



Revolving Doors Agency submission to Ministry of Justice female offender strategy call for evidence

April 2017

About Revolving Doors

Revolving Doors Agency is a charity working across England to change systems and improve services for people who face multiple and complex needs, including poor mental health, and who come into repeated contact with the criminal justice system (CJS). We work with policymakers, commissioners, local decision-makers, and frontline professionals to share evidence, demonstrate effective solutions, and change policy, while involving people with direct experience of the problem in all our work including through our National Service User Forum. Revolving Doors Agency is a member of the Ministry of Justice's Advisory Board on Female Offenders.

Introduction

We welcome the Ministry of Justice considering the particular range of needs faced by and characteristics of female offenders with the intention of publishing a strategy on how to reform and improve the safety of female offenders in custody and the community.

In this response, we have focused on the issues of particular interest to or concern of RDA, and have provided references where appropriate. The recommendations have been developed in consultation with Revolving Doors Agency's service user forum.

1) Have we identified the key principles or are there others that we should be considering?

The principles identified predominantly relate to women at or near the point of initial contact with the criminal justice system including diversion; sentencing; and post sentence. These are, of course, essential points on the journey through the CJS. However, there are other aspects of policy and points on the CJS journey that could also be considered:

1. Release from prison, and the period leading up to it. Putting other considerations aside, the policy intention underpinning Transforming Rehabilitation included providing better and more effective support when returning from prison to the community. Recent inspections by HMI Prisons of individual prisons,ⁱ and recent joint inspections by HMI Prisons and Probationsⁱⁱ suggest that this ambition is not yet being realised. We are aware that the department is currently carrying out a number of reviews of probation services, and this aspect of provision may sit equally well within that strand of work, but sight of it should be retained.

One of the greatest challenges women face on release is obtaining housing.^{iii, iv} Women are more likely than men to lose their tenancies whilst in prison,^{v, vi} leading to uprooted families and increased vulnerability.^{vii} Vulnerabilities associated with a lack of secure housing include (and are not exclusive to) increased likelihood of reoffending;^{viii} barriers to regaining children;^{ix} unemployment;^x prostitution;^{xi} and returning to abusive relationships.^{xii}

The specific needs of each woman needs to be assessed so as to ensure the appropriate housing is provided. Examples of these needs and appropriate housing include women facing mental health issues, as requiring a supportive housing environment;^{xiii} having children, therefore requiring child child-appropriate housing;^{xiv, xv} women with learning difficulties, therefore requiring support in the application for housing;^{xvi} and women having entered prison from abusive relationships, therefore requiring housing in both a supportive and safe environment.^{xvii, xviii}

Given these vulnerabilities faced by women leaving prison it is vital that the female offender strategy addresses the need for robust and reliable preparation plans for release from prison, which need to start months prior to release. Therefore, for those who are serving short sentences this process must start on arrival at prison.

2. At a more fundamental level, consideration should be given to the role of prisons for women involved in the CJS, other than for high impact and/or high risk offenders. While the majority of women in prison at any one time are serving longer sentences, the majority of sentences passed are towards the shorter end of the spectrum. Around 73% of women sentenced to immediate imprisonment are sentenced to short sentences of less than 12 months; a proportion that has increased in recent years, and the average time served, including remand, is a little under 5 months.^{xix} Proportionately more women than men in prison are first offenders, at 26% compared to 12%.^{xx}

Spending short amount of time in prison is unlikely to do much more than further disrupt already chaotic lives, and is likely to deliver worse personal, social and reoffending outcomes for many offenders than community alternatives. Particular consideration might be given to breach and recall, where there are signs that the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms have had the (presumably unintended) effect of increasing the number of women recalled to prison for potentially relatively trivial reasons. Although the rate of increase of recall appears to have now stabilised, this still means that several hundred women per year are being recalled to prison when, prior to the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms, they would not have been.

2) What more can be done to support and divert vulnerable women when they first come into contact with the criminal justice system?

Key issues

Women who come into contact with the criminal justice system tend to have a wider range of needs than their male peers, and in many cases more severe needs. Their social and family situation tends to be different as well, with women being far more likely to be sole parents or carers; 25% of female prisoners are lone parents compared to 3% male. They are less likely than men to have someone

looking after their home and family, and they are more likely to lose their home and children as a result of imprisonment.^{xxi} Women proportionately commit more acquisitive crime, which may often be economically driven and stem from their domestic circumstances, with 28% of women's offences being attributed to financial motivation in comparison to 20% of men's offences.^{xxii}

A spectrum of multiple and complex needs tends to be more prevalent among women in contact with the CJS compared to men. RDA's recent report *Rebalancing Act*^{xxiii} identified a number of other disparities between men and women in contact with various parts of the CJS, including greater prevalence of mental ill health, opiate and crack cocaine misuse and other. The report also reviewed research highlighting the significantly higher excess mortality rate faced by women on release from prison of around 70 times in the first week after release (compared to around 30 for males), almost entirely attributable to drug related deaths. There are distinct disparities of vulnerability and risk among the prison population, as despite only 5% of the prison population being female, women account for 47% of all incidents of self-harm.^{xxiv}

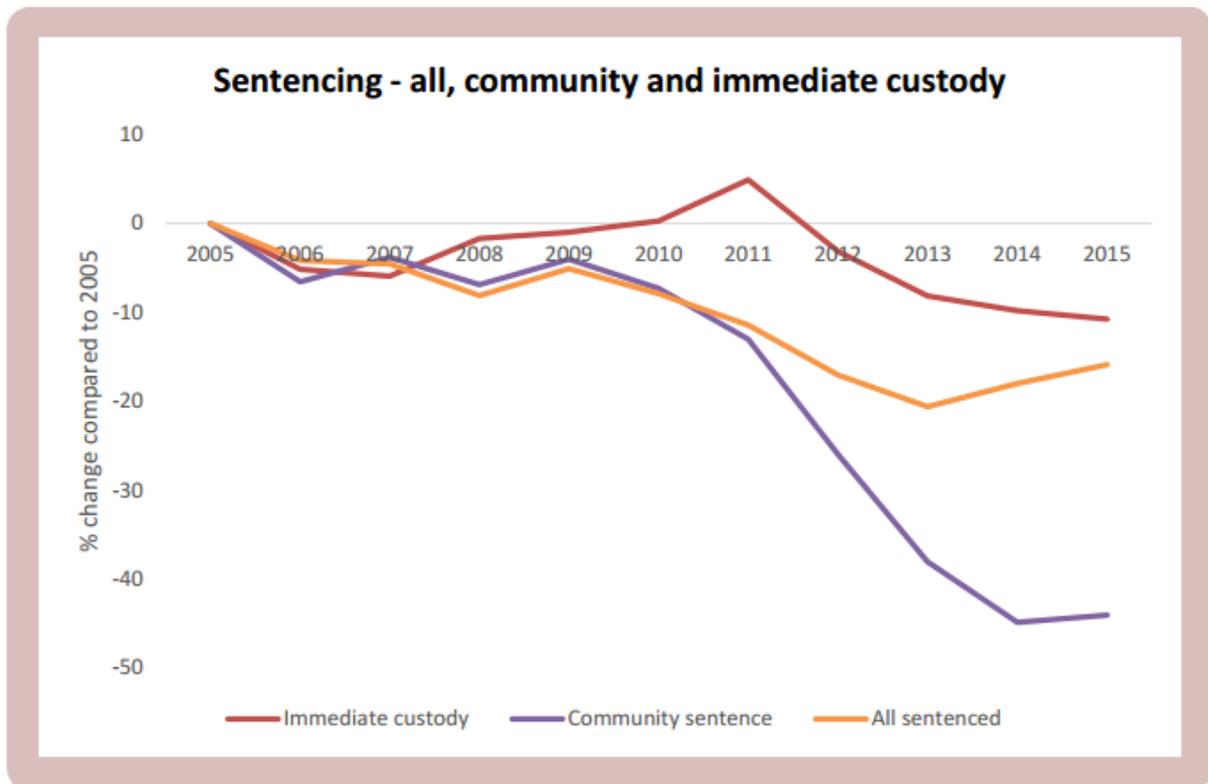
Recommendations

- It is important that an effective assessment is carried out at the earliest stage as there may be barriers involved with disclosing and/or identifying vulnerabilities and needs, such as a lack of understanding or awareness of one's own needs, or a fear of the outcome of asking for help (such as having children taken into care).
- There may be a risk that L&D increasingly sees the problems of those who come into contact with the CJS through a medical lens. Ensuring that the social and care needs of individuals, and in particular women, are firmly and consistently in scope, may help to address some of the drivers behind female offending. This should be genuinely holistic, and include assessment of issues such as income maximisation, education, training and employment opportunities (ETE), life skills, housing difficulties, and parenting. In essence, a whole family or whole household approach.
- Offering peer support via L&D can be an effective means of engaging women, and can offer the prospect of longer-term support and more effective signposting and referral. The services should, within the constraints of the circumstances, be designed to be fun.
- It goes without saying that there must be services available to divert people to. While it would be unwise to generalise given the differences in need and provision around the country, the availability of mental health services and women's services is likely to be a significant limiting factor in many areas and for many women.
- L&D and aligned services should include support around social (re)integration, including around healthy relationships, life skills, and childcare.
- The value of early and comprehensive assessment should be maximised through the use of a single, person-centred plan, which can follow the individual on their route through or diversion out of the CJS, ensuring consistency of approach in addressing needs, including criminogenic needs, and reducing the amount of duplication at different points of the system(s).

3) How can we improve community sentences for women in a way that inspires sentencer confidence; ensures that they are seen as a viable alternative to custody for some women; and contain the right support/interventions to support rehabilitation?

There is good evidence that, for some offenders, better outcomes can be obtained from community sentences than custodial ones.^{xxv} Not only do more women than men successfully complete community sentences and have their sentences terminated early,^{xxvi} but the negative impact of taking a woman away from their home (especially if they are mothers) is extremely high.^{xxvii} In short, for many female offenders, community sentences offer a more effective and cost effective response, whether one considers reoffending in a narrow sense or a broader range of social and economic outcomes.

Despite this, the use of community sentences for both males and females has decreased precipitately in recent years, with a consistently smaller and declining proportion of women being given community sentences compared to men (2010: females – 6%, males – 11%; 2015: females – 2%, males – 10%).^{xxviii}



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Further, requirements included in community sentence orders may not match need, with only 0.4% to 0.7% of community or suspended sentence orders including a mental health treatment requirement, despite the level of mental health need among the offender population being substantially higher. Older research^{xxx} has also shown that the requirements included in a community sentence may not adequately reflect the nature and number of needs faced by female offenders.

A number of factors have been put forward as potential explanations for the fall in the use of community sentences, including a lack of sentencer confidence in their effectiveness and in the availability of relevant services. There may be particular obstacles to the appropriate use of mental health treatment conditions, relating to the absence (unlike drug and alcohol treatment requirements) of a standardised service specification and concerns about availability and

accessibility which may, at least in part, be justified. There may also be a perception that a short sentence in custody may offer respite from chaotic lifestyles in the community, or an opportunity to engage in services. In reality, on a like-for-like basis, prison typically has higher reoffending rates than community sentences, and at a higher cost per person.

Research^{xxx} using offending and reoffending records for 320 women identified, based on propensity score matching, a potential saving of £3.6m. The same research found that community sentences were associated with a reduced reoffending rate, fewer new offences per reoffender, and a longer time to reoffending; this is consistent with previous research.

Recommendations

Increasing sentencer confidence around the use of community sentences requires the improvement of both the quality of services and care provided during community sentences, and the sentencers understanding of the benefits of community versus prison sentences. Discussions with stakeholders suggest that as well as awareness, there may be doubt on the part of sentencers of the availability of appropriate local services. In some cases, that doubt may be justified; in others, such as the availability of drug and alcohol pathways, it may be less so.

There are various important aspects in terms of educating sentencers around the benefits of community sentences over incarceration. Sentencers need to understand that prison is not a solution to many of the reasons women commit crimes in the first place, and leaves women and their families in a state of disarray. The negative impacts of imprisoning women are all very closely linked. A third of women in prison lose their homes,^{xxxii} and women are on average sent 55 miles away from their home.^{xxxiii} This not only means that over 17,000 children are taken away from their mothers,^{xxxiv} but 95% of these children are uprooted from their homes^{xxxv}, and often placed in care, which is known to have very poor outcomes (in addition to imposing a significant financial burden on local authorities).^{xxxvi} Furthermore, half of the women in prison are left without a single visit from their children.^{xxxvii} These do not only create problems for the women while in prison, but also increase the challenges faced by women when leaving prison as housing needs to be reobtained, employment needs to be sought, and the return of children to their mothers needs to be organised – none of which would need to occur if community sentences were to be used. Not only does incarceration have a damaging effect on the women's life outside of prison, but can also have a traumatising effect on the women while in prison. Women in prison are exposed to high levels of criminal activity (such as violent crimes^{xxxviii} and drug-dealing^{xxxix}) and social isolation.^{xl} The exposure to crime and isolation can lead to increased levels of mental health problems and institutionalisation, in the long-run leading to increased re-offending rates.^{xli, xlii, xliii}

In order for sentencers to fully understand the impact of prison sentences on women (especially mothers) specialist understanding is needed. There are a few ways in which we feel this can be achieved. Firstly, it is vital that thorough pre-sentence reports are sent to sentencers so that the needs and vulnerabilities of female offenders can be fully taken into account (something that currently only happens for 20% of female offenders in comparison to 30% of male offenders^{xliv}). Secondly, it may be useful for sentencers to follow the journey of a few offenders they have sentenced in order to increase their knowledge of community and prison sentences and their outcomes as part of professional development. Thirdly, it would be beneficial for sentencers to be assessed on the success of the sentences they have passed and the outcomes for the individuals

they have sentenced. These would all help educate the sentencer and hold the sentencers to account, thus encouraging the sentencer to be more invested in the sentencing outcomes.

It is important however, to not only increase the proportion of women given community sentences, but to also improve the quality of care provided during community sentences. This is because reoffending rates for women given community sentences although lower than those serving custodial sentences is still relatively high (48.8% in comparison to 55.3%).^{xlv} In order to improve the quality of services and care provided during community sentences it is important to have gender specific services and ensuring that women who are serving community sentences are given priority when it comes to receiving care in services such as mental health services. Furthermore, it is important that strong and supportive women's centres – described by HMI Probation as 'undervalued and under threat'^{xlvi} – are encouraged and supported (to be expanded upon in the following question) in order to offer gender specific support to women serving community sentences. It is worth noting that for community sentences to be seen as a viable option women's centres need to be resilient and reliable; but this may be at risk if women's centres are absorbed into the CJS as this may change the dynamic between the centre and the client (referred to in the following question). A high level of support is required by women in the criminal justice system not only as women often have responsibilities that men do not have (such as childcare), but also because of the challenges women have faced before entering the criminal justice system. For example, 25% of women in prison spent time in care as a child;^{xlvii} over half of women in prison report having faced domestic violence;^{xlviii} five times as many women in prison as those in the general population have mental health conditions;^{xlix} and 37% of women in prison report having attempted suicide at some point.^l The gender specific care that is needed is often not available within the prison environment due to a range of reasons, including prisons not having the services required; women not meeting the threshold; and women not being in prison long enough to be able to effectively access support. Therefore, the use of a community sentence would provide both the time and access to services required for the appropriate support to be offered.

4) How can government work with the sector to increase the resilience of women's centres?

Women's centres are extremely important spaces as they can offer gender specific care that addresses a wide range of issues faced by women, including far higher rates of trauma and abuse. A thematic inspection of a variety of services offered to women in the community, including women's centres, was conducted by HM Inspectorate of Probation.^{li} Both positive findings and points for concern were raised with regards to the running of women's centres. A major positive role of women's centres include centres is the way in which the centres act as one-stop-shops for women. This means that the women attending women's centres can access support for the full variety of needs they may face (e.g. mental health services, drug/alcohol misuse services, family counselling, financial support and advice etc.). Women's centres were further praised if they offered educational or skills-based qualifications for women; if they offered childcare support; and if they provided peer support.

Women's centres were criticised if they did not offer these specialist services. Furthermore, concern was raised with regards to how far women had to travel to access these services. For example, a women's centre in Hammersmith despite having women from Islington being referred there, had no

visits from women based in Islington. The resilience of women's centres was also found to be dependent on the strategic differences between areas in the way in which they did or did not prioritise women. Staff whom had specialist training around the specific needs of women offered a higher quality of care. Finally, the issue of funding was raised. CRCs were at the time of the evaluation were considering budget allocations and funding priorities. This not only places women's centres in a state of uncertainty but also means that they are women's centres are not given autonomy over actions and decisions. It is important that the services are closely aligned with the criminal justice system (in order to best support the women) but that they are not part of the criminal justice system. The way in which Transforming Justiceⁱⁱⁱ has brought the two together changes the dynamic between the keyworker and the women as what was supposed to be there to support and protect the women becomes part of the enforcement apparatus.

For the government to work with the sector to increase the resilience of women's centres women's centres need to be given greater autonomy to make their own decision with regards to the needs of the women. Moving the funding away from CRCs would ensure that the centres are not solely probation focussed. This would help move the focus of women's centres away from the criminal justice system. This may increase the women's confidence in the women's centres as the focus would no longer be on offending behaviour, instead moving towards a more holistic point of care. A further way in which the resilience of women's centres could be increased is to This would require funding to be given directly to women's centres and would therefore enable them to use their specialist knowledge and skills to provide the highest quality care for women. There need to be more women's centres to both ease access for the women and to ensure that there is space for more women to attend women's centres.

A further way in which the resilience of women's centres could be increased is to ensure that the staff at women's centres are not directly linked to the CJS so that women do not feel like the people who are supposed to help them are also the same individuals who can imprison them. This degree of separation may help increase the confidence of the women in the centres.

5) How do we move towards a higher quality women's custodial estate which is safe, secure, rehabilitative and closer to home for the majority of women?

It is clear from the distance most women are held from their families, as well as the vulnerabilities and needs women enter prison with, that a higher quality women's custodial estate which is safe, secure, rehabilitative and closer to home for the majority of women, is needed. However, it is important to stress that this should not be instead of increases and improving the use of community sentences. A safe, secure and rehabilitative prison that is closer to home should not be seen as preferable over community sentences, but should be seen as an improvement to the current custodial state for those women for whom a custodial sentence is necessary.

It is important that the female offender strategy include plans to make it easier for women to maintain strong relationships with families, especially children. The current lack of contact with children for mothers in prison is apparent through the fact that only half of women in prison have had one or more visits from their children whilst in prison.^{liii} Barriers to contact with children include both the distance of the prison from home and barriers to the type of contact a child is allowed to

have with their mothers. For example, the issue of women in prison only being allowed out-going calls restricts the contact a child is allowed with their mother. A possible solution to this would be to allow incoming calls from relatives and even provide prisoners with telephones in their cells. This would increase contact with children and therefore hopefully decrease the negative impact losing contact with a mother can have on the lives of children.^{liv}

Having prisons closer to home for the women would of course help improve this if it is, in fact, achievable with the current proposals, but it is also important that the design of these prisons further aids the relationship between the women and their families. For example, it is important that prisons are designed to provide sufficient space for families to visit their female family member in prison, whether through the use of visiting flats or visiting rooms. These areas need to be psychologically informed planned environments (PIPEs) that are appropriate for children. NatCen produced a report on their exploration of PIPEs commissioned by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).^{lv} NatCen established a few major findings: 1) “establishing and maintaining supportive relationships between staff and offenders were seen as key to PIPE delivery”; 2) “PIPE staff need to comply with the PIPE way of working, as inconsistent approaches can undermine helpful interaction with offenders”; 3) “Communication about PIPEs needs to filter through all levels of operation”. It would be useful for this research to be combined with other research on psychologically informed environments (such as the recent literature review conducted by the Mental Health Foundation^{lvi}) to help create a safe, secure, rehabilitative custodial state for women. Incorporation of research around carceral geography would also be beneficial as this research demonstrates the importance of visitation and recidivism as well as providing insight into designs that help promote safe, secure and rehabilitative environments in prison.^{lvii, lviii}

An example of the potential for an improved safe, secure, rehabilitative and psychologically informed environment is the use of mother and baby units (MBU). The units can provide women with the opportunity to create an attachment between themselves and their child. To improve MBU it is important to help women feel confident in the benefits of MBU, and help alleviate fears around applying for a space in MBU (outlined on page 2 of O’Keeffe & Dixon, 2015^{lix}). An example of a common fear is the fear that women will be seen to be choosing the baby over their other children. This fear was addressed by HMP Askham Grange’s Acorn House, which is an overnight child contact facility. Not only does this help alleviate this fear, but it also helps maintain relationships between the mother and children and helps with the transition for both the mother and children back into normal life.^{lx} The new female offender strategy should incorporate this and similar examples of best practice to help inform decisions in the female custodial state.

ⁱ For example, see: <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/04/Bronzefield-web2015.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/ciji/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/09/Through-the-Gate.pdf>

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