions and long-term health and legal costs²⁰.

This evidence clearly demonstrates the long-term financial benefits of providing early, specialist support to migrant women with NRPF status, helping them to avoid more expensive and prolonged interventions.

Case Study 1



Elsie (Supported by Southeast and East Asian Women's Association - SEEAWA)

Elsie, the spouse of a British citizen, was trapped in an abusive relationship and feared deportation if she left. With early support, she was safely housed with a friend while her Destitute Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) application was submitted and approved within a week. This enabled her to access Universal Credit and start her journey to secure housing and legal status.

She received trauma-informed mental health support in her native language, registered with a GP, and was eventually granted Indefinite Leave to Remain under domestic violence provisions. Today, Elsie is a British citizen, working as a teaching assistant and free from abuse. Without early intervention, she may have remained in danger, unable to recover or achieve independence. This case shows how prompt, coordinated support protects wellbeing and enables women to rebuild their lives.

Case Study 2

Mama S (supported by Magpie Project)



Mama S was referred to us by her local Children’s Centre support worker, who recognised that she was in urgent need of both immigration advice and basic practical support for herself and her young children. When Mama S first arrived at The Magpie Project, she was facing imminent homelessness, living in a precarious situation with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). This meant she had no legal entitlement to benefits, housing assistance, or most statutory support—even though she had children to care for.

Our Family support work team listened to Mama S’s story and initiated urgent support on her behalf. We made a MASH (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) referral to Newham Social Services, highlighting the risks facing her children and the urgency of her housing situation. At the same time, we provided her with essential practical items: nappies, clothes, baby food, toiletries—small things that make a huge difference when you’re trying to survive day to day.

Most importantly, we connected Mama S to trusted partners for specialist immigration advice. Through these referrals and ongoing support, she began taking steps towards resolving her immigration status—a complex and often unsettling process made easier by having someone walking alongside her.

Mama S’s journey is far from over, but with the right advice, a warm, safe and consistent space, and people who care, she is no longer facing these challenges alone.

The Toll on Under-resourced Organisations

Underfunded and over-used

Despite their deep community ties and trusted relationships, grassroots support services are often chronically underfunded and undervalued. It is not uncommon for local authorities to refer women to these organisations for urgent help – including in cases where support is a statutory duty – without providing any financial contribution. In some cases, these groups are effectively delivering frontline services on behalf of the council, without the recognition or resources that such work requires. This is true in the case of Families and Community Support Services (FCSS), a grassroots organisation supporting migrant families in Newham (93% of their users are women). The organisation at present receives no funding from the borough, but is continually having clients referred to them, in many cases clients who qualify for statutory support.

Penalised for being front-facing

Women In Newham Network partners operate as community based, front-facing services but face more pressure as vulnerable users seek them out when facing access barriers by digitised, non-drop-in models. There are severe limitations on services like the Citizen's Advice Bureau in Star Lane (which covers Newham/Hackney/Tower Hamlets), which offers no drop-in and its telephone line opens between 10am-10.30am on a Monday only where clients can request a call back. Their website also caveats that due to high demand, they cannot see everyone. Operating just down the road, Newham Community Project sees over 1,000 drop-ins every year. This puts enormous strain on internal resources and all WiNN members report working for more hours than they are paid.

This devaluation is compounded by challenges from funders. Alternative's Trust reported facing additional conditions imposed after a small council contract was awarded and being expected to produce quarterly monitoring reports for grants of just a few thousand pounds. These administrative burdens divert precious capacity away from direct service delivery, long-term planning, and policy engagement. As a result, many grassroots organisations are stuck in survival mode - "firefighting" day-to-day crises rather than building sustainable strategies or influencing systems change.

This situation is avoidable. Local and national governments, funders, and commissioning bodies all have a role to play in reversing this cycle. Solutions include: **providing multi-year, unrestricted core funding; ensuring grassroots groups benefit from devolution and local growth strategies; recognising and funding organisations delivering statutory-like support;**

and simplifying application and reporting requirements.

Building long-term partnerships based on trust, not just transactional contracts, will allow these vital organisations to thrive – ultimately reducing crisis demand and delivering better outcomes for the most marginalised women and communities.

The emotional toll on staff and volunteers

The emotional toll on staff in grassroots organisations supporting migrant women is profound. Burnout, high turnover, and declining staff wellbeing are growing concerns, particularly in the context of limited resources and increasing demand for services. Nearly one-third (30%) of charities reported an increase in staff burnout or exhaustion over the past year. Additionally, over one-quarter (26%) observed a decrease in staff wellbeing, and 25% noted an increase in sickness absence.²¹ These challenges are especially pronounced in small, community-based organisations that often operate with minimal staff, and low pay, making them more vulnerable to the impacts of burnout.

The emotional toll faced by community organisations is felt by members of WiNN, who are often supporting highly complex and distressing cases with limited resources. As Heal Together shared, the strain of this work has been so significant that they have sourced psychotherapy every two weeks, offered for free by a volunteer who wants to support the Somali community, simply to cope with the emotional weight of their casework and continue supporting others.

This emotional strain not only undermines the health and morale of staff but also risks diminishing the quality of support provided to vulnerable women. The lack of adequate investment in these organisations leads to higher staff turnover, disruption of services, and a reduced ability to build trusting, long-term relationships with those in need. To break this cycle, sustainable, long-term funding is essential. Investing in the wellbeing of frontline workers in the form of "care budgets" (which could fund advice lines or counselling sessions, for example) will ensure continuity of care, reduce burnout, and ultimately improve outcomes for migrant women in Newham.

Strength in Place: The Newham Ecosystem

Despite the challenges, Newham is home to a vibrant, diverse, and effective ecosystem of small charities. These organisations:

- Provide support in dozens of languages
- Offer wraparound services tailored to women with immigration restrictions, including NRPF
- Are embedded within communities, often led by women with lived experience of NRPF, abuse, or trafficking and/or committed to employing former service users in their organisations.

The existing support network in Newham represents a major opportunity for funders and policymakers: the foundations are already in place. The cost of creating new systems from scratch is unnecessary when compassionate, effective, culturally relevant organisations already exist in the borough. Networks such as WiNN and the wider ecosystem of specialist women's organisations in Newham also hold valuable expertise that should inform national and regional policymaking. As new structures like the Fair Work Agency are developed, these networks should be actively consulted to ensure that policies on employment rights, irregular work, and NRPF reflect the lived realities of women in diverse communities. Their experience offers crucial insight into how enforcement and protection can work effectively for those most at risk of exploitation.

Case Study 3

Alternatives Trust East London



Alternatives Trust East London (ALTEL) runs a thriving volunteer programme that equips women with the skills, confidence, and support needed to move into employment or further training. Between August 2024 and July 2025, 21 volunteers engaged with the programme, with 15 actively contributing to service delivery and 3 successfully transitioning into paid work. The advisers were previous users of the service and thus were especially well-equipped to support in a compassionate and practical way.

ALTEL supported Maria, who came to the UK from Italy. Following a serious accident that left her temporarily immobile, Maria faced isolation and uncertainty. Alternatives Trust supported her through

her recovery, helping her access disability benefits, online learning, and emotional support. She began volunteering in a Family Hub as a childcare support worker. With tailored CV support, interview coaching, and encouragement from Alternatives staff, Maria secured a job as a Nursery Nurse just two months later.

Stories like Maria's demonstrate that organisations like Alternatives Trust are already doing vital, high-impact work helping women rebuild their lives, move into employment, and contribute to their communities. This kind of support doesn't just change individual outcomes; it reduces long-term demand on public services. With the right investment, organisations like ALTEL can continue to deliver life-changing support while saving money across health, social security, and housing systems.

Reframing the Narrative: From Compliance to Compassion

Rather than placing blame on overstretched services or unresponsive funders, we advocate for a different approach: one that emphasises compassion, cultural competence, and a collaborative mindset. It's not about doing more, but about doing things better with the resources we have. The key is not to overwhelm the system, but to enhance the services already in place. For instance, when a woman fleeing domestic abuse is refused housing support due to her NRPF status, can she be immediately referred to a trusted grassroots organisation equipped with the language, resources and casework expertise to help her navigate the complexities of her situation?

This approach would not only reduce harm but also lead to significant cost savings. By ensuring that migrant women are referred to the right services early on, we reduce the likelihood of repeat crises, costly legal battles, and long-term reliance on social security and public services. A little investment in bolstering the existing infrastructure - by supporting small, grassroots organisations - can go a long way in preventing more expensive, longer-term interventions. This model has the potential to save money in the long run, all while providing more compassionate, effective, and culturally competent care.

Case Study 4

Heal Together



Heal Together, a grassroots organisation working with Somali women in East London, is reshaping how support is delivered in communities where mental health, grief, and trauma are often hidden behind cultural taboos.

Heal Together observed that official data from Newham, Tower Hamlets, and Hackney showed no Somali women presenting for miscarriage services, despite their direct knowledge that many Somali service users had experienced pregnancy loss(es). Heal Together also observed that Somalis account for around 7% of mental health crisis presentations – far exceeding their population share.

Over the past year, the organisation has shifted from focusing solely on crisis intervention (such as housing or benefits) to prioritising well-being, maternal mental health, and emotional resilience.

Recognising that many women had silently endured loss, including miscarriage and trauma, without ever accessing support, Heal Together introduced alternative, community-led approaches that reframed resilience as seeking help rather than suffering in silence.

This cultural shift has allowed Heal Together to open up conversations around deeply stigmatised topics like baby loss, domestic violence, and LGBT+ inclusion. Through culturally sensitive advocacy, trauma-informed peer work, and a safe space for reflection, the organisation is not only meeting urgent needs but also fostering long-term systemic change. Their work shows that when services are designed with compassion, trust, and cultural context in mind, they are not only more effective but also cost-saving in the long run – preventing crisis before it escalates.

Case Study 5



Skills Enterprise

When Angela first came to Skills Enterprise in 2022, she was seeking work and successfully secured a job as a social carer with their support. However, after 14 months she was forced to leave due to sustained racism and bullying, leaving her distressed, unemployed, and struggling with Universal Credit issues. Skills Enterprise stepped in immediately, securing specialist help from Newham Council's Employment Rights Hub and liaising directly with the benefits office to resolve her claim.

Recognising that she needed more than crisis intervention, Skills Enterprise offered a tailored programme of support. Angela took part in digital skills training, ESOL classes, and employment coaching, eventually becoming a Digital Champion mentoring others. She re-engaged with the Job Club, built her confidence, and enrolled in further education, including a Level 1 Artificial Intelligence course at Newham College. Today, Angela is an active, valued member of the community - thriving personally, contributing to others, and planning her return to the workforce.

Her journey shows how investment in holistic, person-centred support transforms lives and saves public money in the long term, reducing reliance on crisis services while helping women build sustainable futures for themselves and their families.

The Role of Local Organisations: What Works

Cultural and Context Specific Support for Women with NRPF

Small, place-based grassroots organisations are uniquely positioned to support migrant women due to their deep understanding of the local community and the specific needs of its members. These organisations often have longstanding relationships with women facing multiple barriers, including those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), and provide culturally sensitive, tailored support that larger, generic services may overlook. Their proximity to the community allows them to build trust, offer personalised care, and respond quickly to emerging needs. With flexible, local knowledge, these organisations can navigate complex immigration and welfare systems, ensuring that migrant women receive the support they need when they need it most.

Key examples of the support that local, grassroots organisations are well-placed to deliver include:

- Navigation of immigration and welfare systems
- Casework around domestic abuse exemptions and legal aid
- Trauma-informed, gender- and culturally competent advocacy
- Emotional and social support that builds trust and confidence

Holistic, Co-located Services

Women with NRPF face some of the greatest practical barriers to accessing support, including language, mobility, childcare, and documentation issues. These challenges are further compounded by their lack of eligibility for most mainstream services, leaving them isolated and vulnerable. A holistic, co-located service model offers a solution to these barriers by bringing together a range of services under one roof.

In this model, immigration support, legal advice, health services, and childcare all share the same space, making it easier for women to access the help they need without the burden of navigating multiple systems. Crucially, this model eliminates the need for women to repeatedly recount their trauma or endure long, difficult journeys with young children. Instead, they can receive comprehensive care in one place, where a variety of services are tailored to their unique needs.

There is strong existing evidence supporting the value of shared premises for women’s sector organisations. A leading example is Preston Road Women’s Centre in Hull, which co-locates domestic abuse support, legal advice, childcare, and housing services under one roof. This model improves access for women facing complex challenges, reduces overheads, and enables smaller organisations to deliver housing through a collaborative ‘midwife’ approach. Similarly, the Women’s Resource Centre has advocated for a dedicated Women’s Building in London, backed by feasibility studies showing high demand, social return on investment, and long-term sustainability. Together, this body of evidence makes a compelling case for investment in co-located, holistic service hubs that are accessible and culturally responsive for migrant and minoritised women.

Such models increase trust, access, and impact, particularly for those who would otherwise fall through the cracks of mainstream systems. By working together in a holistic, co-located space, organisations can provide more effective, compassionate care that significantly improves the lives of women with NRPF in Newham and beyond.

Case Study 6

Unlocking the Potential of Stratford Advice Arcade



Families and Community Support Services (FCSS), a grassroots organisation supporting migrant families, is based in the Stratford Advice Arcade - a council-owned building that has fallen into disrepair and underuse since the collapse of the managing charity. Despite paying rent to the council, FCSS operates without essential services like cleaning and basic property maintenance: the lift has been out-of-service for months, severely limiting access to their service. In practice, FCSS’s director has taken on informal caretaker duties, maintaining the building without support or recognition.

This situation illustrates how councils can support community organisations through creative use of public assets. With basic oversight and collaboration, the Stratford Advice Arcade could be transformed into a thriving hub for co-located services. The council could commit to support from a named officer, engage tenants in planning, and review rent in cases where organisations are informally maintaining the premises — demonstrating how strategic premises support can boost community capacity and social impact.

Conclusion

This is not about villains and victims. It's about transforming a system that fails the most marginalised - especially women with no recourse to public funds.

Local charities are not merely plugging gaps. They are offering genuine lifelines. And those lifelines save lives and public money.

Newham already has the people, the knowledge, and the relationships. The foundation is strong. What's needed is sustained investment, recognition, and compassion.

It's time to invest in a three-pronged approach involving **local support** (councils), **money** (funders), and **experts** (community partners) to create better and more equitable systems.

Footnotes

- ¹ House of Commons Library (2025) No Recourse to Public Funds (<https://bit.ly/4oVdcES>)
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Housing Justice, NACCOMM and Praxis (2015) Models of accommodation and support for migrants with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) (<https://bit.ly/4iWKqIZ>)
- ⁴ Well Newham (Accessed 2025) No Recourse to Public Funds Training (<https://bit.ly/3Yz1Dlx>)
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- ⁶ Office for National Statistics (2023) How life has changed in Newham: Census 2021 (<https://bit.ly/4j0xZFR>)
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- ¹² Glass Door (2025) New Glass Door Report: supporting women experiencing homelessness (<https://bit.ly/4q9moq4>)
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- ²¹ Pro Bono Economics (2025) Underfunded, under resourced and under the radar: The state of the women and girls' social sector (<https://bit.ly/4pDslM3>)
- ²² Department for Business and Trade (2025) Factsheet: The Fair Work Agency (<https://bit.ly/3KxmBED>)
- ²³ Purple House (Accessed 2025) A safe space for women, run by women (<https://bit.ly/4q4xFYM>)
- ²⁴ Women's Resource Centre (2025) WRC Women's Building (<https://bit.ly/4aOpnQf>)



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