

Written evidence from Anawim, Birmingham Centre for Women

Anawim is a women's centre with 35 years' experience of working with women in prison and in the community. We are about to start delivering alternatives to custody again after a 4 year 'break' as we pulled out of the contract when the CRC took over and only commissioned courses rather than the holistic casework that women require. We also have a police diversions scheme, Liaison & Diversion and support women with multiple & complex needs who have not offended as well. We regularly offer in-reach and through the gate support to women from our two 'local' prisons.

Note – I am writing this from the perspective as a practitioner with 18 years' experience in this sector as I am aware of Women in Prison & others writing from a much more academic, evidence based point of view.

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?

There has been some progress with the investment in women's centres and in women's champions within Probation but this could go a lot further.

• What more can be done?

Women's centres are an ideal place for women to receive the support they require in order to change their lives for the better. By offering holistic casework to women we can address all of her needs in one place. Dividing people's needs into distinct sections doesn't work for anyone but as women's lives are often even more complex than men's due to family & caring responsibilities, as well as being victims of domestic & sexual abuse, it doesn't work at all for them. When women leave prison the amount of appointments they have to attend in diverse parts of the city while at the same time trying to rebuild a life – find somewhere to live, claim benefits etc. often means appointments at Probation are missed and women can be recalled.

Women's centres can offer very robust alternatives to custody, enabling women to remain in their community near to family and children and support structures. In our experience of delivering alternatives prior to Transforming Rehabilitation and the work we did with sentencers and having a magistrate on our board, we know that the majority do not want to sentence women to custody and were very upset when we pulled out as they had every confidence in our programmes.

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

Covid and the delays to court has reduced numbers but this could be temporary if we don't increase options for alternatives.

Reserve custody for crimes that attract a 2-year sentence or above. Short sentences are pointless, expensive and counterproductive. They do not act as a deterrent but further entrench offending and encourage re-offending.

• Do community sentences currently offer a credible alternative to custody? (If no, why not?)

Current community sentences managed exclusively by the Probation service often cannot offer enough support and opportunities for peer on peer encouragement. ROs have caseloads

that are too large and have so few women that they do not build up the necessary expertise around women's needs especially trauma related issues. But we are absolutely in favour of community sentences for women.

• **What more could be done?**

We could make much better use of unpaid work as part of an Order. This could be built into viable social enterprises, offering real work experience skills.

If invested in adequately, women's centres could offer 90% of women a viable alternative to custody. For those few who do need to be in custody for public protection, ROTL could be used more effectively as could small custodial or residential women's centres nearer to women's home bases. Women's centre staff are diverse and draw workers from many different professional backgrounds, teaching, social work, housing officers, substance misuse services etc. who all bring different experiences, contacts and understanding.

Women's centres have proven records on reducing re-offending, our rates were 3% 6% and 1% when we delivered them prior to TR.

Alternatives to custody must address all the needs women present with, such as child safeguarding, domestic abuse, sexual violence, sexual exploitation and 'sex work' as all the areas affect her offending and her ability to move on into employment and take civic responsibility.

Women's centres offer opportunities to become peer mentors, ambassadors, champions and volunteers – these help them to move closer to the employment market as well as utilising their stories & experiences to deter & prevent other young women entering the CJS. So much more could be done, such as schools programmes where these women could deliver classes relevant to younger girls and women. We run a programme called Venus which addresses period poverty, sexual exploitation, sexual health & consent, signs of coercive control among others. Although schools and colleges are crying out for this they rarely have the funds to pay.

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

• **Do these offer a suitable alternative to custody?**

We have been involved in offering advice to officials based on our experience of running our residential, Dawn house. I believe there has been some progress but the opening of the centre in Wales still appears some way off. Plus, it is only targeting a very small number of women, 20, at a high financial cost. Non-residential women's centres offer better value for money, if housing options near to the centres could be sourced this would help massively. The housing benefit system is way too complicated and prevents centres from sourcing suitable accommodation.

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

Very little, women are still not routinely asked if they have children prior to court although I believe with the work on pre-sentence reports this is improving. It's hard to access presently with the backlog in cases. Simple joining up could improve things massively such as informing schools when a parent is sentenced to custody. It beggars belief that schools do not know, hence cannot support the children adequately. Plus, when informal caring arrangements are put in place often with grandmothers this can be extremely detrimental on

their lives and they are offered no support to manage this responsibility. Inadequate parenting and adverse childhood experiences have often contributed to where the mother is when she commits her offences, placing her children in the same environment or sometimes with the perpetrator of domestic abuse is extremely harmful upon the children and perpetuates the cycle. With proper support these families could make it work but they are left, plus stigma plays a big part in them not asking for help.

Children's Trusts need to work much more closely with women's centres, Probation and schools. We get many referrals from children's trust insisting women attend parenting programmes, therapeutic trauma workshops but they very rarely want to pay for this provision. Co-location or true partnership working of social workers, Local Authority domestic abuse workers, substance misuse staff, pastoral workers from local schools etc. would make a huge difference and enable information sharing and a true whole system approach.

Women in Custody

5. Since the publication of the Female Offender Strategy, what work has been done to improve conditions for those in custody?

Conditions are generally good in custody from what we see. We go (in non Covid times) into HMP Drake Hall & HMP Foston Hall and both are excellent but they would say themselves that if they did not have the churn of short sentenced women to continually deal with through receptions they could do so much more. If custody was reserved for sentences of over 12 months we could cut the population dramatically. I heard recently from HMP Peterborough that their average stay was 21 days. This is pointless and highly expensive, all of these women could have carried out their sentence in the community over a longer time period where proper work could be done with her. Access to education and work needs to be extended with meaningful courses which lead to employment in place. With a much less population personal officers would have the time to offer the support they so often long to.

6. Does the female prison estate take a Whole System Approach (that considers all of the offenders needs) to those in their care?

No, they cannot as they do not have all the relevant skills in place.

• What does this look like in practice?

It is a bringing together of all disciplines, sharing resources and skills and budgets. We saw glimpses of it when we had funding from MoJ to deliver Corston style one stop shops, we had co-located mental health nurse and Probation officers and Substance misuse offered weekly sessions as did police around domestic abuse, sadly that funding did not last.

• Are there any barriers in achieving a Whole System Approach to female offending?

People not wanting to share, commissioning that sets people up against each other in competition instead of encouraging partnerships. Agencies holding their budgets to themselves. Too much red tape around databases and GDPR can prevent information sharing.

7. How are women supported to maintain family ties in prison? What progress has been made on improving family ties since the Farmer Review? What effect has Covid-19 had on maintaining family ties for women in custody?

Structurally this is incredibly difficult. With women's prisons so far from women's homes, I have never in my 18 years of working in this area seen a social worker take a child to visit its mother in prison. They just would not have the resources. All the more reason to keep women in their community with their children or at least alongside if they are already in care so she does not lose them. We have witnessed a complete change to the number of children adopted with the fast adoption bill, hardly any of our women not have their children with them now.

• What support is available for mothers to maintain contact with dependent children?

Very little. Children's services are massively overstretched. Women's centres can help with this and do, but our resources don't allow either. We do facilitate supervised contact and attend many case conferences.

8. What factors contribute to the high levels of self-harm in the female estate?

Trauma which remains unaddressed. Custody is not the correct place to address this though except for in the wonderful specialist units such as CAMEO in HMP Foston Hall which does, but this is rightly limited to those servicing long sentences. If a woman is in for less than 2 years it would be unwise to undertake deep trauma work, yet some emotion regulation work would I believe be beneficial.

During these Covid times the isolation has been a major factor, again women are not like men whose self-harm has reduced, women do not fight and bully each other to any degree as in the male estate, generally women are much more social and value and require social engagement to survive.

• What is being done to address the high levels of self-harm in the female estate?

I think the approach is very medical and doesn't address the root causes, care is taken and women are put on suicide watch but that is only literally a sticking plaster. They do not have the training or time to explore the root causes.

• What more could be done?

Reduce the prison population and stop removing mothers from their children. Put more mental health professionals in, increase listening and counselling services. Increase education and therapeutic groupwork programmes.

9. Does the custodial estate offer a trauma-informed environment for females? (a trauma informed environment, being that which is about putting experience, behaviours and needs first, and creating a safer, healing environment that aims to reduce and prevent trauma and retraumatising an individual)

I don't believe that a large custodial estate can be effectively trauma informed. Our staff were instrumental in HMP Drake Hall achieving their Enabling Environments certificate but this was a challenge. It is great to do but is fundamentally at odds with locking people up against their will. The very principles as you outline involve consent and free choice.

• Could more be done? If so, what?

Very small custodial estates to house the few numbers of women who require custody dotted across the country would enable the walls to be more permeable for the community to enter

and offer their support and services. They would encourage women to work together and build lasting positive relationships and resettle back upon release.

Offering meaningful projects/work is greatly beneficial to improve mental health and recover from trauma. I visited a prison in Venice which had a full market garden within the walls. They grew herbs and plants which they sold in the local market every week and made some into soaps and toiletries which were supplied to local hotels. Women were allowed out escorted regularly to work in the market and the hotels, they also took in all the laundry to wash. This offered proper work experience and many were offered jobs upon release. We continually have experience of women working for DHL etc. in Drake Hall, being promised jobs which do not materialise. This is very detrimental and disappointing to the women who are then set back again.

10. What support is available to ensure that women are successfully resettled into the community upon release and reduce reoffending?

We offer high levels of support through the gate but this is very labour intensive and not sustainably funded, we rely upon charitable trusts for this work.

• Are there any barriers to effective resettlement, and reduced reoffending?

Many – distance from home, the fact that women have to wait 6-8 weeks for benefits, too little housing available, having to pitch up as multiple agencies all within the first day or so is overwhelming. Often, scripts are not set up and housing is not available, she is expected to manage all this when her priority is a bed for the night.

Community alternatives circumvents this need for resettlement, as work can be put into making her home safe, her financial situation stable and reunite her with positive family members and a range of other factors to make her life more stable.

11. What support does the female adult estate offer to girls transitioning from the youth custodial estate?

This is not an area which we work so I have no knowledge.