

Written evidence from The Women's Budget Group

Summary

- Women affected by the criminal justice system (CJS) often have a range of multiple, complex gendered needs that are different from men's and require different responses¹.
- The Ministry of Justice's Female Offender Strategy² (2018) recognised that prison exacerbates the conditions that lead women to come into contact with the CJS.
- The National Concordat highlighted the need for specialist services designed for women and the Female Offender Strategy aims to reduce the use of custody and ensure that courts can have confidence in effective community sentences and support services which work for women.
- It is generally agreed, across government and the CJS, that Women's Centres represent the most effective support as part of alternatives to custody.
- Despite recognition of the value of Women's Centres, funding for these services remains inadequate and precarious.
- Funding is often on a short-term basis leaving Women's Centres unable to plan for the future and staff at constant risk of redundancy.
- We recommend a model of matched funding in which central and local government share the costs of delivering the objectives in the Government's Female Offender Strategy.

Introduction

The UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. WBG is an independent network of leading academic researchers, policy experts and campaigners that analyses the gendered impact of economic policy on different groups of women and men and promotes alternative policies for a gender equal economy. We have only answered the questions within the scope of our work. This submission draws on our 2020 report *The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women's Centres*, which was written in collaboration with Brighton Women's Centre, The Nelson Trust, Together Women, Women in Prison and Anawim.

¹ See Baroness Corston's seminal report, *The Corston Report*, 2007, Home Office
<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180207155341/http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-reportmarch-2007.pdf>

² Ministry of Justice (2018) *Female Offender Strategy*
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719819/female-offenderstrategy.pdf

Reducing the number of women in custody

1. What progress has been made on commitments to reduce the number of women in custody since the publication of the Female Offender Strategy?

The Government's strategy recognises the role played by Women's Centres in meeting women's needs and explicitly commits to adopt the model more widely, repeatedly acknowledging the savings that investment in Women's Centres yield over the costs incurred directly by the criminal justice and prison system. Additional costs are also incurred in further spending on health, mental health, social security, housing, and children's services. However, there has been insufficient investment in services to implement the strategy. This was most recently evidenced in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Committee recommendation that the UK Government "*Allocate sufficient resources to effectively implement the Female Offender Strategy*³", in response to extensive non-governmental organisation (NGO) evidence about the poor levels of funding for women's community services.

Issues linked to female offending cost the Government approximately £1.7bn, including police costs of around £1 billion in 2015/16. It costs £52,121 to keep a woman in prison for a year⁴. This does not include indirect costs such as children going into care, lost housing and lost economic output.

In 2011 Revolving Doors estimated over 13,000 women fall into the core target client group in England⁵, meaning that around £50 million could pay for a network of Centres to meet their needs. A more recent assessment in 2018, found that the full cost of providing holistic, women-centred services to all women subject to criminal justice supervision is up to £70.7m per annum⁶. It is generally agreed, across government and the criminal justice system, that Women's Centres represent the most effective support as part of alternatives to custody.

What more can be done?

Halt plans to build 500 new prison places for women.

The Government's announcement in January 2021 to build 500 new prison places for women, which was met with widespread challenge across the sector, represents a U-turn from the commitment in the strategy to reverse 2016 plans to build 'five new, small community prisons for women⁷'. In fact, the 2016 prison plans were scrapped in order to 'shift our

³ para 58 a) CEDAW /C/GBR/CO/8

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

⁴ Costs per place and costs per prisoner 2018-19 in the Prison Performance Statistics 2018 to 2019 - Table 2: Supplementary Information <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-performance-statistics-2018-to-2019>

⁵ Counting the Cost, Revolving Doors, 2011 http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/file/1793/download?token=_uhAj6qr

⁶ Clinks and the Prison Reform Trust in 2018 <https://www.clinks.org/community/blog-posts/ensuring-distinct-approach-ministry-justice-launch-their-female-offender>

⁷ See point 12, page 7 Ministry of Justice (2018) Female Offender Strategy

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719819/female-offenderstrategy.pdf

emphasis from custody to the community⁸ and to ‘reduce the female prison population⁹’. The £150m pledged for the new prison places massively overshadows the funding committed to the community provisions lauded as the way forward in the strategy. The Women’s Budget Group adds its voice to the call made by many across the sector, to stop the 500 new prison places for women. These plans will only perpetuate the conditions that lead women to coming into contact with the CJS and unnecessarily separate families.

Commit to sustainable funding for Women’s Centres.

The case for investing in Women’s Centre services has been summarised in successive reports¹⁰, and most recently and comprehensively in **Why Women’s Centres Work: An Evidence Briefing**¹¹. This independent briefing sets out:

- Why Women’s Centres are needed, and the benefits they offer;
- Evidence of their impact, including direct testimonies from women supported from Women’s Centres.

The report cites:

- demonstrable improvements in relationships, work, housing, neighbourhood, money, physical health as well as substantial improvements in mental health (80% of women)
 - almost all the women reported a significant improvement in their life as a whole (an average 66% improvement from when they first engaged)
 - Most significantly, re-offending was cut to less than 5% (the national average being 23.4%¹²)
-) Women who offend are a small demographic but are disproportionately expensive to the public purse because they are a complex, vulnerable and multiply disadvantaged group. They are also more likely than men who offend to have caring responsibilities, and the benefits of support given to them also affect their children, who might otherwise be in care, suffer disrupted home life and education, and so on.

Why Women’s Centres Work: An Evidence Briefing makes clear how Women’s Centres play a key role in meeting the needs of women in their communities. It provides the definitive business case for investing in this effective service model.

Costs and benefits of the Women’s Centre model

“Women’s centres are often central to Whole System Approaches...analysis found a reduction in the one year proven reoffending rate of between 1 and 9 percentage points for

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ For example, Ending the inertia: a plan to transform outcomes for women offenders; Justice Data Lab Re-Offending Analysis: Women’s Centres throughout England

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/427388/womens-centres-report.pdf

¹¹ Tavin Institute (2019) Why Women’s Centres Work report <https://www.tavinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Women-and-Girls-Briefing-Report-Final-web.pdf>

¹² Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2017

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/759770/women-criminal-justice-system-2017.pdf

female offenders who received support provided by 32 Women's Centres throughout England." The Government's Female Offender Strategy

Evidence from the Government shows that Women's Centres offer considerable benefits in reducing the costs of reoffending and repeat victimisation. However, the benefits delivered by the Women's Centre model are not even close to being realised as a result of inadequate funding. The Women's Budget Group has sought to address the crucial gap between the commitment to services and the allocation of resources to secure delivery, by:

- examining multiple independent evaluations of a range of service provision in terms of costs and impact;
- examining the current funding arrangements for Women's Centres and the impact that this has on services;
- recommending practical steps to achieve a sustainable funding model

Our analysis of the complexity and precarity of current funding concludes that it is unsustainable and wholly inadequate and demands a commitment from government and local agencies to long term investment.

The Government's Female Offender Strategy says: *'female offenders cost the Government approximately £1.7 billion in 2015/16, including estimated police costs of around £1 billion. This excludes wider social costs, such as the cost of intergenerational offending.'*

In its Strategy, the Government committed to: *'Invest £5 million Government funding over two years in community provision for women...We recognise that the availability and sustainability of these services, such as Women's Centres, is essential for ensuring that we can deliver the vision we have outlined. An additional £1.5m will be invested to support the development of community-based provision for female offenders.'*

There is a **colossal gap between the overall costs of current provision in excess of £1.7 billion, and the one-off investment in diversionary services over two years of £6.5 million (i.e., £3.25 million a year)**. This disparity continues despite the Government's overt commitment to the Women's Centre model and acknowledgment of its effectiveness in preventing recidivism and reducing the call on other services. This fifteen-month bridging fund has not met the need for sustainable funding for these services, without which the Female Offender Strategy cannot be delivered, and considerable potential savings in public spending will be lost.

2. What has been done to reduce the number of women serving short prison sentences?

Since 2014 there has been a 24% reduction in the use of immediate prison sentences for women of under six months¹³. However, three quarters (73%) of prison sentences given to women are for six months or less¹⁴.

¹³ Prison Reform Trust (2020) New figures reveal significant north-south divide in rates of women's imprisonment <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/News/vw/1/ItemID/956?SkinSrc=%5bG%5dSkins%2fPRT%2fAdmin>

Women's Centres as independent specialist community support services for women facing multiple disadvantages including women involved in (or at risk of involvement in) the criminal justice system. They serve women only, in recognition of the well-evidenced need for gender-specific interventions. Centres provide holistic, woman-centred, trauma-informed services in safe, women-only spaces. Many provide access to specialist advocacy, advice and support on housing, substance misuse, mental and physical health, employment, debt, domestic abuse and family and parenting issues. This can be through in-house specialist staff and partnerships with other agencies.

We share the view of the Public Accounts Committee in its observation that *'community alternatives to prison have shown to be effective for women, but to date have been starved of investment'¹⁵*. We recommend that a significant element of core funding should be provided centrally, and matched funding be granted from a local consortium of commissioners.

The benefits of supporting Women's Centres go much wider than the savings to the Criminal justice agencies. Women who are involved in, or at risk of being involved in, the Criminal Justice System are disproportionately also women who have experienced violence and mental health issues. The report *Hidden Hurt*¹⁶ has collated outcomes for women who have experienced extensive abuse. 30% have attempted suicide, over half have a common mental health disorder, while a fifth have been homeless. The report also notes that:

"women with extensive experience of physical and sexual violence are far more likely to experience disadvantage in many other areas of their lives, including disability, ill health and substance dependence; poverty, housing, and debt; childhood adversity and discrimination... In addition, they are also more likely to experience indicators of chronic disadvantage spanning ill health, disability and poverty."

Rising rates of self-harm among women in prison are a significant cost to the NHS. The Prison Reform Trust discusses how the latest Safety in custody statistics¹⁷ highlighted the number of hospital admissions *"The proportion of self-harm incidents that required hospital attendance in the women's estate was 2.3%, an increase of 32% to 253 incidents in the last 12 months."*

A further benefit to consider is that any investment in Women's Centres strengthens services to women who are victims of crime. There is considerable evidence of the links between victimisation and offending, particularly domestic and sexual abuse, and exploitation.

Health

The local Health Partners financial return on investment is 47.66 indicating that for every £1 spent on the centre £47.66 is saved. 22% of the benefits fall to Health.

Local Authority

¹⁴ Ministry of Justice (2019) Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2018 Court Outcomes by Police Force Area data tool, London: MoJ

¹⁵ Public Accounts Committee (2020) <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2486/documents/24751/default/>

¹⁶ Hidden Hurt, Agenda, 2016 <https://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Hidden-Hurt-full-report1.pdf>

¹⁷ Prison Reform Trust web site <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projectsresearch/Women/News/vw/1/ItemID/769>

The figure for the Local Authority (GMCA) financial return on investment is 3.81 indicating that for every £1 spent on the centre £3.81 is saved. 22% of the benefits fall to the Local Authority.

3. What progress has been made on the development of Residential Women's Centres?

The Women's Budget Group endorse the position of the organisation Women In Prison (WIP) on this matter¹⁸. We echo their concerns that residential women's centres (RWCs) will reproduce the harms we see when women are sentenced to short periods in prison and will be counterproductive to reducing reoffending¹⁹. RWCs would still involve a woman being uprooted from her community with the associated risks of losing her home, employment, and children²⁰.

The Women's Budget Group support WIP's position, that piloting a new system of RWC diverts resources away from the network of community-based Women's Centres which are proven to be effective solutions to reducing [re]offending yet continue to be starved of funding²¹.

4. What has been done to ensure that the welfare of dependent children is taken into account when sentencing decisions are made?

The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules), states that 'non-custodial sentences for pregnant women and women with dependent children shall be preferred where possible and appropriate'²².

A major study found that two-thirds (66%) of imprisoned women are mothers of children under the age of 18²³. A third (34%) of these women had children under the age of five, and a further 40% had children aged between five and ten²⁴. Only five per cent of children with a mother in prison remain in the family home during their mother's imprisonment²⁵, and only nine per cent are cared for by their fathers²⁶, whereas most children with an imprisoned father remain with their mother. About a fifth of mothers are lone parents prior to imprisonment²⁷. In a survey of 1,400 women serving a first sentence in Holloway prison, 42% did not know who was looking after their children²⁸.

¹⁸ WIP response (2021) Justice Committee Women In Prison Inquiry

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² [Resolution \(un.org\)](#)

²³ Liebling, A. & Maruna, S. (2005) The effects of imprisonment Devon: Willan.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Caddle, D. & Crisp, D. (1997) Mothers in Prison HO Research and Statistics Directorate Findings no.38 London: TSO

²⁶ Corston, J. (2007) The Corston Report - A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system London: Home Office

²⁷ Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing reoffending by ex-prisoners London: SEU

²⁸ Research by Revolving Doors, reported in Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Taskforce (2009) Short study on women offenders London: MoJ

The removal of the primary carer (almost always the mother) has a severely detrimental impact on the child. Women centres as described above are not only more effective at reducing reoffending but also enable women to stay in the family home and continue to look after their children.

June 2021