



This Girl Can Croydon - Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

Background

Croydon is the second most populated borough in London with significant geographical inequalities and high levels of deprivation. Through Sport England's 'This Girl Can' funding, London Sport and Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA) were able to plan and deliver targeted activity sessions for inactive women in specific localities in Croydon. In addition, the project sought to explore lived experiences of women during the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular:

- Those who have been less active as a result of fear or anxiety.
- Those who have been adversely financially affected.
- Those who have experienced a greater burden of care.

Methodology

To get a better understanding of who participated in the activities, and to explore the lived experiences of women in Croydon, we used a variety of methods including questionnaires, focus groups, and feedback forms.

Key Findings

In total, at least 465 women participated in one of the activities CVA offered with 78.6% of women being classed as 'inactive'¹ or 'fairly active'² before joining the sessions. To add to this, 58% were from ethnically diverse backgrounds. From focus groups and feedback forms, London Sport identified five key themes:

- Women's relationship with physical activity had changed because of attending the activity sessions.
- The delivery of sessions through digital means helped address some of the barriers to participation for women.
- The sessions had positive outcomes for women, including improved mental health and well-being.
- Sessions were fun, social and engaging - in particular, instructors were praised.
- Activities were inclusive of a wide-range of women - including those with long-term health conditions or care responsibilities.

Main Conclusions

- The project engaged women who would not normally consider physical activity - in particular, women with additional care responsibilities or those from ethnically diverse backgrounds.
- The activities on offer helped address barriers women faced in accessing physical activity such as fear and intimidation or lack of time.
- The sessions were fun, social and the instructors were passionate and empathetic. This motivated women to attend regularly and women were keen to continue engaging in physical activity.

¹ Inactive was defined as completing 0-30 minutes of moderate activity in the past week. Moderate activity was defined as any activity that causes a person's heart rate to raise and made them feel a little out of breath – this should not include any activity that is part of a person's job, or any housework, gardening, etc.

² Fairly active was defined as completing 30-149 minutes of moderate activity in the past week.





Background

Sport England relaunched the 'This Girl Can' campaign in 2020 with a focus on women from ethnically diverse communities and from lower socio-economic groups. Croydon was selected as part of the Core Cities programme due to its comparatively low levels of activity, high levels of deprivation, and ethnic diversity, as well as its strong voluntary and community sector (VCS), and robust track record of successful partnership working.

Using Sport England funding from the 'This Girl Can' programme, London Sport and CVA worked together over a year to provide a range of physical activity sessions for women in Croydon. Sessions were targeted at women aged 16-60 who considered themselves 'inactive'. Activity levels were determined in a self-completed Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire (PAR-Q).

The project also wanted to explore the 'lived experiences' of women during the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to:

- Those who have been less active as a result of fear or anxiety.
- Those who have been adversely financially affected.
- Those who have experienced a greater burden of care.

As the infrastructure lead for the VCS in Croydon, CVA led on 'This Girl Can Croydon' campaign, connecting and communicating with the target audience through its community partners and delivering sessions through a network of small, local providers. Through their links, CVA was not only able to reach some of the most difficult to engage residents but also involved local people to develop their own assets and passions to support delivery.

To support CVA and local community partners to reach a specific audience of people who live in the target areas of Croydon, London Sport supported local organisations to deliver digital marketing (specifically Facebook advertising) to recruit women to take part.

London Sport also led on the monitoring and evaluation of the project, completing desktop research, designing surveys, conducting focus groups, and analysing all the results.

The first phase of the project ran from March 2020 - September 2020 and the second phase ran from October 2020 - March 2021.

Each type of activity ran for 12 weeks. Eleven different activity sessions ran during the first phase of the project and fourteen ran during the second phase of the project. Due to Covid-19, the majority of these sessions took place virtually.



Methodology

To get a better understanding of who participated in the sessions delivered by CVA, and to identify whether project objectives were met, we used the following methods of data collection and feedback:

- **Questionnaire** - women were asked to complete a short questionnaire at the beginning as well as at the end of the programme delivery. We used the validated PAR-Q, as well as questions about their current activity levels and their background.
- **Focus groups** - we conducted two focus groups to get an in-depth understanding of the unique experiences of these women, and to get their feedback on what worked well about the programme and how it could be improved. Women who took part were incentivised for their time.
- **Feedback forms** - all women were asked to complete a form at the end of the programme to give their feedback on what they liked most about the sessions and their plans for ongoing participation.

Findings

This section presents participation data as well as findings from questionnaires, feedback forms and focus groups. We have broken down our findings into three sections:

1. Summary of participation data (for phase one and two of delivery)
2. Findings from participant focus groups and feedback forms
3. Feedback on classes

1. Summary of participation data:

Overall, across phase one and two of delivery, the project engaged at least **465 women** across 25 different activity sessions delivered by CVA. Activities included: Bollywood dance, fitness sessions, self-defence classes, yoga, walking football, and netball.

From the questionnaires submitted at the beginning of the programmes, women were asked a range of questions including their current activity levels, their age and ethnicity, and whether they live in Croydon.

Key findings include:

- **58.0%** of those who disclosed their ethnicity³ ($n=362$) were from ethnically diverse backgrounds (as shown in **figure 1** below)
- **78.6%** of women⁴ ($n=458$) were considered 'inactive' or 'fairly active' on joining the programme - meaning over three quarters of women who joined were doing less than 149 minutes of moderate exercise a week and therefore not meeting Chief Medical Officer's guidelines.
- **87.3%** of those who stated their age ($n= 418$) were between the ages of 18 and 60 at the time of the survey (as shown in figure 3 below)
- Over two thirds (**68.4%**) of women who participated⁵ live in Croydon.

³ 104 women did not disclose ethnicity.

⁴ Seven women did not answer questions relating to physical activity levels.

⁵ Three women did not answer question about where they lived.

Figure 1: Proportion of women from ethnically diverse backgrounds (n=362)

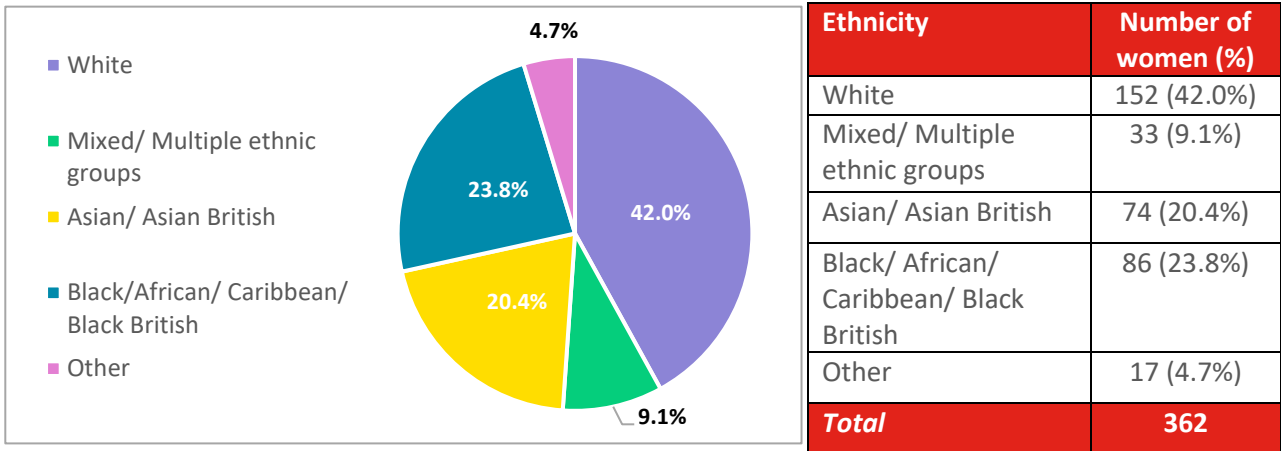


Figure 2: Activity levels of women before programme delivery (n=458)

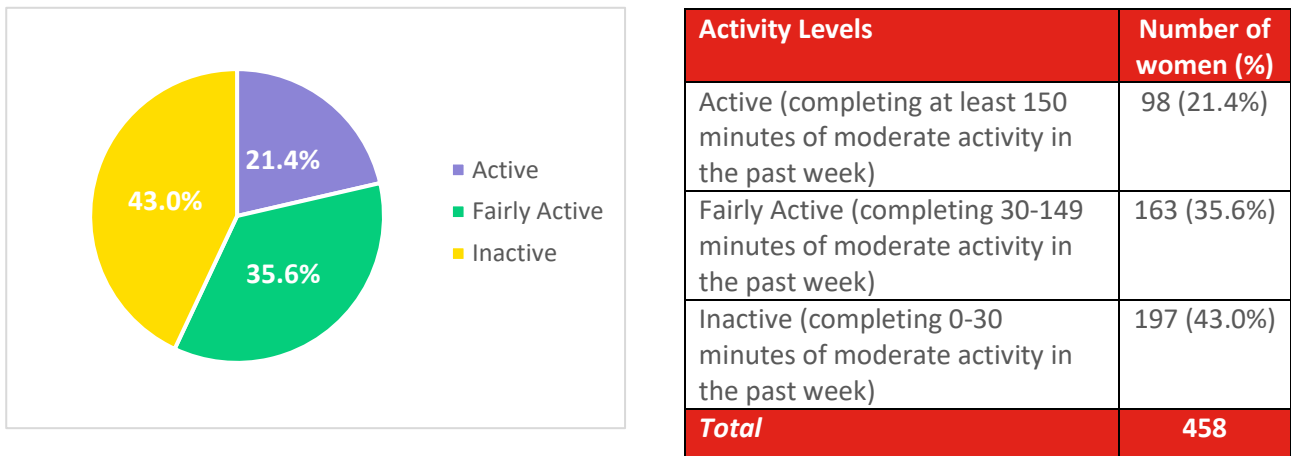


Figure 3: Age range of women participating (n=418)

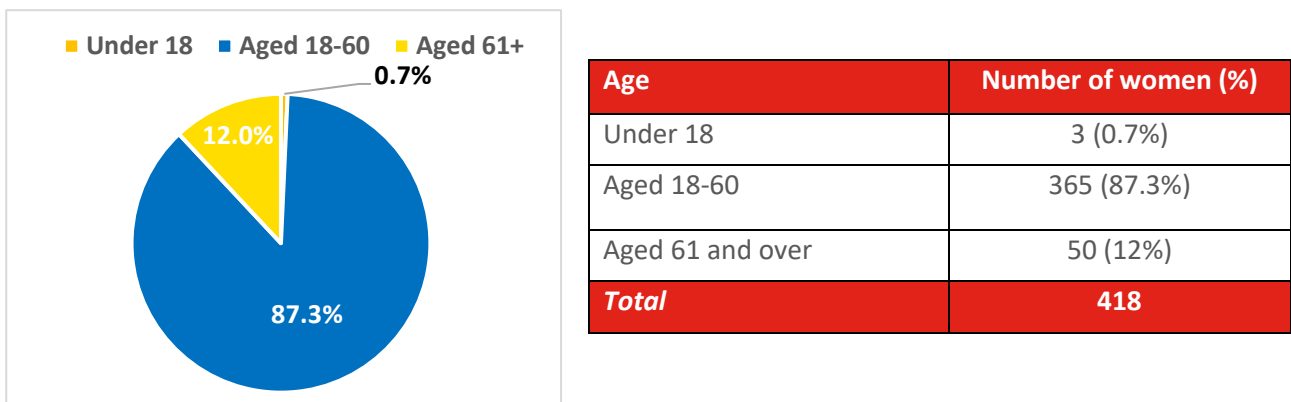
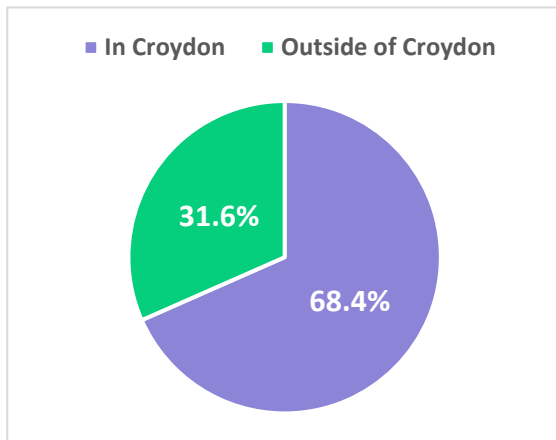


Figure 4: Proportion of women living Inside and outside of Croydon (n=462)



Location	Number of women (%)
In Croydon	316 (68.4%)
Outside of Croydon	146 (31.6%)
Total	462

2. Findings from participant focus groups and feedback forms:

Alongside participant surveys, we conducted two online focus groups mid-way through delivery of the phase two sessions. A total of 18 women were involved in the focus groups.

Together with verbatim from feedback forms, we were able to derive some key themes which helped us understand more about the women who engaged with the sessions, as well as their unique experiences throughout Covid-19, and what they enjoyed about participating in the activities.

Based on our findings, we consolidated **five key themes**:

- Women’s relationship with physical activity had changed due to attending the activity sessions.
- The delivery of sessions through digital means helped address some of the barriers to participation for women.
- The sessions had positive outcomes for women, including improved mental health and well-being.
- Sessions were fun, social and engaging - in particular, instructors were praised.
- Activities were inclusive of a wide-range of women - including those with long-term health conditions or care responsibilities.

Women's relationship with physical activity had changed because of attending the activity sessions

Over three quarters of women (78.6%, see figure 2) who participated in the programme were considered ‘inactive’ or ‘fairly active’ before joining the sessions, with women stating they had low confidence and little motivation to exercise previously.

Women were open about reasons they were less active before, with many stating they did not have the confidence to approach the gym, or that they were intimidated by going into spaces such as a gym. Examples include:

“Intimidated by going gym - more likely to do it at home.”



"Worked well as I didn't have confidence to exercise but do now".

"Men staring at you whilst working out in gym."

"Before [I] was nervous to think about joining something and being afraid to approach it".

"Was self-conscious and fussy about who I participate with".

However, many women were positive about the impact that the sessions have had on their lives and stated that their attitudes towards physical activity had shifted, and they knew the benefits of regular participation.

"Built up confidence that I can go to classes as well as zoom classes."

"Exercises everyday now".

"Genuinely think it's saved my life."

Delivery of sessions through digital means helped address barriers to participation

Although Covid-19 had negative impacts on many aspects of people's lives, women were positive about the delivery of sessions on Zoom. Many said that the attending online sessions helped address previous barriers to participation they had.

Women stated various barriers that prevented them from accessing physical activity before, with many stating the following reasons for being unable to participate:

a) Care responsibilities:

Some women said that having care responsibilities, such as childcare, meant they were unable to devote time to exercise before, but that having classes on Zoom meant they were able to exercise at-home which was more convenient for them.

"[I] didn't do anything at all - mostly because childcare, and [I] always sign-up and [then] can't go to the gym."

"I'm a carer for elderly relative who has dementia and hard to have a release such as going out for a drink or meals, so this is a good way to let off steam."

b) Travel (transport):

A few women said that travelling to participate in activity would deter them due to the added time and cost implications of this. Having the sessions on Zoom meant they did not have to worry about transport arrangements.

"Previously didn't like face to face [sessions] due to transport, but online is easier as [I] have more motivation to do this and the exercise."

"[I] don't have to travel an hour to get there or get bus."

c) Cost of physical activity:



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Women stated that the cost of participating in physical activity was a huge barrier for them before. As well as the cost of the gym or other physical activity sessions, women spoke of the additional cost of transport, clothing, or equipment needed. In particular, a few said that up-front fees or bulk payments were not feasible for them.

"[We're] living off one salary with lots of cut-backs. Don't want to take food off of kids and it's a choice between the two."

"[You] don't need special gear just do it in whatever you've got."

"[I] can't commit to big chunk - puts [me] off committing at all in the first place."

The sessions had positive outcomes for women, including improved mental health and well-being

Women stated that the weekly sessions meant a lot to them and that their mental health and well-being had improved substantially since being on the programme.

A few women said that lockdown and isolation had resulted in a decline in their mental health, but that the regular weekly sessions improved their mood, sleep, gave them motivation, and made them happier. It also helped some feel less isolated by having a group to socialise with.

"[I] didn't want to get out of bed or do anything but [the sessions] gave me a fixed time slot and [I'm] working out every day now."

"Unhappy and bored during lockdown, but now stress levels reduced and [I] always feel happy after."

"[I've] been doing dance class with relative with dementia. When [the] music comes on they tap their feet and dance too. Hour of no agitation and emotion. Happy release for both of us."

As well as the mental health benefits mentioned above, some women also spoke of the benefits the sessions had on their body and general health:

"Husband said to me he was worried that I would have a heart attack if I didn't exercise. I was obese before but now normal BMI. I don't feel unwell!"

Sessions were inclusive of a wide-range of women - including those with long-term health conditions, ethnically diverse women, and those with care responsibilities

Some women said that they really loved how diverse and inclusive the groups were. Having the sessions online, as mentioned previously, had benefits for women with care responsibilities, but it also meant others who may not normally participate had the opportunity to do so.

Some women said that having culturally relevant classes meant they were able to take part, and that having like-minded people around them made them feel more comfortable:

"Not as many opportunities in Lambeth especially for Asian people and dancing. Bollywood sessions energetic and inspiring."



"[I'm a] housewife always at home. Always cooking and cleaning so [I'm] always very happy after doing Yoga Tamil sessions."

Some women said that having online classes was good for those with long-term conditions or injuries as they were in their own home and felt more comfortable. Some said the instructors were understanding and patient with them which they really appreciated:

"When you have an injury, you need to have someone who is patient and tells you to take your time."

"I had cancer and had osteoporosis and fell out of love with running as didn't want to break anymore bones. [The] sessions given me passion and fire again and [the] instructor cares about us and takes time to get to know us."

"[I] have severe OCD and sometimes difficult for me to actually go out. If sessions were in-person I wouldn't have been able to do it."

Session content and delivery was fun, social, and engaging

One of the most prominent themes to emerge related to how enjoyable the women found the sessions. Women were overwhelmingly positive about the delivery of sessions and the wide-range of activities on offer to them.

In particular, women praised the instructors of the sessions. They stated their enthusiasm, understanding, patience and relatability made them want to come back:

"[The instructor] was very open about her fitness journey, she is also a mother."

"Instructor is passionate and kind. Really welcomed me into group. He knows his stuff and gives alternatives if you can't do one bit. He took time to know people so he knows when he can say 'push more' and when he can't!"

"Teachers are really good and music is good. Teacher relationship with the group is good as they see everyone."

To add to this, many women said that they liked being able to try different activities they had not done before or would not have considered. They were positive about the wide range on offer.

"different types of exercise to give me a flavour - some of them which I didn't think I could do"

"just a chance to try something new. Can't always go to trial things, sometimes you have to do things more than one to actually work out if you like it."

Finally, women said that the sessions were fun and social which was a big thing for many who were isolated due to the lockdown:



"WhatsApp group is brilliant, even if I missed session. Everyone is excited and shares link of what they did."

"[I] look forward to the laughs and giggles. When you're in the gym it's so serious and nobody smiles at you. I feel loved in this group whereas not in the gym."

"I liked the half hour chat at the beginning then one hour exercise."

"can't miss it as you don't want to let the side down."

Conclusions

With their existing strong relationships with the local community and their links to trusted delivery partners and community organisations, having CVA as the delivery lead was vital to the success of this project. CVA were able to operate quickly and flexibly during the pandemic, supporting partners to continue to deliver sessions. Working with a local organisation or group with a network of established relationships helps to create and deliver sessions suitable for the target audience.

Despite challenges in relation to delivering activities during the pandemic, CVA were able to quickly switch these sessions online. Through effective marketing and targeting, as well as the wide range of activities CVA offered, the project engaged women who would not normally consider physical activity in their lives, or, who wanted to start but did not know where to begin. In addition, the activities attracted women from a variety of backgrounds, such as ethnically diverse women or those with additional care responsibilities.

Although Covid-19 had negatively impacted these women, through loss of income or additional care responsibilities, for example, they were overwhelmingly positive about the delivery of these sessions online. For some, the sessions were the only social interactions they had that week, and for others it was the only way they could feel energised or relax, despite the worry of Covid-19.

Furthermore, the various activities and the approach to delivery helped combat numerous barriers that these women had faced previously, such as fear and intimidation, or lack of time to be able to commit to going to the gym. CVA commissioned local delivery partners that were committed to offering their communities cheap or, in many cases, free sessions, as they understood that cost was a common barrier to physical activity for the target audience. Having free online classes meant women could do physical activity at home and did not have to worry about additional costs or travel time. Many said that if the sessions were not online they would not have been able to attend.

It was positive to hear that many of the women had found a love for participating in physical activity - whether that was for the first time or returning to physical activity after not participating in years. The groups were varied, fun, and social with empathetic and passionate instructors who took the time to get to know women on a personal basis. This contrasted with some women's previous experiences, such as how "serious" some opportunities for physical activity can be. They said that having sessions that had music, or time to talk at the beginning, motivated them to return as it was something they enjoyed and valued.



Finally, as well as benefits for the participants, the campaign provided a lifeline for local delivery partners to keep going during lockdown. They were able to develop a new audience of previously inactive women who they had found harder to engage prior to this programme. The delivery partners gained new skills in moving sessions online, received training in digital marketing, received training on how to develop case studies, built a support network of other partners and agencies such as London Sport, and gained access to further funding opportunities. This has made the organisations more sustainable and able to continue to offer activities for this cohort and future cohorts.

Learnings and recommendations

Based on our findings and conclusions, we have sought to identify some key learnings from the project, and highlight opportunities for future planning and delivery:

- Local organisations, like CVA, bring a wealth of expertise of the community and hold trusted partnerships with local organisations that can help deliver projects. Having established partnerships and being grounded within the community means that local organisations are a trusted presence that delivery partners feel comfortable working with.

Recommendation: Programmes or projects aimed at a specific locality should be led or co-created with an organisation or group from the target location. Working with a local organisation or group with a network of established relationships helps to connect funders or programme leads, such as London Sport, with the right local deliverers.

- Local deliverers are committed to a specific locality or community and are linked to community groups with wider social concerns such as reducing poverty, reducing violence, and reducing health inequalities. This means that they understand the target community and can cater sessions to suit their needs, such as cultural-specific programmes like Bollywood dancing.

Recommendation: When working in specific places or spaces, ensure that the needs of the audience are considered. Working with local delivery partners ensures that the community voice is heard and that interventions actually meet the needs of those they are targeted at.

- Covid-19 taught the sector a lot about use of technology to promote engagement with physical activity. Having online 'live' groups meant more participants were able to get involved as barriers to access were reduced, such as lack of time, or transport available to get to activity.

Recommendation: When planning programmes and interventions, consider running sessions that can be delivered both digitally and face-to-face to ensure the needs of all women are taken into account and that barriers are reduced.

- Women were complimentary of the content and delivery of specific sessions, as well the wide range of activities CVA offered. Having sessions that were fun and social, and included music or dance, were particularly effective as women enjoyed participating and were motivated to come back. In addition, women were not keen on how serious the sport and physical activity sector and businesses can be.



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Recommendation: Consider the full content of sessions, including music, to create fun and light-hearted sessions. Build in social elements to sessions, whether this is time to talk during sessions or, where possible, continue the conversation outside of sessions, through WhatsApp groups, for example.

- It was important for the women that they could relate to the instructors, whether this through the instructors having lived experience or by the instructors listening, understanding, and being empathic with the women. Having enthusiastic, patient, and instructors made women feel that wanted to continue to attend sessions.

Recommendation: When considering the workforce that are delivering specific activities, consider the target audience and target communities who will participate. Having instructors or coaches that can relate to, or understand, the audience will help build rapport with the participants. For example, other mothers or ethnically diverse instructors.

- Many women stated that prevalent payment structures for gyms or physical activity classes were a barrier for them participating in terms of committing time and finances. Up-front fees or bulk payments were not feasible or practical for many women with additional care responsibilities and/or those with less disposable income.

Recommendation: Consider more flexible payment structures for sessions, such as 'pay-as-you go' or paying for a set number of sessions upfront but have flexibility on the date participants attend sessions.

- Some of the women heard about the sessions through the targeted digital marketing, however many of them heard about the sessions through word of mouth. Some women also stated that having target age ranges on adverts was restrictive and off-putting.

Recommendation: When designing branding or marketing campaigns (or activity sessions) for women, consider removing specific reference to age groups as this restricts those who can participate and may deter women from engaging who want to take part.

- London Sport and CVA greatly benefitted from conducting focus groups with participants. Not only did we learn about the unique experiences of women's lives throughout Covid-19, but we were also able to identify any areas that could have been improved on in relation to marketing or delivery.

Recommendation: Consider the use of focus groups as an evaluation method for future place-based projects. It is important to continue to explore the lives of women elsewhere across London, because the lived experience of women in Croydon may not resonate elsewhere. Consider comparing findings and identifying any similarities or differences to help in future targeted interventions.

