

# Provision for women offenders in the community

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Executive summary

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# Provision for women offenders in the community

## The report

This is a summary of *Provision for women offenders in the community*, a research report which is of use to policy-makers, sentencers and practitioners alike. The report:

- a) outlines research evidence in relation to women offenders' 'criminogenic' needs;
- b) identifies what is known about what works best with women;
- c) describes different models of existing service provision; and
- d) identifies examples of good practice with women offenders in the community.

In particular, the findings of the report will be of use to Regional Offender Managers to help them decide what might be appropriate provision for women offenders and assist them in identifying the relative benefits of different models of service delivery. To this end, we provide a checklist of questions to aid commissioners of services as they consider potential community-based services for women offenders in their regions.

## Background

The research which the report is based on has its origins in three particular developments: the Women's Offending Reduction Programme, the setting up of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), and the *Equality Act 2006*, which requires public bodies to take steps to promote equality between women and men and eliminate unlawful discrimination. Following on from a series of reports which have expressed concern about the neglect of women in policy, and damning Prison and Probation Inspectorate reports in relation to the treatment of women, there is an urgent need to address women offenders' distinctive needs.

It follows from this, and from the findings of the recent *Corston Report*,<sup>1</sup> which focuses on vulnerable women, that there is an urgent need to establish what services are available for women in the community, beyond the limited statutory provision. Area-based Government-inspired and funded demonstration projects in two regions, implemented from the beginning of 2007, will examine the potential and pitfalls of particular models of provision for women in the community (most particularly 'one-stop shop' provision in

Yorkshire and Humberside and in the North West), but there is a clear need to explore what might be available beyond these demonstration projects and in other geographical areas. Indeed, it is perhaps unlikely that sums approaching the £9.15 million devoted to these demonstration projects will be offered elsewhere in the country.

Drawing a parallel with the pilot community justice project in North Liverpool (a community-based court with one-stop shop resources on the same premises), and pointing to the successes of that scheme, journalist Clive Coleman suggests that it is 'fabulous for a reason: it cost £5.4 million to set up and has a £1.8 million annual running cost'.<sup>2</sup> Following this project's success, a roll out of community justice to ten new areas has been announced. The model being rolled out is based on a separate project in Salford, which originally cost £100,000 to set up and runs on an annual budget of £150,000. Thus the idea is that the new models will apply the principles of community justice with a fraction of the funding and infrastructure afforded to the North Liverpool demonstration project.

Whilst there is no direct evidence to suggest that the 'Rolls Royce' demonstration projects for women will follow in a similar downmarket direction, it is both logical and realistic to assume that this could well be the case. This points to a need to identify existing provision for women and to see what, if anything, might be utilised or adapted to enhance women offenders' chances of staying out of custody, and of being empowered to turn away from crime. The need has become more pressing following parliamentary confirmation in the third reading of the *Offender Management Bill 2006*, on 28 February 2007, that private companies and voluntary groups are to be allowed to take over some of the Probation Service's work, by enabling probation managers to commission services from 'the best available provider'. One key question then is who can best provide for women? However, it is important first to consider what women who offend need. The report attempts to address both of these questions.

### The research

The report is based on extensive literature and web searches. A sample of project sites to visit was selected from a general directory.<sup>3</sup> The sample was established on the basis of a combination of reputation, location, and the projects' focus on community-based provision for women offenders. Attempts were made to include both statutory and voluntary sector service providers, although the latter outnumbered the former significantly. Twenty-four projects were contacted in writing, and followed up by telephone and email. Eighteen site visits were undertaken, supplemented by six telephone interviews and informal discussion with a small number of women offenders.

### About women offenders<sup>4</sup>

- Women commit less crime than men: just 20% of known offenders in England and Wales who are cautioned or found guilty are women;<sup>5</sup> four out of every five known offenders are male.
- Men outnumber women offenders in all major crime categories. Between 85% and 95% of offenders found guilty of burglary, robbery, drugs offences, criminal damage or violence against the person are male. Where women do offend, they are more likely to commit property-related offences than anything else, although there have been some slight increases in lower-level violence (around pubs and clubs) in the last few years, and increases in drugs-related offences (as for males).<sup>6</sup>
- In 2006, the peak age of offending was 18 for males and 15 for females.<sup>7</sup> There has generally been a lack of attention to the fact that the offender population is ageing in line with the general population,<sup>8</sup> but recent evidence suggests that there is an increasing number of offenders (male and female) over 50 years of age in prison and on community penalties.<sup>9</sup> The number of prison receptions of men aged 60 and over doubled in the decade 1986-1996, from 299 to 699, and rose to 774 by 2000. The number prison receptions of women aged 60 and over rose from 14 in 1990 to 34 in 2000.<sup>10</sup>
- Women generally have fewer previous convictions than men and their rate of persistence is lower.
- In terms of sentencing, of those aged 18 to 20 sentenced for indictable offences in 2005, analysis reveals that 39% of

young women received a community sentence compared with 35% of young men, and 14% of young women received immediate custody compared with 26% of young men. In the 21 and over age group, 34% of women received a community order compared with 28% of men, and 17% of women compared with 30% of men received an immediate custodial sentence.

- However, there has been a huge increase in the number of women sentenced to imprisonment since the early 1990s. Between 1995 and 2005, for instance, receptions of women remanded into custody rose by 106% (compared to 24% for males) and the number of women sentenced to immediate custody rose by 69%.<sup>12</sup>
- Analysis of Home Office statistics indicates that the increased use of custody does not in general reflect more serious offences being committed by women (indeed, 62% of all those remanded do not get a custodial sentence). Rather, the increases reflect a greater propensity for magistrates and judges to send women to prison,<sup>13</sup> although the figures do now appear to be levelling off.<sup>14</sup> 70% of imprisoned women receive sentences of less than one year.<sup>15</sup>
- Of the women in prison, ethnic minority groups represent 29% (compared with 22% of men). 20% of the women's prison population are foreign nationals, many of whom are deported upon completion of the sentence and not released into the community in England and Wales, but there are nevertheless a significant number of ethnic minority women who will be released into the community.
- Women's criminal careers are, on average, much shorter than men's and their rates of reoffending, regardless of sentence, are traditionally lower (although the difference in relation to prison is now far less than it once was).<sup>16</sup>

### Women's 'criminogenic' and desistance-related needs: a summary

Consistent messages from the literature on women offenders include:

- Women offenders tend to have a history of unmet needs in relation to education, training and employment, physical and mental health, housing and income;
- Their sexual and violent victimisation can play a part in the onset and persistence of offending;

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- Research indicates high rates of substance misuse, especially opiates, amongst female offenders;
- Women's offending is most often associated with poverty and financial difficulties; and
- Many women's financial situations are further strained by their having sole responsibility for dependent children.

Recent analysis of data drawn from OASys, the national offender assessment tool, suggests that a key characteristic of women offenders is the likely presence of multiple presenting problems. Of a sample of 158,161 female offenders assessed in 2005:

- 39% had been victims of domestic violence;
- 33% had accommodation needs;
- 32% had misused drugs;
- 29% had education and training needs;
- 28% had financial needs;
- 24% had misused alcohol;
- 16% had particular needs in relation to employment; and
- 10% were assessed as posing a medium, high or very high risk of harm to children.<sup>17</sup>

## Other relevant factors drawn from research on imprisonment, desistance, and resettlement

- The 'pains of imprisonment' are especially severe for women, who have higher rates of self-harm, mental illness and suicide in custody than men.
- Women's lives tend to be more disrupted by periods in custody than men's (for example, in terms of separation from their children and loss of family ties).
- Women are generally less resistant than men to accepting community supervision and resettlement help upon leaving prison.
- According to reconviction statistics, women are more successful than men in reducing their reoffending.
- Women may have complex childcare needs, which must be taken into account when providing services for them.
- The complexity of factors relating to women's pathways into crime points to the need for broadly-based provision that can be individually tailored.

## What works with women: a summary

- Most provision is focused on the needs of male offenders because men's offending and reoffending tends to be more frequent and serious. The evidence suggests that although there is some overlap in needs, provision designed for men does not necessarily meet the needs of women.
- Most women offenders have multiple problems so an effective response is likely to require the involvement of a range of voluntary and public sector organisations.
- Effective work is empowering and emphasises positive pathways out of offending, rather than focusing exclusively on the list of 'criminogenic needs' derived from evaluations of offending programmes designed for men.
- Few services adequately manage to meet the needs of ethnic minority women and other minority women (for example, elderly women or women who are disabled).
- Attention to women's learning styles is important in facilitating effective outcomes.

## Models of provision

Despite the fact that provision in the community is variable, and geographically patchy, there is evident capacity within voluntary sector projects already working with women to suggest that NOMS may be able to utilise available expertise to commission provision which is appropriate to women offenders' needs. Alongside other developments, this would help to move work with women offenders towards good practice. Nine lessons, or key precepts, for good practice are outlined below.

*These nine lessons should be taken into account in providing for women in the community. Provision for women offenders should:*

- 1) Be women-only to foster safety and a sense of community and to enable staff to develop expertise in work with women;
- 2) Integrate offenders with non-offenders so as to normalise women offenders' experiences and facilitate a supportive environment for learning;
- 3) Foster women's empowerment so they gain sufficient self-esteem to directly engage in problem-solving themselves, and feel motivated to seek appropriate employment;

- 4) Utilise ways of working with women which draw on what is known about their effective learning styles;
  - 5) Take a holistic and practical stance to helping women to address social problems which may be linked to their offending;
  - 6) Facilitate links with mainstream agencies, especially health, debt advice and counselling;
  - 7) Have the capacity and flexibility to allow women to return to the centre or programme for 'top up' or continued support and development where required;
  - 8) Ensure that women have a supportive milieu or mentor to whom they can turn when they have completed any offending-related programmes, since personal support is likely to be as important as any direct input addressing offending behaviour; and
  - 9) Provide women with practical help with transport and childcare so that they can maintain their involvement in the centre or programme.
- Questions for commissioners of services**
- The NOMS/National Probation Service Good Practice Guide<sup>18</sup> identifies the need for consistency, continuity, commitment and consolidation in offender management and highlights women's needs in offender management practice (from bail and remand and pre-sentence reports to women and national standards). There is also attention to the *Reducing Re-Offending National Action Plan* and a restatement of women's distinctive needs.
- 2) To what extent could existing mainstream provision for women be utilised for women offenders? Are there useful partnerships that could be forged between agencies to help address women offenders' needs (including both intra and inter voluntary and statutory provision)?
  - 3) In what ways could any barriers to working with women who offend, within existing service provision, be addressed and overcome?
  - 4) Do any of the potential service providers already have a stable setting or building which might be used as a base for women's services?
  - 5) Who, if any, are the other service users within the same building or setting? Would any of these other service users militate against the creation of a safe, supportive environment for women? Or, conversely, can any of the other activities within the same setting be used to enhance the work with women (for example, Women's Aid or counselling)?
  - 6) Is there appropriate child care provision? If not, could childcare provision be created or purchased off-site?
  - 7) Is the building/setting easily accessible and otherwise conducive to women's needs? Could transport be provided?
  - 8) Does the project involve styles of working with service users which are conducive to women's learning needs?
  - 9) Does the provision provide opportunities for women to be integrated within non-offending user groups?

A key question for commissioners of services is how far the identified resources in each region (beyond statutory provision) might assist in addressing women's needs. Despite a certain patchiness in its geographical spread, there is sufficient voluntary sector provision to encourage exploration of what existing initiatives and projects might be available within each NOMS region, and to examine how they might not only *supplement* mainstream statutory provision, but be incorporated into *core* services for women offenders.

In particular, commissioners should start with these nine questions when commissioning services:

- 1) What is available within the NOMS region specifically for women (including ethnic minority women, young women, elderly women and other disadvantaged women)?

These questions provide a starting point. They are not intended as an exhaustive list of questions for commissioners; rather, they serve to highlight that women's needs must be at the forethought of provision, and not an afterthought. Women's needs are distinctive, but often overlooked. Commissioners need to appreciate that it requires determination and detailed knowledge to ensure that appropriate provision is delivered to women.

This is a summary of *Provision for women offenders in the community*, a report published by the Fawcett Society. For a copy of the full report, which also contains a [Directory of Services and Resources for Women Offenders](#), please see [www.fawcettsociety.org.uk](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk) or contact the Fawcett Society at [info@fawcettsociety.org.uk](mailto:info@fawcettsociety.org.uk) or on 020 7253 2598 or at 1-3 Berry Street, London, EC1V 0AA.

# References

<sup>1</sup> Corston, J. (2007) *The Corston Report: A Report by Baroness Jean Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System*. London: Home Office.

<sup>2</sup> Coleman, C. (2007) 'Courting controversy.' *The Guardian*, 14 February.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A in the full report.

<sup>4</sup> The main provision for girls falls under the auspices of the Youth Justice Board (see [www.yjb.gov.uk](http://www.yjb.gov.uk)) and they are not discussed within the context of this report beyond occasional references. Where we refer to young women we mean the 18 but under 21 age group.

<sup>5</sup> Home Office (2006) *Crime in England and Wales 2005/6*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 12/06. London: Home Office. Crime statistics are produced on an annual basis; these are the most recently published statistics.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See also Midwinter, E. (2005) 'How many people are there in the Third Age?', *Ageing and Society*, 25, pp. 9-18.

<sup>9</sup> Wahidin, A. (2004) *Older Women in the Criminal Justice System: Running Out of Time*. London: Jessica Kingsley; Wahidin, A. and Cain, M. (eds) (2006) *Ageing, Crime and Society*. Devon: Willan Publishing.

<sup>10</sup> Bramhall, G. (2006) 'Older offenders and community penalties: a framework for thinking' in A. Wahidin and M. Cain (eds) *Ageing, Crime and Society*. Devon: Willan Publishing.

<sup>11</sup> Home Office (2006) *Offender Management Caseload*

*Statistics 2005*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/06. England and Wales. London: RDS/NOMS; Fawcett Society (2004) *A Report of the Fawcett Society's Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice System*. London: Fawcett Society.

<sup>12</sup> Home Office (2007) *Sentencing Statistics 2005 England and Wales*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 03/07. London: Home Office; Howard League for Penal Reform (2006) *Women and girls in the penal system, Prison Information Bulletin 2*. London: The Howard League for Penal Reform.

<sup>13</sup> Gelsthorpe, L. and Morris, A. (2002) 'Women's imprisonment in England and Wales: a penal paradox', *Criminal Justice*, 2, 3, pp. 277-301; Deakin, J. and Spencer, J. (2003) 'Women behind bars: explanations and implications', *Howard Journal for Penal Reform*, 42, pp.123-36; Hedderman, C. (2004) 'Why are more women being sentenced to custody?', in G. McIvor (ed.) *Women Who Offend*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

<sup>14</sup> Home Office (2007) *Sentencing Statistics 2005 England and Wales*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 03/07. London: Home Office.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Carlen, P. and Worrall, A. (2004) *Analysing Women's Imprisonment*. Devon: Willan Publishing.

<sup>17</sup> National Offender Management Service & National Probation Service (2006) *Delivering Effective Services for Women Offenders in the Community. A Good Practice Guide*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

# About Fawcett

## About Fawcett

Fawcett works to close the inequality gap between women and men at work, at home and in public life. We are proud to trace our roots back to 1866, when Millicent Garrett Fawcett began her lifetime's work leading the peaceful campaign for women's votes. Today we campaign so that all women can enjoy fair treatment and live with dignity and respect.

We campaign to transform women's lives by tackling the vicious cycle of inequality from all angles. We do this by focusing on women's access to:

- **Power:** a woman's right to exercise power and take the decisions that affect her life;
- **Money:** a woman's right to fair pay and pensions and to live free from poverty and discrimination;
- **Justice:** a woman's right to live free from violence and enjoy fair treatment.

We set the gender equality agenda through innovative campaigns supported by robust research, a national network of supporters and activists and unrivalled access to decision makers within politics, business and the media. We ensure that women's voices are heard in every debate and offer pragmatic solutions that never fail to put women first.

For more information on Fawcett and our work visit [www.fawcettsociety.org.uk](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk)

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