

Women in Prison
HM Government Transforming the response to domestic abuse:
Supporting female offenders section

Introduction

Women in Prison (WIP) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the proposed Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill. Please note that as an organisation providing specialist support to women in the criminal justice sector we will be responding only to questions number 13 and 14 of this consultation. We support our colleagues in the women's sector such as Women's Aid, EVAW coalition, Women's Resource Centre (WRC) and Agenda which will supply responses that apply more broadly to all women affected by domestic abuse.

We support calls from the wider women's sector for the government to focus on a broader Violence against Women (VAWG) strategy. We agree that the proposed Domestic Abuse Commissioner should be a VAWG commissioner with responsibility for the entire VAWG strategy, which would include domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is a vital strand of any VAWG strategy. However, it must be acknowledged that domestic abuse takes place within a broader landscape of VAWG which includes, but is not limited to, trafficking, prostitution and physical and sexual violence outside of the confines of relationships – all of which also disproportionately affect women in the criminal justice system.

Any domestic abuse strategy needs to involve collaborative working from a wide range of stakeholders. As argued by Agenda in their response to this consultation, Central government must take a joined-up approach to tackling VAWG and ensure all relevant departments are fully represented in championing this agenda and funding the support services required (in particular Department for Education; Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government; Department of Work and Pensions; Ministry of Justice and Department for Health and Social Care). Whilst the Home Office should continue to play a key role, the strategy must not focus on criminal justice solutions as the only response to the problem or at the expense of considering VAWG as a wider public health or social justice issue.

Please note that all our references to domestic abuse refer to intimate partner abuse, not other forms of domestic abuse such as sibling abuse or child-parent abuse.

Summary of key points made by Women in Prison

- 1) Domestic abuse is often a root cause of offending and needs to be addressed at as early a stage as possible, including through police diversion schemes. For every woman in contact with the criminal justice system (including in prison) there is an opportunity to help address this issue.
- 2) Independent specialist women's advocacy and support services, including those in women's centres, are the lynchpin of support for women in contact with the criminal justice system (including those in prison), particularly because their levels of trust in the criminal justice system and in state agencies is often extremely low.
- 3) Strategic funding in the area of domestic violence services and women in contact with the criminal justice system (including those in prison) needs to be based on understanding of which women's centres and related services exist and where the major gaps are in prisons and communities.

13. Question: How can we work better with female offenders and vulnerable women at risk of offending to identify their domestic abuse earlier? Please select top 3.

Criminal justice agencies to adopt appropriate enquiries into history of abuse at each stage of the criminal justice process

X *Dedicated support and/or IDVAs in women's services*

X *Encourage the use of schemes which divert vulnerable women out of the criminal justice system (where appropriate) and into services – NOTE: This should include signposting to appropriate services*

X *Improve availability of support for domestic abuse victims in prisons*

Support signposting into appropriate services for women who come into contact with the police

Please note that WIP are in agreement with other respondents such as Agenda and EAWW in objecting to the consultation request for prioritising issues that are often of equal importance. We do not understand how this approach is useful in a strategic approach to addressing violence against women and girls

Identifying and preventing abuse in the criminal justice system

Identification of a history of abuse often relies on trusting relationships built over time. In the case of women with an offending background, levels of trust in the criminal justice system and with state agencies is likely to be very low. Independent women's services are therefore vital in enabling women to speak out about abuse they have experienced and address the issues this raises for them. Access to such services need to be considered for all women in touch with the criminal justice system, whatever their suspected offence. The facts about domestic violence suggest that offending by a woman is one indicator that she could be at risk of domestic abuse. The approach of all agencies in touch with that woman should take that risk into account in their practice and approach.

We know from our work with women in the criminal justice system that the task of *identifying* domestic abuse is not usually the main problem; It is well known that there is an enormous over-representation of women who have suffered abuse in the criminal justice system (including in prison). The figures stated in this consultation document speak of over 60% of women and, as with all cohorts affected by abuse, this is likely to be an under-representation of the actual figure. Rather than identification, the real issue is the lack of support and options for women at risk of offending once abuse is identified.

The right to live a life free of abuse is a fundamental matter of right to life and failures to provide support to those facing abuse have serious consequences. Prevention is key in dealing with domestic abuse and much more work must go into preventing abuse from taking place in the first place, through the various channels outlined in this document. Where abuse has taken place, availability of housing options such as refuges and supported housing are vital. Moreover, service provision must not stop at the point where a woman is removed from an abusive situation and in a safer environment. If more funds are invested in services to provide preventative and ongoing care for

women's emotional, mental and psychological wellbeing this would reduce the financial burden to society in the long run as it would result in reducing the number of women being picked up by emergency services, substance misuse services and the criminal justice system.

Prevention and early intervention is also key in the case of offending; preventing domestic abuse by male perpetrators of violence can also help prevent offending by women and provide women with an opportunity to turn their lives around. However, in tandem with preventative work we must also have robust interventions to deal with abuse that is already taking place. In the case of women in the criminal justice system, there are several possible points of intervention. Not only do we know that women in the criminal justice system face extremely high levels of abuse, we also know that women's offending in many cases can be directly linked to coercive relationships (see for example [Prison Reform Trust's 'There's a reason we're in trouble'](#)). Despite this knowledge, there are not currently sufficient police diversion schemes in place to divert women out of the criminal justice system and into suitable services. Neither is being a victim of domestic abuse sufficiently taken into account as a mitigating factor in the sentencing of women, despite the fact that courts provide another opportunity for diversion and intervention for women with support needs. These forms of early intervention, away from the criminal justice system and into support in the community, would provide women with an opportunity to tackle root causes of their offending, thus preventing a further entrenchment in the criminal justice system. Finally, there is very little domestic abuse support on offer to women serving prison sentences and on release from prison, despite their needs often being clearly identified and despite the fact that prison can be a key point of intervention.

Women in the criminal justice system and domestic abuse

In order to know how to best support women in the criminal justice system around domestic abuse one has to understand the particular situations facing women in the criminal justice system.

Relational offending

A majority of women in contact with the criminal justice system have experience of abusive relationships and many women will be in such relationships at the time of committing an offence and/or being sentenced. Some offending by women is relational. For example, there are women who offend to support somebody else's drug use, a situation sometimes linked to domestic abuse or other coercion or exploitation such as prostitution. Other examples of women's offending being relational are where women are convicted of acquisitive crimes, such as handling stolen goods, fraud or theft. In some cases, abusive relationships are behind these types of offences and women offend as part of a wider pattern of coercion control by a partner. In some cases, the abusive act consists of the offences actually being committed by an abusive partner and the woman is convicted although the offence in reality was carried out by the abusive partner (either without the woman's knowledge or with limited knowledge on the part of the woman about the full details). Examples of such cases include charges for handling stolen goods where women's homes are used by perpetrators to store stolen goods, co-conspiracy charges where women's homes and/or mobile phones have been involved in schemes by partners and fraud cases where perpetrators use a woman's bank card or bank details to commit an offence. Joint-enterprise related offences are particularly relevant here as they can hide a complex pattern of coercion and control.

Women may be offending as a result of being in a coercive relationship but often have no means of exiting such relationships. Women are therefore often in desperate need of support - practical, psychological and emotional - in order to do so. The need to find alternative safe accommodation

cannot be understated in these cases, nor can the reality of the desperate housing situation facing women caught up in the criminal justice system (especially after leaving prison).

Women with gang affiliations

Where women are affiliated to gangs, coercion and control are often prevalent features of women's gang experiences. This is especially the case for young women who are extremely vulnerable in the context of gangs and are often subjected to coercion, abuse and sexual exploitation within the context of the gang itself. It is therefore paramount that women, especially young women, who come into contact with the police are signposted into appropriate support services that are independent from the criminal justice system.

Women as perpetrators of violence

While there are instances where women are sole perpetrators of violence, in many cases the human story behind the statistics around women as perpetrators hide complex patterns of coercion and control by male partners. In many cases where men report women for domestic abuse, this is a retaliatory action that fits a wider pattern of abusive behaviour of manipulation and coercive control. Mental ill health and substance misuse are often prevalent in such relationships, and substance misuse can be a coping mechanism by women which can sometimes also be linked to violence. In some cases where women are sentenced for violent offences against a partner, the act of violence was of a defensive nature and a response to abuse by the partner. From what we know about domestic violence and its gendered nature, any woman suspected of perpetrating domestic violence is also at risk of being a victim of domestic abuse. This should be taken into account in the practice of police and other agencies, including taking a 'trauma-informed' approach and considering referrals to appropriate support agencies. The dichotomy here of "victim or perpetrator" can mean that key opportunities for intervention and effective responses are missed and a woman can become caught up in the criminal justice system in a way that causes further harm to her and her children.

Funding for women's services

As noted above, it is not the *identification* of abuse that is the primary issue when it comes to women in contact with the criminal justice system, but the lack of alternative options for these women. In the case of diversionary schemes and sentencing, this is an issue that can be partially solved through a change in culture and policy, which prevents women getting caught up in the criminal justice system in the first place. Financially, a 'whole-systems approach' is likely to result in significant cost-savings, when taking into account the full extent of the spending associated with prison sentences for women (including costs to social services and other wider societal consequences). In order to fully address any identified domestic abuse, there is a desperate need for improved funding for support services, coupled with appropriate housing options.

Increasingly in the voluntary sector, we are entering a culture of 'signposting' and 'contract managing', as opposed to actual service delivery, due to cuts to funding coupled with increased demand and expectations of voluntary sector agencies to deliver more services with less resources. As an organisation, we desperately want to support our service users around domestic abuse but simply cannot do so without the funding for specialist domestic abuse projects and workers. Instead, we are forced to turn clients away and signpost them elsewhere, sometimes to services that are not entirely suited to their need or no longer exist, on other occasions to services that are over-stretched or are in themselves restricted to signposting and information giving. The result is a

ridiculous ‘merry-go-round’ of signposting and onwards referrals with very few meaningful support interventions to get to the heart of the issues.

Stable, secure, long-term and ring-fenced funding for dedicated support in women’s services is absolutely vital in order to offer support to women with experiences of abuse. For women in the criminal justice system, we advocate for women’s centres as ‘one-stop-shops’ where women can access a range of services for their often multiple, overlapping needs. Without funding for women’s centres, initiatives such as police-and court diversionary schemes cannot function as they require women’s centres to act as an alternative to custody and a women-centred base for services. The vast majority of individuals who access criminal justice services are men – 95% of the prison population. For the tiny minority of women in touch with the criminal justice system, male-dominated spaces and services are completely inappropriate – and can actually be dangerous.

Strategic funding for services

Services such as women’s centres for women with complex needs and those in contact with the criminal justice system have not benefited from strategic national funding – or even a national strategy for women affected by the criminal justice system (which strengthens their case for local funding). As a result many of those which have remained open now face a funding crisis including closed projects and loss of staff. Attempts to access funds through opportunities such as the Tampon Tax Fund have been largely unsuccessful. Any new funding available to support women who are in contact with the criminal justice system, including the proposed fund linked to domestic violence services in this consultation, needs to be allocated in a strategic way. This needs to be based on a clear understanding of what services exist in communities, including women’s centres, and in prisons - and the major gaps. There is concern that some generic providers of domestic violence and criminal justice services without a track record of providing gender specific support for women in the criminal justice system will see women’s prisons and this group of poorly served women as a “new market”. Non-strategic and competitive processes such as that which took place to allocate the Tampon Tax Fund, support this dysfunctional and counter-productive approach. Women’s centre providers and prison governors will together have a clear sense of where some of the main gaps are and the most efficient and effective way of filling these.

Services for children and young women

Children witnessing domestic abuse experience significant trauma and face a range of future risk factors, including mental health issues, substance misuse and involvement with the criminal justice system. Women’s centres often run parenting support programmes as part of their package of support services to women. Wherever possible, the parenting and family support work that takes place in women’s centres should also include education and support for women’s children. Women’s centres offer another opportunity for early prevention work where children and young people can receive education and promotion around healthy relationships. Currently, there is very little mental health support in place for children who are affected by parental domestic abuse, other than that offered through Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), which has very long waiting lists. More therapeutic services are needed for all those affected by abuse. We would also like to see more therapeutic interventions in refuges for women as well as their children, to go alongside the practical support offered to women.

In some cases women’s centres offer services to young women at risk of involvement with the criminal justice system and young women at risk of gang involvement. There is a case for a separate Youth Strategy for young women (16-17 year-olds), and any work with young women needs to take

into account their particular vulnerabilities. This separation between strategies for adults and strategies aimed specifically at younger women is common practice in other situations and is logical also in the case of domestic abuse.

Women with insecure immigration status in the criminal justice system

Foreign national women face particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system and can be extremely vulnerable in the context of VAWG and domestic abuse. Overall, there is a lack of support for foreign national women to overcome cultural and language barriers and to receive appropriate mental health support, whether in the community or in prison. Women who are trafficked, including by their husbands, face particular barriers and may be less likely to disclose abuse, particularly due to the risks of criminalisation and deportation. Abusive partners can use women's insecure immigration status as a means of coercion and control. Safe reporting systems for women with insecure immigration status are therefore needed, as is investment in language and cultural interpreters. Women with No Recourse to Public Funds also face particular difficulties with housing and are therefore even less likely to be able to escape abusive relationships. Specialist services like [Hibiscus Initiatives](#), with its women's centre in North London, are vital to supporting this group of women, including in tackling experience of abuse.

Services in prison

In answering the question above, selection of *'Improve availability of support for domestic abuse victims in prisons'* option as one of our top three priorities should not detract from the fact that the absolute priority need is for community support services for women and diversion away from the criminal justice system and from prison. The vast majority of women in prison (where they are often unable to access domestic violence support) should not be there and should have either been diverted from the criminal justice system or should be serving sentences in the community. However, we absolutely feel that the availability of domestic abuse support services in prison needs to increase so that women who do serve custodial sentences are receiving the support they require.

- 1- For women who are sentenced to prison, the lack of domestic abuse support services within prison is completely unacceptable. In many prisons, the only domestic abuse provision on offer is that provided as part of the Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) in the last 12 weeks before release – often group work rather than individual support. Moreover, due to the nature of short sentencing facing women, many women serving short sentences will not even be able to take advantage of this support. Our experience of working within the prison system is that domestic abuse provision is severely lacking across the women's prison estate, despite being recognised as a gender-specific pathway towards resettlement and all women's prisons having designated domestic abuse leads. The physical environment of prisons is also often wholly inappropriate for domestic abuse work where vulnerable women are often expected to open up to strangers in conditions where they can easily be overheard by other staff and prisoners. Prisons should not underestimate the importance of a safe environment for providing support and listening to clients as a pre-requisite for them to disclose domestic abuse.

The domestic abuse provision is extremely patchy across the prison estate, with some prisons having practically no provision at all and others offering limited support to certain women at certain points of their sentence. This is both a failure to provide vital support to women in prison and a lost opportunity to enable women to tackle issues such as domestic abuse whilst serving their sentence. If there were a shift in culture towards prioritising these services within the prison service (and this being reflected through associated funding), women's centres could work in partnership with local domestic violence support services to deliver the necessary support and interventions to women in prison. Many women's centres have the knowledge and partnerships, but simply lack the capacity to provide the support needed.

Custody offers an opportunity to provide a positive intervention to women of this particular cohort, at a point where they are relatively safe from the domestic abuse perpetrators, and may be receiving substance misuse support (where applicable) as well as mental health interventions (although, in reality, mental health support is available to far from all women in need). We know from our work that the majority of women in prison have domestic abuse experiences and many will be leaving prison to return to abusive partners – often from necessity and because their partner is the source of a home, and in some cases access to the woman's children. The demand for domestic abuse support in custody is very high with many women asking for help such as counselling, therapeutic group work and one-to-one advocacy, only to be turned away.

WIP previously delivered a domestic abuse project called 'Thyme' in London and HMP Holloway, funded by London Councils. This project encompassed one-to-one counselling in custody and community, therapeutic group work and practical workshops in prison, as well as advocacy on release and in the community. The project was of enormous benefit to the hundreds of women who were able to take advantage of it, especially due to the 'through-the-gate' element of the service. Sadly, though, the funding came to an end last year and we see very few projects like this across the women's prisons.

Although domestic abuse support in prison is not an example of early intervention or prevention in the strictest sense, as we are here referring to women who have previously experienced domestic abuse, it is nevertheless an opportunity for prevention in the sense of putting in place options for change in the woman's life to enable her to escape abuse. A fully resourced domestic abuse programme delivered across the women's prison estate, in combination with adequate refuge and supported housing provision for women on release from prison would make an enormous difference to women in the criminal justice system and help break, not just the cycle of abuse, but also the cycle of offending. But this has to be part of the bigger picture of holistic support to meet women's range of complex needs in the community.

(Specialist) housing provision

Overall there is a desperate need for more refuges and other types of accommodation for all women facing domestic abuse as many women are turned away due to lack of capacity, with devastating consequences. Women fleeing domestic abuse should automatically be classified as being in 'priority need' for housing and should not need to fulfill additional vulnerability criteria. It is extremely difficult for a woman to re-build her life without safe and stable accommodation and the lack of safe housing can be a matter of life and death for women in abusive relationships. For women in the criminal justice system, homelessness and lack of safe and secure housing also has significant impact on offending levels. In addition to the overall lack of accommodation for women facing domestic

abuse, it is very difficult to find appropriate refuge spaces for women with an offending background, substance misuse and/or mental health issues. Specialist supported housing is therefore vital for women with complex needs. For more information on the housing barriers facing women in the criminal justice system, see the briefing '[Home Truths](#)' (2017), produced by Prison Reform Trust in partnership with Women in Prison.

The complex victim-perpetrator dichotomy facing women in the criminal justice system who are affected by domestic abuse can present problems in accessing refuges and related services. Many refuges are shared houses and some criteria for access may make it difficult for women affected by the criminal justice system and women with substance misuse issues to use these facilities. There is therefore a need for housing provision for women affected by the criminal justice system that accounts for the additional barriers faced in their accessing refuge spaces. More attention also needs to be given to facilitating access to housing for women leaving prison whose only alternative is to return to an abusive partner.

Diversions schemes and signposting by police

A focus on diversion is a fundamental pre-requisite for changing the sentencing of women and allowing those who have been brought to offending by experience of abuse to tackle the root causes of that offending. However, for problem-solving justice interventions such as diversionary schemes to work, women not only need to be diverted *away* from custody but also need diverting *toward* support in the community. Investment in, and funding for, women's centres and other services is therefore vital if diversion and other community options are to become widely used criminal and social justice solutions. Therefore, the funding of women's services discussed above is necessary in order to incorporate diversion into the 'whole system approach'. It is vital that a national picture of services is in place in order to strategically identify gaps and ensure sustainable investment in existing women's services.

Police diversion schemes

Women's centres can be an important, and value for money, resource for diversion schemes. They can provide of a package of measures for community sentences and they can add access to independent support which can help women with support they need to meet requirements of the probation service and any programmes they are committed to. There have been some positive developments in recent years, with women's centres being used for police liaison and diversion schemes. Examples of these include schemes run by Women in Prison in partnership with other criminal justice agencies in Surrey, Lambeth and Manchester. Women's centres can also focus on early intervention for women at risk of offending and in some places are used by police diversion schemes for women affected by domestic abuse.

Court diversion schemes

Many women in the criminal justice system have multiple support needs and there is a common link between mental ill health and experiences of trauma, including domestic abuse. When it comes to court diversion schemes, there are many examples of successful mental health liaison and diversion schemes. One example is the work undertaken by [Together for Mental Health](#) and their work in courts, which includes gender-specific work with women. However, not all magistrates' courts have access to these kind of services. In addition, in order to work effectively, it is important that partnerships are established between liaison and diversion services and local services; they cannot

work in isolation from the 'whole system'. It is also vital that community mental health and other services are sufficiently secure in terms of commissioning and funding to ensure they remain a permanent and reliable sentencing alternative. Such schemes often take many months to become established and trusted routes for diversion. However, it should be stressed that mental health liaison and diversion schemes are not a preventative measure as they are primarily applied to those who have been charged with an offence.

More investment in mental health support services would help prevent many people with mental health needs from entering the criminal justice system in the first place, including preventing a slippage into substance misuse (e.g. when experience of trauma results in self-medication through substance misuse). Examples of such services may include, but not be limited to, early intervention in schools, easier and quicker access to counselling through GP referrals, walk-in clinics, day centres, emergency out-of-hours support, floating support and increased opportunities for supported accommodation for vulnerable adults. For women, there is a desperate need for gender specific services that address their particular needs – including experience of abuse and trauma. Women's centres can offer such mental health support and advocacy, filling a gap for many referral pathways from GPs, schools, other health professionals, police, courts and prisons.

Signposting into appropriate services for women in contact with the police

Where women in the criminal justice system come into contact with the police, there are examples of good practice that we would like to see replicated and extended.

Some police forces have systems in place for identifying domestic abuse, as well as partnerships set up with local women's support services. Brixton Police Station in the Borough of Lambeth works closely with the Gaia centre and the Beth Centre, referring women with whom they come into contact to the domestic abuse support services of these organisations. The Brixton Police Community Safety unit also chairs the local MARAC meetings where the Gaia and Beth centre are present, together with other relevant local agencies.

Co-location of IDVAs within mainstream services such as the police is another example of successful partnership work. We feel the IDVA courses should be made more financially accessible which would encourage their proliferation. They should also be more broadly co-located with other relevant services such as social services or GP surgeries. It is essential, though, that these services recognise the limitations of criminal justice solutions for women who may have themselves been harmed by the criminal justice system and lost trust in it. Independence and trust are qualities of effective women's services that are too often undervalued in commissioning arrangements.

Training for professionals

As suggested in the consultation document, there should be more investment in training for professionals in order to ensure appropriate signposting to the right services, and trauma-informed practice from all professionals. Training should be delivered in partnership with specialist women's organisations, including women's centres. Police should receive domestic abuse training to help them recognise signs of abuse and respond to these sensitively and appropriately (including identifying when a woman arrested for perpetrating abuse may actually be a victim of abuse). Any such training must contain clear explanations of what domestic abuse actually is – that it is not always physical, the element of coercive control often involved and, crucially, how it differs from other forms of physical violence. It is vital that the police and all professionals in the penal system fully comprehend the nature of domestic abuse and how it generally differs from other violence as

women's likelihood to report domestic abuse and their ability to leave an abusive relationship have a significant impact. Any domestic abuse training aimed at statutory agencies should, in addition to techniques and procedures, contain information about options such as legal aid for women in abusive relationships and train professionals to support women in applying for legal aid. Overall, legal aid should be promoted much more effectively by the government and statutory agencies in order to increase women's understanding of the process and their rights. All training needs to be under-pinned by a trauma-informed approach (such as that delivered in prisons and in communities by the charity, [One Small Thing](#)).

14. Question: How can we make greater use of women-specific services to deliver interventions in safe, women-only environments? Please select top 3.

Availability of a GP at women-only services

Availability of a nurse at women-only services

Child contact sessions so that women who are not living with their children can have supervised access to their child

X Delivery of health interventions such as mental health and substance misuse treatment at women-only services

IDVAs located or linked to women-only services

X Improving access to benefits, finance and accommodation advisors at women-only services

Provision of employer interventions at women-only services to help individuals become work ready, including offering work experience and/or mentoring

X Other (free text) – One-stop-shop women's centres

Introduction: Women's centres

In line with the 2007 [Corston Report](#), Women in Prison advocates for, a network of 'one-stop-shop' women's centres that can provide holistic support to women in the criminal justice system. We run three such women's centres – the Beth Centre in Lambeth, London, the Women's Support Centre in Woking, Surrey and Women MATTA in Manchester. There are many other examples of such women's centres across the country that provide excellent services to women with domestic abuse experience and a range of other support needs. Some have already had to close while many of those still in existence face an ongoing battle for survival. We strongly urge that this model is extended, with sustainable, national ring-fenced funding, supported by local matched funding.

Women's centres are absolute key to delivering interventions to women in contact with the criminal justice system, in safe, women-only environments. We fully support the Ministry of Justice investment in the development of a 'whole system approach' to women in the criminal justice system, with women's centres at its heart to prevent and respond to women's offending. However, the £1 million seed funding on offer is clearly a very small amount of money nationally, and we are unclear about how many years this funding covers. Moreover, only a very small proportion of this funding has, so far, reached women's centres. In order to function, this 'whole system' model needs to be given a chance to succeed by receiving serious levels of investment. There are already examples of existing models and pilots from which the government can draw clear conclusions about their effectiveness and suitability. These holistic women's centre services are proven to work, but have in many cases been left with effectively no national support. The women's centres surviving are doing so through a complex and unsustainable funding model which has them lurching from one funding crisis to the next, often with very little job security for staff or possibility of long-term planning for projects.

The case for women's centres and a 'whole system approach'

Women's centres providing support to women in the criminal justice system

Women's centres focused on supporting women with complex needs and those in contact with the criminal justice system are a vital part of the ecosystem providing for survivors of domestic abuse. In some cases, the women accessing women's centres will be those who have been excluded from refuge provision due to drug use or their offending. For some, their complex needs will mean that multiple issues such as tackling addiction or severe mental health issues need to be addressed in tandem with support around domestic abuse. Women's centres and provision for women affected by the criminal justice system need to be seen as a central feature of domestic violence services, so that they complement the services provided by refuges, IDVAs and other domestic abuse services. A multi-agency and whole-system approach is necessary to effectively support women who require support from a range of services. It is therefore not a helpful approach in this consultation to separate out and rank in order of importance a small number of priorities.

The core features of women's centre provision are:

- 1) **Holistic support** which meet the entire spectrum of a woman's needs – not just one or two elements. If a woman is supported in this way she will be able to more effectively access domestic abuse services;
- 2) **Relational support** which emphasises the long-term journey for change and the positive relationships women can build to progress. This includes relationships with family, children and community; Peers who are working together in groups and sometimes further on in their progress (e.g. peer mentors); and with the women's centre itself and its staff. Women's centres are places to which women can return without judgement, especially after a 'false start' or a setback. This is different to many mainstream and statutory services which are time-limited and focused on isolated individual needs.

3) Independent advocacy – this is a deeply undervalued element of effective support for those caught up in the criminal justice system, especially when they have a background of trauma and abuse. For many women in this position, they have been repeatedly failed by state agencies and often by others in their lives. Their trust levels are often at rock bottom. This can be made worse by relationships where punitive powers are exercised (e.g. in prison or for an individual under probation supervision). There are incredible talented and dedicated staff working in our prisons and probation service, but independent advocacy is crucially different in that it does not involve a power imbalance – or the ability for the advocate to punish for non-compliance. That is why so many women value the independent advocacy support over the long term that is offered by women’s centres and providers like Women in Prison.

We urge the government to build on past and existing successful work to invest in independent advocacy in prisons and women’s centres as part of a national strategy. Such advocates and Prison Link Workers in prisons are trained in trauma-informed practice and enable women to build the type of long-term trusting relationships which is not possible for most other services that are part of the criminal justice system. As well as advocacy, they can provide group work in prisons and women’s centres, and help link women to mainstream services on release, including mainstream domestic violence services, where appropriate.

Sometimes domestic abuse is identified through wider engagement with a woman. For example, a woman may be arrested for shoplifting, be diverted to a women’s centre and then, through independent advocacy and key work, her other support issues are discussed and information about abuse from a partner emerges. Criminal justice agencies can help identify risks of abuse through their work with women. For example, a woman arrested with a co-defendant who has a history of domestic abuse is at high risk of abuse herself. Similarly, investigation into the nature of the offence may give indications of domestic abuse. For some women, accessing women’s services and feeling safe to disclose offers opportunities for identifying and addressing domestic abuse. In some cases women feel it is not in their best interests to, or do not wish to, pursue a criminal justice solution, which is another reason why independent advocacy support services, separate from the criminal justice system, are so important.

Case study: The ‘whole system approach’ for women in the criminal justice system

The ‘whole system approach’ model in Greater Manchester for women in the criminal justice system and those at risk of offending is a national example of best practice. The ‘whole system approach’ uses women’s projects/centres as hubs in each borough, into which women at any point in the criminal justice system can be referred. The service delivered provides ‘wrap-around’ provision for women in the criminal justice system and those at risk of offending, and in the more developed centres gives women access to a wide range of services, designed to help them tackle root causes of offending, and address issues such as domestic abuse, substance misuse, debt etc. which underpin their offending. The providers of these centres have formed a Women’s Support Alliance in order to ensure that a collective voice is heard by policy makers and commissioners of services and to represent the interests of their beneficiaries and service users. The ‘whole system approach’ is funded and delivered in a partnership between the Women’s Support Alliance, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) Justice and Rehabilitation Executive Board and the Cheshire and Greater Manchester Community Rehabilitation Company. In April 2016 the Women’s Support Alliance secured additional funding from the Big Lottery and Tampon Tax Fund which has been allocated across Greater Manchester.

WomenMATTA, run by WIP, is one of the alliance of women's centres supporting the 'whole system approach', covering Manchester and Trafford. WomenMATTA provides intense, holistic support to women affected by the criminal justice system and to those at risk. The Centre provides women with a safe space in which to access gender-specialist support services. It is a 'one-stop-shop' offering group work, one-to-one and counselling, supporting women around:

- Domestic violence/sexual abuse
- Mental health
- Substance misuse and alcohol addiction
- Debt or money issues
- Parenting support
- Housing and homelessness
- Education and employment
- General emotional wellbeing and physical wellbeing

Emotional and practical support is available to women at risk of reoffending from the caseworkers that are employed by the women's centre. An assessment is completed to determine current needs including housing, mental health, substance misuse, education, employment, domestic abuse and confidence/self-esteem levels. Women are supported to identify needs, risks, and relevant support networks and access specialist local service provision, addressing exclusion and disadvantage in their communities. The projects also support women to increase positive engagement with partner agencies which to increase the number of women who complete community orders and licences and contribute to the reduction in re-offending.

The case for specialist services for women in the criminal justice system

Complex needs of women in the criminal justice system

As an organisation, we advocate for specialist services for women in contact with the criminal justice system. Due to the multiple, overlapping needs facing many women in this position, it is often ineffective and unrealistic to deal with any one issue, including domestic abuse, in isolation. Women's offending often takes place within a complex web of interlinked issues with offending often being linked to substance misuse and mental health, which in turn is linked to domestic abuse and trauma. As domestic abuse cannot always be separated from other support needs it works much better for women to be able to access support in the 'one-stop-shop' setting of a women's centre. These services are best offered by specialist providers rather than accessed through long waiting lists for mainstream services. Domestic abuse services in prison and for women in the criminal justice system are therefore best delivered by criminal justice system-specialist organisations such as women's centres that are working holistically and in partnership with mainstream providers such as those delivering domestic abuse-related services.

Women in the criminal justice system are some of the most marginalised people in our society and are often in poverty and/or debt. Any prison sentence generally exacerbates financial issues, including debt, because they often lead to women accruing rent arrears, risking tenancies, losing benefits or employment. As such, the imprisonment of a woman who is a victim of domestic

violence is likely to increase her risk and reliance on the perpetrator, after release and whilst in prison.

As a group, women in the criminal justice system tend to lead chaotic lives, often involving homelessness, substance misuse, mental ill health and financial difficulties. Understandably, many mainstream services are ill-equipped to deal with this particularly challenging group, with many staff feeling fearful and lacking the experience to deal with women who are sometimes seen as difficult or intimidating. Mainstream services can be risk-averse and can therefore be unwilling to accommodate women in the criminal justice system. As a result, many women in contact with the criminal justice system are unable to use mainstream services. This is a particularly common situation for women with personality disorders, a condition that is over-represented among women in the criminal justice system. One way of mitigating these situations is for workers of women's centres and other specialist service providers to support women to attend appointments, advocate on their behalf and liaise with professionals and services.

As a result of the barriers outlined above, women may miss appointments and/or disengage from support for periods of time. With many services, a missed appointment or a lack of engagement usually means going back to the end of the waiting list or being discharged. While it is understandable that services often operate according to this practice, it is unrealistic to assume that this way of working will be effective for this particular cohort of women. In order to make services more accessible and to maximise uptake services need to work flexibly, for example by offering drop-in sessions or offer outreach services to meet women in the community where they live. It is also important for services not to enforce a blanket exclusion for those women who fail to attend appointments but to give women a chance to come back to services when they are able to engage effectively. Mainstream services need to take into account the vulnerability and sometimes chaotic lifestyle of this client group. The best way to do this is with the support of sustainably funded independent advocates based in women's centres.

Mental health and substance misuse

Women in contact with the criminal justice system often require crisis support around mental health and/or addiction, as well as domestic abuse. Unfortunately appropriate services are rarely available in the community, often resulting in mental health breakdowns and/or reoffending. This constitutes a false economy with many women ending up in A&E or back in prison rather than getting the preventative or ongoing care they need to tackle the root causes of their offending. Long waiting lists for mental health interventions act as a barrier for engagement; Many women agree to sign up to go on waiting lists for mental health interventions such as counselling when in a moment of crisis but by the time their appointment comes around they are unable to engage as they have disengaged from support, gone back to prison, gone back into active addiction or lost interest or trust in the service. A proliferation of different types of services are needed in conjunction – on the one hand preventative, ongoing and long-term support services would be able to reduce the prevalence of crisis situations for many women while more mental health crisis services are also needed for women who will still be experiencing acute issues.

Substance misuse and mental health services have faced significant cuts in recent years, to the detriment of women in contact with the criminal justice system. We currently see a situation where lack of resources have led to extremely narrow criteria to qualify for mental health support which means many women are unable to access any support at all due to being [wrongly] deemed "not unwell enough" for support. More specialist mental health services are needed, such as counselling

for women with substance misuse issues and women affected by prostitution, given the close connection between trauma, mental health and substance misuse. But all of this needs to be underpinned by that independent specialist advocacy that is so central.

Conclusion

The above response highlights a major challenge for women in the criminal justice system with domestic abuse experiences. As a group, women in the criminal justice system face multiple and interlinked disadvantages, often involving a combination of overlapping issues around housing/homelessness, mental health, substance misuse, and domestic abuse. As a result, it can be difficult for some women in this group to fit into the overall 'mold' of mainstream domestic abuse provision. For women with complex needs there is clearly a need for additional support outside of domestic abuse, particularly the holistic support provided by women's centres. Due to the complexity of support required, support workers need to have an in-depth knowledge of working within the criminal justice system and an understanding of multiple disadvantages, in addition to domestic abuse expertise. There is a clear and desperate need for specialist domestic abuse provision for women in the criminal justice system, to be provided by criminal justice system specialists as part of a wider holistic support package of a sustainably funded national network of women's centres. These provide the answer to diversion services and community support. They also provide the link between prison and community that enables women to address domestic abuse when resettling safely into their communities after completing their prison sentence.