

Written evidence from Nelson Trust

Nelson Trust is a charity providing support to women facing multiple and complex needs including those who come into contact with the criminal justice system. The Nelson Trust opened its first Women's centre in Gloucester in 2010, in Swindon in 2014, in Bridgwater in 2019 and Bristol in 2021. The Women's centres provide a holistic, one-stop shop, gender-specific, trauma-informed service supporting women across the nine pathways of need. We also have staff based at the local women's prison (HMP Eastwood Park) where we are able to support women whilst in custody and assist with their transition through the gate. This ensures we are offering a seamless level of support from custody into the community.

a. 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?

Although there has recently been a reduction in the numbers of women currently in custody, the Nelson Trust believe this is largely due to the COVID 19 pandemic. As services begin to return to 'normal' working practices the numbers of women in custody are expected to rise. Liaison and Diversion schemes are key to reducing the number of women in custody. The Nelson Trust are currently commissioned under the female pathway in partnership with NHS Trusts and AWP to provide this service. It has been widely recognised by NHS England that all Liaison and Diversion schemes require a women's pathway. Whilst this recognition is highly valuable, there has been no direct investment into this service. This in turn exposes Women's Centres to high levels of referrals with no financial backing to support this. Due to the lack of funding under the female pathway and high numbers of women continuing to enter the prison estate, it would appear that a limited amount of progress has been made on reducing the number of women in custody.

1a. What more can be done?

Training for the judiciary, highlighting alternatives to custody would be beneficial. Many women are sent to prison for their own safety. This may be situations where they do not have suitable housing or their mental health is poor. Many of these women are remanded and upon returning to court for sentencing are either released from court with 'time served' or do not go on to receive a custodial sentence. This then questions the need to use remand as an option – in most cases the housing situation would not have improved. It is also likely that due to spending time in custody her mental health is now much worse than before. Using alternatives to custody such as Women's Centres will ensure that support is provided in a holistic and trauma informed way driven by the needs of the individual.

Further investment and funding into complex needs women's pathways and Liaison and diversion schemes would be beneficial. This would include not only recognition of the need for a female pathway but commissioning to ensure needs are fully met.

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

The Nelson Trust continue to see large numbers of women sent to prison with sentences of six months or less. The Nelson Trust are currently supporting 83 women in custody. In total, 25 of these women have less than 6 months to serve and 15 women are on remand (many of which will be released from court or will go on to receive a short sentence). This equates to 48% of our current caseload. All of these women are currently in prison for non-violent offences. Considering this high percentage, it would suggest that further interventions are required to reduce the number of women receiving short prison sentences.

2a. Do community sentences currently offer a credible alternative to custody?

When considering the needs of women, the Nelson Trust firmly believe that Women's Centres absolutely do provide a safe and meaningful alternative to custody. This will be achieved through a holistic, trauma informed approach across the nine pathways of need. Short prison sentences do not allow for thorough intervention whilst in custody and therefore needs often go unmet. If support needs are therefore being or can be addressed within Women's Centres, it brings into question the need for the original custodial sentence.

2b. What more could be done?

It has been identified that Women's Centres do offer a credible alternative to custody. For this reason, further investment into this would enable more women to be supported. Longer term funding and grants would provide more stability within the sector ensuring that the support for women is available in the long term. Women's Centres need to be considered for commissioning under the dynamic framework with mainstream services using the co-commissioning model to enable holistic delivery across the nine pathways of need.

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

To the knowledge of the Nelson Trust, little development has been made on the development of residential women's centres (RWC).

3a. Do these offer a suitable alternative to custody?

There is concern within the Nelson Trust that RWC would not provide a suitable alternative but just replicate a women's experience of being in custody. Allowing a woman to receive support from her local Women's Centre would ensure she is not taken away from her children, she would not lose her accommodation (if accommodated) and the support offered to her would be client focused specifically targeting her needs. Investment into women's centres would be much more beneficial than investing into a provision that would largely replicate services already available.

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

Approximately 50% of the women supported by the Nelson Trust have dependent children. For example, over the past 12 months, working on an employability contract within HMP Eastwood Park, the Nelson Trust have worked with 24 women who have dependent children in the community this is out of a total of 50 women. This high number of women suggests that the welfare and needs of children are not taken into account when sentencing decisions are made. A recent case at HMP Eastwood Park has seen a woman receive a 7 year prison sentence for conspiracy to supply class A drugs. At point of sentencing she was 38 weeks pregnant. The judge gave her the highest possible tariff in regards to sentencing and due to the length of sentence a place on a mother and baby unit is now very unlikely to be considered.

b. Women in custody

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

Since the publication of the Female Offender Strategy, the Nelson Trust have noticed no significant improvements in regards to the conditions for those in custody. In the latest HMIP inspection report for HMP Eastwood Park published in August 2019, it was noted that *'in terms of safety, there was a need for the prison to think carefully about the arrangements for those women being segregated for extended periods, and indeed whether it was necessary to do so'*. The report then goes on to describe the living conditions for some of the women highlighting *'Residential units 1, 2 and 3 were completely inappropriate for a women's prison. These units were poor in comparison with the rest of the prison and not fit for purpose'*. This report alone suggests that more needs to be done to improve conditions for women in prison. There is currently a high proportion of the day where women are locked in their cells without any purposeful activity. The impact of COVID 19 has seen women locked up for significantly longer periods of time however going back to the inspection report completed in 2019 and therefore prior to the COVID 19 pandemic it was noted that *'women are locked up in their cells for far too long. Upon entering the units I was immediately struck by the sight of rows of women's faces pressed against the open observation hatches of their locked doors, peering out into the narrow, dark, cell block corridor'*.

6. Does the female prison estate take a whole system approach (that considers all of the offenders needs) to those in their care?

There are significantly fewer female prisons across the country compared to male. With women only making up 5% of the prison population many are imprisoned miles away from home leaving local support services unable to access them. Women in prison more local to their resettlement areas may have access to support from smaller third sector organisations whilst in custody and through the gate. Opportunities through the gate are also local such as relationships built with local employers and colleges. This once again highlights the lack of support for women imprisoned away from their resettlement areas. Due to a high number of women still receiving short prison sentences, HMP Eastwood Park is targeted with providing

an adequate regime for these. Therefore, women on longer-term prison sentences often find inappropriate education to attend or work placements that do not provide recognised qualifications that could support future employment on release. The introduction of the NEXUS unit at HMP Eastwood Park has seen excellent results in regards to reducing reoffending and supporting the women with the care that they need. However, this service is only open to select women (depending on sentence length/type and diagnosis of a personality disorder). Although a third sector organisation, the Nelson Trust are continually attempting to increase their funding streams to enable support services to be available to more women in custody. With recent funding through the Tampon Tax, new Women's Centre Prison Link Workers will be introduced to all women's prisons across the country. The aim of this is to link women into local women's centres prior to release in an attempt to provide holistic support across the nine pathways of need. The Nelson Trust will be placing a worker in HMP Eastwood Park and hope that this will improve support for women whilst in custody and following release.

6a. What does this look like in practice?

Currently there is not an equal service for all and is very dependent on a 'postcode lottery'. The Nelson Trust are currently in HMP Eastwood Park supporting women returning to the South West on release from custody. These women receive holistic support whilst in custody and are introduced to their community keyworkers prior to release. Introduction to the service along with their keyworker has a significant impact on the chances of the woman engaging with the service on release. Further investment needs to be made to third sector organisations to ensure that all women are able to receive the same level of support no matter where they are planning to resettle on release.

6b. Are there any barriers to achieving a Whole System Approach to female offending?

As mentioned above Geographical spread of female prisons create a barrier in achieving a whole system approach. The high number of women receiving short sentences also affects this. Being in prison for a short number of weeks or in some cases days will limit the amount of meaningful work that can be completed. Again, this brings into question the purpose of short prison sentences. There are also a high number of women currently in prison on remand. Many of these women will be released from court with a non-custodial sentence received and in that time, limited support would have been provided to her. This again brings into question the use of remand. If a criminal offence does not hold justification of a prison sentence, why is remand being used as an option initially?

The current resettlement and through the gate models are not fit for purpose within the female estate. It is highly recognised that women need to build trust and confidence in relationships before fully engaging with support. Having a service that 'signposts' will not assist in engaging women. It is also recognised that women struggle to build relationships with multiple people and therefore having one organisation both in custody and through the gate will support with this engagement. This is the model that the Nelson Trust are currently using with excellent engagement rates identified upon release from custody.

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 prison?

Family Engagement workers such as those provided by PACT play a vital role in maintaining family ties. The team at HMP Eastwood Park has seen significant reductions in their funding reducing from four workers down to just one over the last two years. This has had a devastating impact on both the women and their children. Since the Farmer Review, there has been the introduction of ‘family days’, which has been hugely beneficial for women and their children. This has allowed mothers to spend the day with their children and assist with rebuilding relationships. There has also been recruitment into a social worker position this will hopefully bridge the gap between custody and community.

The impact of Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on maintaining family ties. The cancellation of face-to-face visits have meant that in some cases mothers have not seen their children in over a year. Although the introduction of ‘purple visits’ ensured some face to face contact was maintained, for many this was not a viable option due to lack of technology. Covid-19 also impacted support services within the prison. Many of these services ‘pulled out’ of the prison and therefore in many cases support stopped. During this time, the Nelson Trust has continued to engage within the prison and have supported women with engaging in social services meetings to support contact with her child.

7a. What support is available for mothers to maintain contact with dependent children?

As mentioned above the PACT service offer an excellent level of support for mothers with dependent children and with the introduction of a social worker to HMP Eastwood Park, hopefully this level of support will increase. However, as with many services they are largely under funded with only one PACT worker for the prison. This will obviously have an impact on the level of support that can be provided to each women that requires it.

The Nelson Trust offer the Reunite programme created to support women regain custody of their children upon release from custody. When a mother is sent to prison the children will be placed in the care of other family members (where available) or the local authority. During this time, she is likely to lose the family home. Upon release from custody she will be deemed as homeless. As the children are not directly in her care, she will only be considered for housing as a single person. Due to this, she would then be unable to regain custody of her children as she does not have appropriate accommodation for them – a catch 22 situation for both the mother and her children. The Reunite programme aims to remove this catch 22 situation and assist with sourcing appropriate accommodation.

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

Many factors contribute to high levels of self-harm. Some of these include:

- Geographical distance from home – being separated from family, friends and familiar support services will for many women lead to severe anxiety and with this an increase in self-harm

- Lack of meaningful interventions and provision – being locked in a cell for the majority of the day will have implications in regards to an individual's mental health
- Lack of support – Many organisations are underfunded this therefore affecting the level of support available to women in prison. This includes mental health, psychology and counselling services
- Addiction – Many women use substances as a way of blocking trauma of previous experiences. The removal of these substances are often replaced with self-harm as a coping mechanism
- To be listened to – whilst in custody, many women feel silenced and will use self-harm as a form of communication. This may enable them to get their voice heard and their needs met

8a. What is being done to address the high levels of self-harm in the female estate?

Within HMP Eastwood Park, a new ACCT process has been introduced to assist with monitoring women who self-harm. This process is very new and further work will need to be carried out before an analysis of its effectiveness can be concluded.

The Nelson Trust have been running groups in HMP Eastwood Park since 2019. These groups assist with addressing trauma and allow the women to identify how previous experiences may impact their current thoughts and behaviours. Feedback received from the women has been very positive with high numbers of other women requesting to join the groups.

There is also the listener scheme within prisons, which can also assist in reducing levels of self-harm.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 has had an impact on both group delivery and in some cases the listener scheme and due to this, rates of self-harm have significantly risen throughout the pandemic.

8b. What more could be done?

Further resource needs to be provided to address trauma and needs of women along with identifying behaviours associated with this trauma. Education of staff also needs to be provided to all those working within a prison setting ensuring a full understanding on the impacts of trauma and how to manage this appropriately. It is essential that all staff (uniformed and civilian) working within the prison setting understand that self-harm is attachment seeking and not attention seeking.

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 traumatising and individual)

For many women being in prison can trigger their trauma. Conditions within the prison replication power and control dynamics which many women have lived with for most of their lives. Slamming of gates and cell doors can also trigger an individual's trauma – this happens

frequently. In many circumstances when discussing a trauma informed approach this has been met with eye rolling especially from wing staff.

Prior to the Nelson Trust delivering trauma informed groups, time was spent ensuring the group room was appropriate for use. This has included painting the walls a calming colour and using soft furnishings to make the room more comfortable. These simple additions have supported group delivery and ensured the women are as comfortable as possible.

9a. Could more be done? If so, what?

As with question 8 further education for staff would help in understanding how a women's trauma can influence her actions and behaviours. With this in mind, it may assist prison staff with managing challenging behaviour more appropriately.

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

The current resettlement service available at HMP Eastwood Park is not suitable due to the large geographical area the prison covers along with high levels of short sentences. More effective resettlement takes place utilising smaller third sector organisations. The Nelson Trust currently deliver two contracts with the prison, Reconnect and CFO3. Reconnect supports women returning to the South West to reconnect into healthcare services following release. However, the Nelson Trust deliver holistic support and therefore along with healthcare support an assessment of need is completed across the nine pathways. This service has successfully supported the resettlement of over 200 women in the last 14 months and has included support for gaining appropriate accommodation, finance, emotional support, facilitating social worker appointments, referrals to residential treatment and much more. This service alone highlights the positive work of third sector organisations and how local services are in a much better position to deliver Resettlement services to local women.

10a. Are there any barriers to effective resettlement, and reduced reoffending?

To ensure effective resettlement there needs to be appropriate accommodation available for women being released from prison. Currently local authorities will not hold a bed space for women within supported accommodation this meaning a high percentage of women are released homeless. There is also a lack of transport to ensure the safe return of women to their home areas. Local drug and alcohol support services could also provide in-reach services to assist with engagement on release from custody. Further funding could also be provided for residential treatment places supporting with addiction. In order to achieve more suitable resettlement and reduced reoffending there needs to be a more joined up service between community agencies and those in the prison. For example DWP – it is not appropriate for a women to have to wait two weeks for her benefits to be actioned following release from custody or to have to wait two days for her script to be organised with the local drug and alcohol service.

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

From the experiences of recent clients no specific support is provided to girls transitioning from the youth custodial estate. A client sentenced for sex offences was moved from a youth custodial estate into HMP Eastwood Park. Upon arrival, she was provided with a short induction and advised not share details of her offence. When speaking with this client she does not feel that enough support is provided to assist with the transition into the adult estate.