



Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment

A case for change: evidence, barriers and solutions

A policy and practice review for sentencers, probation and cross-sector partners working with women in contact with the criminal justice system.

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About this report

The Prison Reform Trust

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. We do this by inquiring into the works of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. PRT provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Penal Affairs and has an advice and information service for people in prison. www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment

This report considers the need to 'reset' the approach to women's imprisonment. Building on PRT's longstanding work concerning women in contact with, and on the edges of the criminal justice system, and driven by the stubbornly high numbers of women in prison, this programme of work had two core aims:

1. To better understand why the women's prison population remains largely unchanged despite policies and frameworks that promote diversion and community alternatives to custody, and to identify steps to address this.
2. To hear from stakeholders, including women with lived experience of the criminal justice system about what works in improving outcomes for women: what are the challenges, possible solutions and positive practices.

It should be noted that the Women's Justice Board (WJB) published their report, 'recommendations for reducing women's imprisonment' in March 2026.¹ This report was published in July 2026. Stakeholder consultations for this report were undertaken in 2025.

¹ Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Women's Justice Board report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-justice-board-report>

Executive summary

Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment set out

1. To better understand why the women's prison population remains largely unchanged despite policies and frameworks that promote diversion and community alternatives to custody, and to identify steps to address this.
2. To hear from stakeholders, including women with lived experience of the criminal justice system² about what works in improving outcomes for women: what are the challenges, possible solutions and positive practices.

Four months before this report was published, the Women's Justice Board (WJB) published their report and recommendations 'for reducing women's imprisonment.'³ In its introduction, the report says:

It has been government policy since 2018 to reduce women's imprisonment and increase the use of community solutions... However, implementation has been patchy. There is no statutory underpinning of this approach for women... and there has been limited central support, communications and governance to support voluntary implementation. Improving this picture requires strong senior government leadership... across government departments and in partnership with local agencies.

For this report, consultation with stakeholders and a literature review told much the same story. There is no shortage of policy, research and evidence about what needs to be done; what is lacking is strong ministerial leadership, a coordinated departmental approach and the commitment by government to follow through.

Women caught up in the criminal justice system often experience multiple unmet needs and have frequently been underserved by statutory services. Many are victims long before being regarded as perpetrators. Many are mothers. The devastating and long-lasting impact of parental imprisonment on children can be costly both in terms of young lives that do not fulfil their potential and to the public purse.

Persistent use of short sentences, new highs in the numbers of women being recalled to prison and around a quarter of the women's prison population being held in pre-trial detention, each serve to inflate prison numbers.

Alternatives do exist and the 'Whole System Approach' is at its core. The long-term solution to improving outcomes for women and reducing imprisonment lies largely outside of the criminal justice system. However, without meaningful engagement between key government ministers and departments it will be hard for regional and local agencies to deliver effective outcomes.

Recognising and meeting women's needs is fundamental to improving outcomes and requires a focus on the vast array of backgrounds, experiences, support needs and strengths women bring with them. The unique perspective of women's lived experience should be integral to the development, design and monitoring of a 'women's justice system.'

Voluntary sector women's services, particularly Women's Centres are well placed to work with women who may have poor prior experiences of statutory services. Specialist women's services can be especially valuable for minoritised women. Inadequate funding of women's services was cited by stakeholders as a key barrier to improving outcomes for women. One advisory group member for this report noted the government's

...slow fiscal response to compelling evidence of the costs of women's imprisonment vs the cost-effectiveness of community-based solutions.

Inadequate housing was raised as a particular concern by stakeholders. Almost 20 years ago Baroness Corston (2007)⁴ cited the 'accommodation pathway' as 'the most in need of speedy, gender-specific reform'. Little seems to have changed.

Time, training and information sharing were raised by almost all stakeholders as a necessary precursor to effective local partnership working and, by implication in the development of a whole system approach. Services are hard-pressed, there is little time for building relationships, sharing positive practice and challenges, and exploring solutions. Stakeholders with lived experience valued spending sufficient time with a probation officer, without which supervision was a 'tick-box exercise' that added little of value. Judicial stakeholders wanted more information about local community sentencing options and what to consider when sentencing women.

² Hereafter referred to as 'women with lived experience' or 'stakeholder with lived experience'.

³ Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Women's Justice Board report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-justice-board-report>

⁴ Baroness Corston. (2007). *The Corston Report*.

There is no shortage of positive practice, much of it researched and evidenced - and this report has included a small number of examples.

This report and recommendations, together with the report and recommendations from the WJB, tell us little that is new. For over 20 years there has been a good understanding of what is needed to reduce women's imprisonment and improve outcomes, but progress has been slow and implementation patchy.

The WJB has fulfilled its role and come to an end. Central to recommendations made by them is a 'time limited' Women's Justice Reform Programme (see Appendix 3), underpinned by a whole system approach for women in, or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system. The government has yet to respond to recommendations made by the WJB but, in the meantime, has announced a new Women's Justice Advisory Group to support the 'next phase of work'.⁵ Having failed since 2018 in the delivery of government policy, it is imperative that this 'next phase of work' is properly supported. This means strong senior ministerial leadership from the Ministry of Justice, with influence across other relevant government departments and adequate funding. The Prison Reform Trust will provide encouragement and support where we are able. Mostly, we will seek to hold the government to account.

I have worked in the criminal justice system for nearly 30 years. Some of the devastating injustices women faced then, they still face now.

It was a privilege to be invited to become a member of the Women's Justice Board together with some of the most knowledgeable and experienced people in the sector. Our mission was to advise and influence government to finally enact the evidence, to walk the walk and not just talk the talk.

There are many traps that women and girls who fall into the criminal justice system face. Too often their needs are not recognised or understood early enough. Even when they are, there are not enough suitable alternatives to divert them away from custody.

One of the key recommendations made by the WJB was to strengthen the pathway towards early intervention and invest in community alternatives to custody. But responsibility for these recommendations doesn't solely sit within the Ministry of Justice. They require a whole system approach. It is only through collective will, ownership and accountability that we will see change.

The time to slope shoulders has passed. We need to make sure that every part of the justice system and beyond sees this as their collective concern and makes the unnecessary criminalisation of women a thing of the past.

Pia Sinha, CEO, Prison Reform Trust

5 UK Parliament. (2026, March 16). *Women in the criminal justice system* (HLWS1405). <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2026-03-16/hlws1405>

Introduction

Since Baroness Corston's seminal report in 2007⁶, almost 20 years ago, there has been cross-party commitment to reduce the women's prison population and to respond to their distinct needs. *Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment* was established to better understand why, despite these commitments, high numbers of women continue to be imprisoned and how progress made in improving outcomes for women can be built upon to realise lasting change.

Recent years have seen positive policy developments and increased attention to women in the criminal justice system, however, progress has been limited and slow.

Women are a minority in the criminal justice system, making up around 4% of the prison population and 12% of those supervised in the community.⁷ As such, they are often overlooked in a system that is largely designed for men and male patterns of offending. Women from minority ethnic groups are overrepresented at every stage of the criminal justice system.⁸ They often face a 'double disadvantage' of being discriminated against because of their gender and their race.⁹

Short prison sentences, high use of remand and an increasing number of recalls serve to keep prison numbers high (see Box 1). The 'churn' this creates can make it hard for professional services to work effectively with women in prison and on their release.

Short prison sentences often don't give enough time for proper support or rehabilitation, and when women leave prison, they may still face the same problems – like no safe housing, no job, and poor mental health. Stakeholder with lived experience

Box 1: women in prison

- As of 30 March 2026, there were 3,459 women in prison, compared to 3,568 on 31 March 2025.¹⁰
- Women entered prison on 6,417 occasions in the year to September 2025 - either on remand or to serve a sentence - up 5% on the previous 12 months.¹¹
- Women on remand account for more than a quarter of the women's prison population (27%).¹²
- Many women remanded into custody don't go on to receive a custodial sentence - in 2024, more than three in five (68%) women remanded and tried by the magistrates' court did not receive a custodial sentence.¹³
- Most women entering prison to serve a sentence (63%) have committed a non-violent offence.¹⁴
- The proportion of women being sent to prison on very short sentences has risen. In 1993, a third of custodial sentenced receptions were for six months or less - in the 12 months to September 2025 it was 59%.¹⁵
- In the 12 months to September 2025, women were recalled to prison on 3,532 occasions - an increase of 31% on the previous 12 months.¹⁶

The multiple and often unmet needs of women caught up in the criminal justice system are well rehearsed. Women's offending is frequently driven by multiple, complex and interrelated reasons that arise from a backdrop of trauma, victimisation, and socio-economic disadvantage. Most women in the criminal justice system have experienced significant personal challenges, including poverty, poor mental health and domestic abuse, and the links between women's experiences and their offending are too often disregarded by criminal justice agencies.¹⁷

6 Baroness Corston. (2007). *The Corston Report*.

7 Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Offender Management Statistics Quarterly: July to September 2025*.

8 Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Women and the criminal justice system 2023*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/679b44b5f2c688b4b630eab4/Statistics_on_Women_and_the_Criminal_Justice_System_2023.pdf

9 Hibiscus, Khidmat Centres, Agenda Alliance, Zahid Mubarek Trust, Criminal Justice Alliance & Women in Prison. (2023). *Tackling Double Disadvantage Action Plan: 'One year on' Progress report*.

10 Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Population bulletin: weekly 30 March 2026*. Prison population: weekly estate figures 2026. And previous editions.

11 Table 2.Q.1, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Prison receptions: July to September 2025*. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2025. And previous editions.

12 Tables 1.Q.1 & 1.Q.2, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Prison population: 31 December 2025*. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2025.

13 Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Remands data tool*. Criminal justice system statistics quarterly: update to December 2024.

14 Table 2.A.12, Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Receptions 2024*. Offender management statistics quarterly: October to December 2024.

15 Table 2.Q.1 & 2.Q.2, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Prison receptions: July to September 2025*. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2025.

16 Table 5.Q.2, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Prison recalls: July to September 2025*. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2025. And previous editions.

17 Prison Reform Trust. (2017). *"There's a reason we're in trouble" - Domestic abuse as a driver to women's offending*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/theres-a-reason-were-in-trouble/>

Box 2: profile of women in prison

- Around one in five women who entered prison in 2022-23 (19%) said they had been in local authority care.¹⁸
- In 2024-25, 63% of surveyed women in prison serving less than 12 months said they needed help with previous or ongoing trauma, including domestic violence.¹⁹
- Almost three quarters of women in prison (74%) report they have mental health problems.²⁰
- In 2024, women made up 28% of all self-harm incidents despite making up 4% of the population.²¹
- In 2024, 30% of self-harm incidents by women in prison were by those held on remand.²²
- There were four self-inflicted deaths in the women's estate in 2025, unchanged from 2024, one of which was a woman on remand.²³
- 17% of incidents of self-harm in the women's estate were by young women aged 18-20,²⁴ despite them representing 2% of the women's prison population.²⁵
- Women from ethnic minority groups are overrepresented at every stage of the criminal justice system.²⁶
- A 2024 ad-hoc data exercise by the Ministry of Justice estimated that over half (55%) of women in prison have children aged under 18.²⁷
- 196 pregnant women were held in prison at some point during 2024-25, 19 fewer than the previous year, with an average of 49 imprisoned at any one time.²⁸

The daily lives of women with multiple unmet needs are often bleak. They are frequently underserved by health and social care services and, in the absence of timely support, the ongoing cost of addressing poor health and wellbeing outcomes and 'drift' into the criminal justice system is high.

[Women] may also have responsibilities like caring for children, and struggle with housing or money. These issues can make it hard to cope, and some women end up offending as a way of surviving or managing their situation. Stakeholder with lived experience

Many of the solutions to women's offending lie outside of the justice system. For example, secure housing, protection from domestic abuse, timely access to community mental health services and treatment for substance misuse, money/debt management, support for families and skills for work. An effective response requires joined up working - meaning services that integrate support around the individual with a focus on prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation.

Some women need long-term, supportive help to stay out of prison. Without proper services in place, alternatives are less effective and women can end up going back into custody again and again. Stakeholder with lived experience

Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment (hereafter referred to as 'the programme') begins from the premise that while many of the necessary policies and frameworks already exist, they are not consistently applied.

18 House of Lords written question HL8980, 17 July 2023. And Table 2.1, Ministry of Justice. (2023). *Offender management statistics quarterly: April to June 2023*.

19 Criminal justice joint inspection. (2024). *Survey analysis workbook*. The quality of work undertaken with women.

20 Table 2, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. (2025). *Women's comparator workbook*. Annual report 2024–25. HM Stationery Office.

21 Table 2.1, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Self-harm in prison custody 2004 to 2024*. Safety in custody: quarterly update to September 2025.

22 Table 2.6, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Self-harm in prison custody 2004 to 2024*. Safety in custody: quarterly update to September 2025.

23 Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Safety in custody quarterly bulletin: September 2025*.

24 Table 2.3, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Self-harm in prison custody 2004 to 2024*. Safety in custody: quarterly update to September 2025.

25 Table 1.Q.1, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Prison population: 31 December 2025*. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2025.

26 Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Women and the Criminal Justice System 2023*.

27 Ministry of Justice. (2024). *Official statistics in development: Estimates of children with a parent in prison*.

28 Table 8.2 & 8.3, HMPPS. (2025). *Chapter 8 tables—Mother and Baby Units, pregnant prisoners and births*. HMPPS Annual Digest, April 2024 to March 2025. Ministry of Justice.

Methodology

This small-scale programme was undertaken over a period of 18 months. It was designed to be solution-focused, collaborative and grounded in the insights of women with lived experience of the criminal justice system and other stakeholders from across the criminal justice system, including members of the judiciary, and from health, social care and the voluntary sector. Its two core aims were:

1. To better understand why the women's prison population remains largely unchanged despite policies and frameworks that promote diversion and community alternatives to custody, and to identify steps to address this.
2. To hear from stakeholders, including women with lived experience of the criminal justice system²⁹ about what works in improving outcomes for women: what are the challenges, possible solutions and positive practices.

Literature review

To inform the programme a literature review³⁰ was undertaken that:

- Analysed statistics around women's imprisonment, remand and sentencing
- Mapped policy developments and reforms
- Identified gaps in implementation and practice.

The literature review helped frame the programme's hypothesis: that the barriers to reducing women's imprisonment and improving outcomes are often not due to a lack of policies and frameworks, but of application.

Consultation and engagement

The programme adopted a cross-sector, participatory approach, engaging with 70 stakeholders of which 27 were women with lived experience. Stakeholder engagement was undertaken in 2025.

Quotes from stakeholders are drawn upon throughout this report. To protect anonymity, names of stakeholders are not given. Quotes from members of the advisory group for this programme are identified as such. Where relevant, quotes by women with lived experience are identified as such.

Consultation methods included structured questions, roundtable discussions, focus groups and targeted outreach. Stakeholders provided local, regional and national perspectives across England.

Key questions

The programme sought to answer four key questions:

1. Why has the women's prison population remained static despite policy commitments to reduce it?
2. What barriers prevent greater use of early intervention, diversion and community alternatives to imprisonment?
3. What do stakeholders say is needed to better support women and reduce imprisonment?
4. What examples of positive practice exist?

These questions informed stakeholder consultations and analysis.

Advisory Group

A cross-sector advisory group was convened to guide the programme and ensure its relevance and rigour. See Appendix 2 for membership.

Limitations of the programme

This was a small, 18-month programme whose remit extended only to England.

²⁹ Hereafter referred to as 'women with lived experience' or 'stakeholder with lived experience'.

³⁰ Prison Reform Trust. (2025). *Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Resetting-the-approach-2025-briefing.pdf>

Current landscape

This section describes a non-exhaustive list of some of the key policies, legislative frameworks, reviews and international standards and guidelines that impact women caught up in the criminal justice system.

Key policies

Women's Justice Board

In January 2025, the government launched a Women's Justice Board (WJB), with 'a clear mission statement to send fewer women to prison'.³¹ The WJB published its report on 16 March 2026³² and recommended a Women's Justice Reform Programme (WJRP)³³ central to which is a 'Whole System Approach'. At the same time as the WJB published its report, the government announced increased funding for women's services of £31.6 million.³⁴

Lord Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, who chaired the WJB said:

*A key recommendation in the report is the need for sustainable, long-term investment in women's specialist services to deliver gender-specific, trauma-informed support. In line with this, I am delighted to announce that the government will provide an additional £10 million in funding for women's community and voluntary organisations over the Spending Review Period, bringing total funding over this period to £31.6 million. This uplift will strengthen diversion pathways and build capacity within the women's community sector – supporting the sustainable, resilient services called for by the Women's Justice Board.*³⁵

Supported by strong senior government leadership, the WJRP has the potential to ensure the cross-departmental cooperation and accountability to deliver the necessary 'wrap around' services and support for women in the criminal justice system, and those at risk of criminalisation, and to reduce women's imprisonment.

It is hoped that lessons have been learned from the failure of the previous government's **Female Offender Strategy**³⁶, which recognised the evidence base for a distinct approach to women and the case for local, whole system approaches but was extensively criticised for poor implementation,³⁷ lack of governance, no timetable for delivery and no dedicated funding.

Dissatisfaction with the lack of progress in implementing the Female Offender Strategy led to the publication of the **Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan**.³⁸ This reiterated key priorities to reduce offending and improve outcomes for women. A progress report in May 2024 stated 20 of the 51 commitments had been completed, with 'good progress on most of the remaining commitments'.³⁹ The plan has now expired without a review of what has or has not been achieved in practice.

31 Ministry of Justice. (2024, September 24). *Extra support for women through the criminal justice system announced*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/extra-support-for-women-through-the-criminal-justice-system-announced>

32 Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Women's Justice Board report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-justice-board-report>

33 At the time of writing, the government has not yet responded to the WJB's report or indicated whether it accepts or will implement its recommendations. This report nevertheless draws on the WJB's analysis and proposals, including the concept of a WJRP, which we endorse as a framework for change. We recognise, however, that the WJRP has not yet been adopted by government and may not be implemented as set out by the WJB (See Appendix 3).

34 Ministry of Justice. (2026, March 16). *Major funding boost to divert women from a life of crime*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-funding-boost-to-divert-women-from-a-life-of-crime>

35 UK Parliament. (2026, March 16). *Women in the criminal justice system* (HLWS1405) [written statement]. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2026-03-16/hlws1405>

36 Ministry of Justice. (2018). *Female Offender Strategy*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/female-offender-strategy>

37 National Audit Office. (2022). *Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system*. <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/improving-outcomes-for-women-in-the-criminal-justice-system>; Committee of Public Accounts. (2022). *Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system*. House of Commons. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmpubacc/997/report.html>; Justice Committee. (2022). *Women in Prison*. House of Commons. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmjust/265/report.html>

38 Ministry of Justice. (2023). *Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022 to 2025*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/female-offender-strategy-delivery-plan-2022-to-2025>

39 Ministry of Justice. (2024, 23 May). *Policy paper: Female offender strategy delivery plan: 'one year on' progress report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/female-offender-strategy-delivery-plan-progress-report/female-offender-strategy-delivery-plan-one-year-on-progress-report>

Women's Policy Framework

The Women's Policy Framework⁴⁰ was published in 2024 following extensive engagement with practitioners, subject matter experts and women with lived experience. It sets out the core principles of practice for working with women across the criminal justice system. Internal operational guidance sits alongside the framework and highlights areas of promising practice. HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) continues to work with regions to support and monitor implementation.

Legislative frameworks

The Sentencing Act 2026

The Sentencing Act 2026, which was informed by the Independent Sentencing Review⁴¹ (ISR) 2025, adopted many of the recommendations made by the ISR, with the following provisions likely to support better outcomes for women:

- The presumption to suspend prison sentences of 12 months or less, which came into effect on 23 March 2026. In 2024 more than three quarters (77%) of prison sentences given to women were in this category.⁴²
- The addition of new 'relevant' factors, including pregnancy, being a primary caregiver or a victim of domestic abuse, for courts to consider when deciding whether exceptions to bail apply.
- Strengthening the 'no real prospect test', allowing for fewer exceptions to bail where an immediate custodial sentence is unlikely if the person is convicted. In 2024, more than three in five (68%) women remanded, tried and found guilty by the magistrates' court did not receive a custodial sentence.⁴³

Not all ISR recommendations likely to support better outcomes for women require legislation to progress, and some of these are reflected in the report and recommendations from the WJB⁴⁴. These include:

- Expanding referrals into the women's NHS Liaison and Diversion pathway and exploring new models of assessing women's needs and circumstances, including in relation to the Violence Against Women and Girls' (VAWG) strategy⁴⁵, to maximise appropriate diversion.
- Supporting effective expansion of women's Intensive Supervision Courts and ensuring that women's specialist services are embedded in pilot sites.
- Commissioning a review of racial disproportionality for women in relation to arrest and sentencing, *including focus on assault of emergency worker*.⁴⁶

Mental Health Act 2025

The Mental Health Act⁴⁷ provides welcome reforms to:

- Introduce a 28-day transfer period for acutely mentally ill patients held in prison to be transferred to hospital.
- Remove police stations and prisons as a 'place of safety'.
- Remove the power under the Bail Act to remand a person for their own protection where the court's sole concern is the defendant's mental health.

Many women with unmet mental health needs get caught up in the criminal justice system so these changes should be helpful. Implementation relating to remand for a person's own protection and 'place of safety' will not, however, commence before 2029, while reforms to the timeline for prison transfers is expected by December 2027.⁴⁸

40 MoJ. & HMPPS. (2024). *Women's Policy Framework*. Ministry of Justice & HM Prison and Probation Service. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-policy-framework>

41 Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Independent Sentencing Review: Final report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-sentencing-review-final-report>

42 Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Outcomes by offence data tool*. Criminal justice system statistics quarterly: December 2024.

43 Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Remands data tool*. Criminal justice system statistics quarterly: update to December 2024.

44 Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Women's Justice Board report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-justice-board-report>

45 Home Office. (2025). *Freedom from violence and abuse: a cross-government strategy*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-from-violence-and-abuse-a-cross-government-strategy>

46 Emphasis added; see page 13.

47 See Mental Health Act 2025. <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3884>

48 PowerPoint presentation: The New Mental Health Act: next steps towards implementation, 04/03/26: Department for Health and Social Care.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

The Homelessness Reduction Act places a ‘duty to refer’ on public bodies, including prisons. Individuals at risk of homelessness should be referred to the local authority within 56 days of their release date. Local authorities are obliged to ‘take steps to prevent homelessness’ and ‘take steps to relieve homelessness’, regardless of whether an individual is ‘intentionally homeless’ or in ‘priority need’.⁴⁹

Research⁵⁰ and analysis⁵¹ has found that in practice the ‘duty to refer’ has not improved housing outcomes for most women leaving prison.

In 2020, the initiative ‘Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison’⁵² called for a review of the ‘duty to refer’ and

...a national strategy with adequate resources and joined up working between central and local government to ensure the provision of safe homes for women leaving prison.

Such a strategy remains long overdue.

The Care Act 2014

Section 76 of the Care Act sets out responsibilities for the provision of care and support for adults in prison and people living in approved premises. Section 9 of the Act requires the local authority to assess a person’s needs and where these meet the eligibility criteria, to clarify needs and arrange support.⁵³

Some women in prison or living in approved premises may be eligible for care and support, and referral procedures should be in place. Although many women in the criminal justice system have multiple needs that cumulatively limit wellbeing and independence, they may not meet the eligibility criteria for support.

Reviews

The Farmer Review for Women 2019

*Healthy, supportive relationships are not just a ‘nice to have’ for every woman in the criminal justice system. They are utterly indispensable if she is to turn away from criminality and contribute positively to society: relationships she can rely on are a ‘must-have’ for her rehabilitation.*⁵⁴

Lord Farmer’s review highlighted the importance of investment in women’s prisons, Women’s Centres and community services for women, noting that:

*...as the women’s estate is much smaller than the men’s a relatively modest investment will go a long way.*⁵⁵

Tracking the implementation of Farmer’s 33 recommendations was integrated into the Female Offender Strategy (2018) and as of 2023, 27 recommendations had been completed.⁵⁶ The government committed to monitoring further implementation through the Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan⁵⁷, which has now expired.

The National Women’s Prison Health & Social Care Review

A joint review by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and NHS England, which reported in 2023⁵⁸ found that women in prison have disproportionately higher levels of health and social care needs than men in prison and women in the general population. Following publication, £21 million was committed over three years to support NHS England regional teams to deliver against the eight strategic recommendations made. In 2025, a further £1.98 million was committed to develop ‘health hubs’ in each women’s prison to help address inequalities.

49 St Martin-in-the-Fields, London Prisons Mission & PRT. (2020). *Safe homes for women leaving prison*. p.5. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/old_files/FINAL%20Safe%20Homes%20Initiative%20briefing.pdf

50 St Martin-in-the-Fields, London Prisons Mission & PRT. (2020). *Safe homes for women leaving prison*. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/old_files/FINAL%20Safe%20Homes%20Initiative%20briefing.pdf

51 London Assembly Housing Committee. (2021). *Written evidence from London Assembly Housing Committee: Women in prison inquiry*. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/40552/pdf/>

52 St Martin-in-the-Fields, London Prisons Mission & PRT. (2020). *Safe homes for women leaving prison*. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/old_files/FINAL%20Safe%20Homes%20Initiative%20briefing.pdf

53 See The Care and Support (Eligibility Criteria) Regulations 2014. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2014/9780111124185>

54 Lord Farmer. (2019). *The importance of strengthening female offenders’ family and other relationships to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime*. Ministry of Justice.

55 Lord Farmer. (2019). *The importance of strengthening female offenders’ family and other relationships to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime*. Ministry of Justice.

56 Ministry of Justice. (2023). *The Farmer Review for Women Progress Report*. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63d8d9b78fa8f51884b98716/farmer-review-women-progress-update.pdf>

57 House of Lords written question HL8977, 12 July 2023. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-07-03/HL8977/>

58 HMPPS & NHS England. (2023). *A review of health and social care in women’s prisons*. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/a-review-of-health-and-social-care-in-womens-prisons/>

International standards and guidelines

In March 2026, the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women called for nations to

*...review criminal laws and policies that have led to the disproportionate criminalization and incarceration of women.*⁵⁹

In response, the Rt Hon Baroness Jacqui Smith,⁶⁰ Minister for Women and Equalities, affirmed the UK Government's commitment to strengthening access to justice for all women and girls. Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and previously the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said it was time to address

*...the root causes that drive women into prison, including poverty, discrimination and violence, and investing in community-based solutions that support women and their families rather than pushing them into the criminal justice system.*⁶¹

The UK is signed up to the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders 2010 (Bangkok Rules), which emphasise that non-custodial sentences are preferable for women with dependent children and these should be given higher profile.⁶²

⁵⁹ Paragraph 8d: <https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2021/L.3>

⁶⁰ GOV.UK. (2026, March 11). *The UK is putting women and girls at the heart of everything that we do, from development to diplomacy: UK National statement at the UN Commission on the Status of Women General Discussion.* <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-uk-is-putting-women-and-girls-at-the-heart-of-everything-that-we-do-from-development-to-diplomacy-uk-national-statement-at-the-un-commission-on>

⁶¹ The Guardian. (2026, March 13). *'Groundbreaking' UN agreement on justice for women to include those in prison for first time.* <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/mar/13/groundbreaking-un-agreement-on-justice-for-women-to-include-those-in-prison-for-first-time>

⁶² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2026, February 18). *UN experts urge urgent action to protect women in prisons and curb over-criminalisation ahead of CSW70.* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/02/un-experts-urge-urgent-action-protect-women-prisons-and-curb-over>

Discussion

The following discussion is structured around the four key questions explored with stakeholders, which are shown below. Drawing on stakeholder insights, policy analysis and the programme's literature review, each question is explored in turn.

1. Why has the women's prison population remained static despite policy commitments to reduce it?
2. What barriers prevent greater use of early intervention, diversion and community alternatives to imprisonment?
3. What do stakeholders say is needed to better support women and reduce imprisonment?
4. What examples of positive practice exist?

Some common themes emerged. These include failure to routinely recognise and respond to women's distinct needs, gaps in community provision for women, the importance of relational practice⁶³, and the importance of joined up services, partnership working, information sharing and training. These cross-cutting themes are interconnected and appear more than once in the following discussion.

1. Why has the women's prison population remained static despite policy commitments to reduce it?

This is fundamentally a question for the government to answer – why so little progress? There is no shortage of evidence-based proposals and pilots for reducing women's imprisonment, and constantly mounting evidence of the harms it causes women and their children and families. Many of us had expected swifter implementation action and investment in women's services.

Advisory group member

Stakeholder responses to this question centred around four main areas:

- Overuse of remand
- Increasing number of recalls
- Overuse of short prison sentences
- Underuse of community sentencing.

Overuse of remand

Women are being disproportionately put on remand, and this picture becomes even worse when you look at the numbers for black and racially minoritised women. Yet many are there for non-violent crimes. Remand separates women from their children, can mean they lose their home and jobs, and it can mean poorer health outcomes for women, including if they are pregnant. The use of remand against women is rising...this has to stop.

Advisory group member

Increasing numbers of women are in prison despite not being convicted of any offence. In 2025, more than one in four women (27%) were held on remand.⁶⁴

Periods spent on remand are destabilising – family life, housing, work and medical treatment are disrupted. Remand can exacerbate existing mental health conditions, cause poor mental health and can be especially distressing for women separated from their children. In 2024, 30% of self-harm incidents by women in prison were by those held on remand.⁶⁵

Many women held on remand do not go on to receive a custodial sentence. In 2024, 4,571 women were remanded into custody from the magistrates' courts, of whom only 32% went on to receive a custodial sentence.⁶⁶ One stakeholder with lived experience told us she was in prison on remand for seven months before her case was dismissed.

Most custodial remand reflects poor decision-making in magistrates' courts plus systemic failures in housing, mental health provision, and trauma informed bail support, rather than threats to public safety.

Advisory group member

⁶³ Relational practice refers to an approach that emphasises the importance of relationships and interpersonal dynamics in working with individuals. It is grounded in the understanding that effective support and intervention depend on building trust, empathy and understanding between practitioners and the people with whom they work (clients).

⁶⁴ Table 1.Q.1. Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Prison population 30 December 2024. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2024.*

⁶⁵ Table 2.6, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Self-harm in prison custody 2004 to 2024.* Safety in custody: quarterly update to September 2025.

⁶⁶ Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Remands data tool.* Criminal justice system statistics quarterly: update to December 2024.

The Mental Health Act 2025 (see page 8) removes the power to remand women to prison as a ‘place of safety’ and to remand women ‘for their own protection’ where the court’s sole concern is the defendant’s mental health. Women have been particularly vulnerable to being held under these provisions.⁶⁷ For example, in 2024/25, 22 women were sent to HMP Bronzefield as a ‘place of safety’, up from 19 in the previous year.⁶⁸ These changes will not, however, take effect until 2029.

Stakeholders expressed concern that homelessness and limited access to community mental health services mean that, in the absence of any alternative, women who are considered ‘vulnerable’ will continue to be remanded into custody.

Increasing number of recalls

In the 12 months to September 2025, there were 3,532 incidents of women being recalled to prison, an increase of 31% on the previous 12 months.⁶⁹ Of those incidents, over half (59%) were issued a very short 14-day recall.⁷⁰ Some stakeholders suggested that a risk-averse culture, combined with insufficient time to adequately assess risk and a lack of guidance from more experienced probation staff was driving up numbers.

Across recent inspections of women’s prisons, HM Inspectorate of Prisons found that women on fixed-term recall were:

- More likely to be released homeless
- Likely to leave prison again with ongoing addiction and mental health problems
- Unable to access help with finances, benefits and identification
- Insufficiently supported by, and communicated with, by staff.⁷¹

The Sentencing Act 2026 extends the fixed-term recall period to 56 days, which was welcomed by some stakeholders and prompted concern amongst others. While more time in prison may give probation staff additional time to assess risk and set appropriate licence conditions, it is unlikely to significantly impact outcomes such as timely access to decent accommodation. Further, extended recall has the potential to increase prison numbers.

A more fundamental change to the recall process is necessary. For example, removing fixed-term recall entirely, allowing for greater scrutiny and oversight in the recall process at an earlier stage – is recall always necessary? And to reduce the reliance on recall for non-offending related breaches.

Advisory group member

Alternatives to recall should be mobilised where there is no threat to public safety. For example, support from Women’s Centres and the use of community sentences and treatment/rehabilitation requirements would have a better chance of breaking the cycle of offending, addiction and homelessness than additional time in prison.

Overuse of short sentences

Short sentences are still used despite evidence of their ineffectiveness. Decision-making across the system often seems to focus more on risk aversion than on what women actually need.

Advisory group member

Short prison sentences of six months or less disrupt family relationships, housing, employment and access to community support without providing meaningful rehabilitation. They disproportionately impact women and are less effective at reducing reoffending compared with community sentences.⁷²

Provision in the Sentencing Act 2026 to suspend sentences of 12 months or less, which came into effect from 23 March 2026 has the potential to reduce the number of women in prison and encourage greater use of community alternatives to custody – but there are implications:

If more women are going to be managed in the community, this has significant staffing and resource implications for probation. We also need to develop more programmes specifically for women and increase funding for women’s centres.

67 IMB. (2023). *Mental health concerns in women’s prisons*. https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/13/2023/05/11.05.23_Womens-MH-briefing-final.pdf

68 IMB. (2025, 10 December). *Mental health crisis behind bars*. <https://imb.org.uk/news/mental-health-crisis-behind-bars/>

69 Table 5.Q.2, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Prison recalls: July to September 2025*. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2025. And previous editions.

70 Table 5.Q.13, Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Prison recalls: July to September 2025*. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2025.

71 HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2025, November 7). *Recall, release, repeat*. <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/news/recall-release-repeat/>

72 Hillier, J. & Mews, A. (2018). *Do offender characteristics affect the impact of short custodial sentences and court orders on reoffending?* Ministry of Justice.

Some stakeholders raised concerns about women being disproportionately affected by ‘assaults on emergency workers’ offences.

Women might be in crisis. Imagine if they have previously been abused by a man, and then a man [emergency worker] tries to restrain her, or even touch her, she’ll lash out and ‘bingo’ it’s an assault [on an emergency worker].

The Independent Sentencing Review (2025) heard concerns about the disproportionate impact of this offence on individuals who may be vulnerable and recommended ‘...a study of the impact and consequences of the Assault on Emergency Workers legislation.’⁷³ In response to a parliamentary question, the government said it was ‘continuing to consider how we take forward the ISR’s recommendations that do not require legislation.’⁷⁴ One stakeholder noted that the new offence of assaulting a retail worker should ‘be monitored for gendered impact.’

Underuse of community sentencing

We have to make better use of community sentences through a whole system approach and a women’s centre model with gender specific services, and proper funding.

The use of community sentences for women has halved since 2011.⁷⁵ There are several reasons for this including damaged relationships between courts and probation ⁷⁶ and a loss of confidence by magistrates and judges, exacerbated by privatisation reforms in 2014 and funding cuts.

Community alternatives should not be seen as the soft option because they can be difficult.
Stakeholder with lived experience

Community sentences can offer credible alternatives to custody, and unlike short prison sentences, allow for maintenance of housing, family ties and jobs, each of which are protective factors for reducing the risk of reoffending.⁷⁷ Community-based interventions are cost efficient and more effective in reducing reoffending.⁷⁸

*The wraparound support offered to female offenders, recognising their circumstances, has proved its effectiveness (Women’s Centres can cut reoffending to 5% against a national average of 23%). It should be a model for probation services generally.*⁷⁹

2. What barriers prevent greater use of early intervention, diversion and community alternatives to imprisonment?

A major barrier is the lack of resources for early intervention and diversion services. Many of the systems women encounter first, particularly policing, are not consistently trauma-informed, meaning early signs of abuse, coercion, mental health difficulties or vulnerability are not always recognised.

Advisory group member

Stakeholder responses to this question centred around five main areas:

- Homelessness and housing
- Inadequate funding of women’s services
- A lack of coordinated action across government departments, and locally
- A decline in the use and quality of Pre-Sentence Reports
- Sequence and volume of community interventions.

⁷³ Ministry of Justice. (2025). *The Independent Sentencing Review: Final Report*. p.100. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-sentencing-review-final-report>

⁷⁴ House of Lords written question HL14935, 11 March 2026. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2026-02-26/hl14935>

⁷⁵ Ministry of Justice. (2024). *Outcomes by offence data tool*. Criminal justice system statistics quarterly: December 2023.

⁷⁶ NAO. (2019). *Transforming Rehabilitation: Progress review*. And Whitehead. & Ely. (2019). *Renewing Trust: How can we improve the relationship between probation and the courts*. Referenced in: Centre for Justice. (2020). *Smarter Community Sentences*. p.2.

⁷⁷ Centre for Justice Innovation. (2020). *Smarter Community Sentences*.

⁷⁸ WBG & NWJC. (2025). *The Women’s Centre Model – the Financial Case for Alternatives to Prison*. Women’s Budget Group & National Women’s Justice Coalition. <https://www.wbg.org.uk/publication/the-womens-centre-model-the-financial-case-for-alternatives-to-prison/>

⁷⁹ House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee. (2024). *Cutting crime: better community sentences*. 1st Report of Session 2023–24, HL Paper 27. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5804/ldselect/ldjusthom/27/27.pdf>

Homelessness and housing

The accommodation pathway is the most in need of speedy, fundamental, gender-specific reform and should be reviewed urgently. Baroness Corston (2007)⁸⁰

Some 20 years later, it seems that little has changed:

The unmet need for safe, affordable housing is critical. Around 60% of women leave prison without settled accommodation. This is setting women up to fail and is a major contributor to reoffending and the 'revolving door'.

Quite often women are going back to the same area where there are high levels of poverty, deprivation and addiction. It's hard to stay clean when everyone around you isn't. It's hard to break the cycle. Stakeholder with lived experience

All stakeholders raised concerns around housing as a major barrier to improving outcomes for women. For example, unstable housing can precipitate the court's decision to remand and is a barrier to eligibility for the Intensive Supervision Court (ISC). A 2025 evaluation of ISCs, commissioned by the Ministry of Justice found that:

*The lack of housing representatives in the core partnership in two [ISC] sites was felt to be a missed opportunity given the expectation that people should be in stable accommodation in order to be suitable for the ISC. Lack of support from housing limited the pool of people who were eligible for an ISC sentence, as well as generating additional work for staff who spent time identifying accommodation and related funding.*⁸¹

Following an extensive consultation, the initiative 'Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison'⁸², published a practice briefing and recommendations. The briefing concluded:

The link between access to safe and secure accommodation and reducing the vulnerability of women released from prison as well as their risk of reoffending is undeniable... The most pressing need is for a national strategy with adequate resources and joined up working between central and local government to ensure the provision of Safe Homes for women leaving prison.

Some stakeholders suggested the use of Approved Premises⁸³ (APs) as an alternative to sending women to prison.

People aren't aware that APs can be used for bail assessments and as an alternative to custody. There needs to be more information and a culture shift. Court SPOs [senior probation officers] could promote this more.

While such use of APs may be an option, there are difficulties. The women's AP estate faces similar geographic challenges to the women's prison estate. There are 12 women's prisons across England, which means that most women in prison are held long distances away from home, and there are eight APs for women with a limited number of spaces. Some APs for women, however, remain under-occupied and work is underway to improve referrals and strengthen the overall purpose and offer of APs for women.

Inadequate funding of women's services

A key barrier is the government's slow and inadequate fiscal response to compelling evidence of the costs of women's imprisonment vs the cost-effectiveness of community-based solutions.

Advisory group member

There have been consistent and repeated calls for increased investment in women's support services, which is frequently short-term, inconsistent⁸⁴ and inadequate.⁸⁵ Stakeholders from voluntary organisations, Women's Centres and smaller specialist services spoke of functioning in an increasingly difficult funding climate and having to rely on short-term funding with long, arduous tender processes.

⁸⁰ Baroness Corston. (2007). *The Corston Report*.

⁸¹ Russell Webster. (2025, January 21). *First Findings From Intensive Supervision Courts*. <https://www.russellwebster.com/first-findings-from-intensive-supervision-courts/>

⁸² St Martin-in-the-Fields, London Prisons Mission & PRT. (2020). *Safe homes for women leaving prison*. <https://www.londonprisonsmission.org/safe-homes-for-women-leaving-prison>

⁸³ APs are supervised residential units providing high-support accommodation for high-risk individuals leaving prison or on bail, managed by HMPPS. They offer 24-hour supervision to manage risk, assist with rehabilitation and ensure public safety.

⁸⁴ NAO's written evidence to the Justice Committee's inquiry into community sentences. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/122239/html/>

⁸⁵ Damm, C., Dowrick, L. & Harris, C. (2023). *Mapping the UK Women and Girls Sector and its Funding: Where Does the Money Go?*. Centre for Regional, Economic & Social Research (CRESR).

Some stakeholders spoke of the challenge in recruiting and retaining staff without being able to offer employment contracts of more than 12 months at a time, and the at times fragile nature of operational capacity.

In February 2025, a survey of organisations in the National Women's Justice Coalition (NWJC) found 77% had not yet secured funding to cover the 2025/26 forecast expenditure, with an average organisational shortfall of £756,826.⁸⁶

Inadequate funding also manifested in delays in accessing services. For example, stakeholders spoke highly of the Community Sentence Treatment Requirement (CSTR), especially the Mental Health Treatment Requirement (MHTR) (see page 23), but reported long waiting times to begin treatment (and inconsistent awareness of the MHTR among sentencers and some probation staff).

*Further investment in treatment places is required. The need for mental health, and alcohol and drug treatment far exceeds the current rate of imposition of Community Sentence Treatment Requirements, which itself exceeds the availability of treatment.*⁸⁷

Delays in accessing MHTRs were further highlighted in the recent evaluation of Intensive Supervision Courts⁸⁸, alongside gaps in adult social care services, and the need for greater resources and specialist training for staff working with women.

A lack of coordinated action across government departments, and locally

Effective early intervention, diversion and community alternatives require shared strategic objectives, sustainable funding and common performance measures across agencies to underpin consistent and effective delivery. Where one partner, agency or service provider cannot meet requirements, the whole system comes under strain and practitioners lose confidence in initiatives.

Advisory group member

Stakeholders frequently returned to the need for a strategic, joined-up approach to tackling women's offending and the importance of early intervention.

Women in need don't just appear in the criminal justice system from nowhere. We need to get much better at identifying those at risk and intervening early.

Stakeholders highlighted cultural and organisational factors that hampered local joined-up working. Typical examples were poor communication between agencies that led to missed opportunities, and a lack of clarity in accountability, with professionals and practitioners not always clear who was responsible for coordinating support. One stakeholder described this disjointed working as 'passing the parcel', with women 'bounced' between services.

Silo working, we have to overcome it. We are all guilty of it and it is so unhelpful. Unless and until we put the woman at the centre of things, it's not going to work.

Stakeholders with lived experience described how gaps in the coordination of statutory services directly affected their ability to engage.

Nobody talks to each other. You spend all day going to different offices and making phone calls nobody answers. I was too exhausted to think, let alone chase halfway across town and back to get help.

Local efforts at joined up working would, many stakeholders felt, be more readily achieved if led by example from 'the top' and were hopeful that the Women's Justice Board (see page 7) would galvanise greater cooperation between government departments.

Despite widespread acceptance that reducing women's imprisonment requires a 'whole systems approach', due to the intersecting factors driving their contact with the criminal justice system and high levels of unmet need, there is little sign of the joined-up government action needed. Collaboration at senior levels, cross-portfolio partnership funding, ministerial leadership and drive and clear delivery timetables are all key. Advisory group member

86 Women's Budget Group. (2025, 15 May). *Women's organisations delivering the Women's Centre Model are struggling to survive*. <https://www.wbg.org.uk/article/womens-organisations-delivering-the-womens-centre-model-are-struggling-to-survive/>

87 House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee. (2024). *Cutting crime: better community sentences*. 1st Report of Session 2023–24, HL Paper 27. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5804/ldselect/ldjusthom/27/27.pdf>

88 CFE Research and Revolving Doors. (2025). *Process evaluation of the Intensive Supervision Courts pilot: Final Report*. Ministry of Justice. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/691c4c0ee39a085bda43eeab/intensive-supervision-courts-pilot-process-evaluation.pdf>

A decline in the use and quality of Pre-Sentence Reports (PSRs)

PSRs are important. They are used to assist judges and magistrates in deciding the most suitable sentence for an offender following conviction and help to ensure sentencers have all the relevant information to make informed sentencing decisions. They are prepared by the probation service and provide an assessment of the person's background, circumstances and risk of reoffending. The most detailed PSR, which takes time to prepare, is the 'standard delivery'. Since 2011 the use of 'standard delivery' PSRs has fallen by 95%.⁸⁹

In recent years, although the total number of PSRs has increased, this is due to a rise in same day 'fast delivery' and 'oral' reports. The use of 'standard delivery' PSRs declined from 32,523 in 2014 to 4,374 by 2023. Decisions on the type of PSR required are generally led by the court. Capacity pressures, court backlogs and strain on probation services have meant that 'fast delivery' and 'oral' PSRs are often favoured.

In 2024, HM Inspectorate of Probation found that less than half of PSRs were 'sufficiently analytical and personalised to the individual'.⁹⁰

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of detailed PSRs for women, identifying needs, risk and circumstances alongside local options for sentencing. The impact on children affected by their mother's imprisonment should also be considered and may be included in a PSR or a Child Impact Assessment.⁹¹ It is unlikely this level of detail can be gained from a same day, 'fast delivery', 'oral' report. For example, most women appearing in court are unlikely to have the confidence or be comfortable in sharing details about their lives, which may be distressing or sensitive but relevant to their case, with an authority figure they have not previously met. Stakeholders told us that 'it takes a while' for a woman to have the confidence to share information about herself. One judicial stakeholder said:

If probation really engage with the woman, the reports are richer, of greater value to the courts... a decent PSR explores issues in the round and is supportive in a way that fits the woman's needs and is sensitive towards them. And that takes time.

In contrast, another stakeholder noted that sentencers do not always take into consideration, or even read, the PSR. One stakeholder with lived experience said:

I was recommended a drugs programme as part of a community sentence, but I got prison instead. They don't listen to the report, they see your crime.

The effective use of PSRs for individuals with protected characteristics, including women, has been jeopardised by recent legislative changes reducing the autonomy of the Sentencing Council. The Sentencing Guidelines (PSR) Act 2025 prevents sentencing guidelines from including 'provision framed by reference to different personal characteristics of an offender', and specifically highlights race, religion or belief and cultural background.⁹² The Sentencing Council may still issue guidelines advising courts to consider a person's personal circumstances in deciding whether to request a PSR. Magistrates and judges are still able to request PSRs where they ordinarily would,⁹³ but the new legislation may serve as a deterrent. The impact of these changes on judicial decisions to request a PSR and on sentencing practice remain to be determined and should be kept under review.

I don't think they [members of the judiciary] are fully aware what's available. It's a combination of not knowing what interventions and services are available but also not knowing enough about the woman in front of them. It's also about time pressures because courts are flat out, so it means the right information isn't put in front of them. Stakeholder with lived experience

Sequence and number of interventions

The sequence and number of interventions offered through a community order may determine whether an individual succeeds or not. Too many interventions can be overwhelming and, in the wrong order, counterproductive. One stakeholder with lived experience said:

I needed help with my mental health first, but I had to do other stuff, and the buses were always late, or my childcare let me down. It was a nightmare.

89 Whitehead, S. (2018). *The changing use of pre-sentence reports*. Centre for Justice Innovation. Referenced in Prison Reform Trust. (2023). *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: January 2023*.

90 HM Inspectorate of Probation. (2024). *The quality of pre-sentence information and advice provided to courts – 2-22 to 2023 inspections*. HM Inspectorate of Probation: Research & Analysis Bulletin 2024/04. p.19. <https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/document/the-quality-of-pre-sentence-information-and-advice-provided-to-courts-2022-to-2023-inspections/>

91 For more information on Child Impact Assessments, see <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/women-the-criminal-justice-system/child-impact-assessment-project/>

92 Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Act 2025. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2025/17>

93 Sentencing Council. (2025, June 13). *Amendments to be made to sentencing guidelines as a result of the incoming Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-Sentence Reports) Act 2024*. <https://sentencingcouncil.org.uk/updates/amendments-to-be-made-to-sentencing-guidelines-as-a-result-of-the-incoming-sentencing-guidelines-pre-sentence-reports-act-2025/>

Stakeholders pointed to the added value of Women's Centres, a 'one stop shop' where women can access the support they need and engage in interventions in places they know and trust. In a recent report⁹⁴ on the health of people in prison and on probation the Chief Medical Officer said:

Women at risk of entering the criminal justice system or on probation need to access multiple services in different locations, creating a high burden of care and barriers to access.

3. What do stakeholders say is needed to better support women and reduce imprisonment?

Areas that stakeholders identified as barriers in the previous section were again highlighted, but framed differently, as being what was needed to work effectively with women. Responses centred around four main areas:

- Recognising and meeting women's distinct needs
- Greater coordinated action across government departments, and locally
- Training and information sharing
- Time for meaningful relational practice.

Training is routinely cited as the answer alongside increased funding and dedicated resource. Whilst these are important, they will not result in better support for women unless they are accompanied by established policies, procedures, behaviours, evidence-based research and female-specific options that take account of women's distinct psychological, physiological, familial and criminogenic difference or needs. Gendered options should be developed as standard and routinely delivered.

Advisory group member

Recognising and meeting women's distinct needs

There must be greater understanding of women's inherent needs and risk...then develop services and programmes that target them meaningfully.

It always feels like we're trying to fit women into a model and system designed for men.

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of recognising and responding to women's needs across the criminal justice system. This means ensuring that services, programmes and treatment options are designed with women in mind, alongside the flexibility to support individual needs. A 'one size fits all' approach, when the 'one size' is generally designed for men does not work:

[Electronic monitoring] tags are not designed with women's circumstances or bodies in mind... there are dangers in tagging pregnant women. Advisory group member

While electronic monitoring may be a useful option for some women in certain circumstances, it can cause anxiety and distress for others. Evidence shows⁹⁵ that electronic monitoring is most effective when combined with appropriate supervision and support. Professional discretion and clear guidance would help avoid situations where a tag risks undermining resettlement outcomes, such as employment, family contact or if a curfew is imposed when there is a risk of domestic violence.

Best practice, stakeholders told us, involved women with lived experience in the development, design and monitoring of services, programmes and activities as their unique insight is likely to produce greater effectiveness and efficiency.

It is important that the voices of women with lived experience are included not only in research but also in meetings and discussions that shape policy. I think many people would be shocked by some of the experiences women have and would want to support change, but they simply aren't aware and haven't heard directly from women and seen the impact. Advisory group member

Models such as Advance's pan-London key worker service⁹⁶, developed for young women, demonstrates the value of meeting women where they are, both physically and emotionally, through trauma-informed engagement that builds trust.

94 DHSC & MoJ. (2025). *The health of people in prison, on probation and in the secure NHS estate in England*. p.131. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-health-of-people-in-prison-on-probation-and-in-the-secure-nhs-estate-in-england>

95 PRT. (2026, March 19). *PRT comment: Expansion of electronic monitoring*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/prt-comment-expansion-of-electronic-monitoring/>

96 For more information, see [Maia and Lift - Advance Charity](#)

Early intervention can help to inform diversion pathways for women, and many stakeholders spoke highly of NHS Liaison and Diversion (L&D) services in police custody and at court. Others, however, described services as ‘hit and miss’, often due to a lack of engagement from local support services such as social care and community mental health teams. One stakeholder highlighted the limited amount of time to properly respond to women’s needs:

There’s not enough time; you’ve got to assess their clinical need, their social care need...if we are to break that revolving door cycle of reoffending you do need a purposeful delay. You need two or three weeks to create a credible holistic package of care that’s going to break that cycle...it’s impossible to deliver that in a couple of hours.

One stakeholder with lived experience said:

I didn’t know about any services and was left to deal with social workers who didn’t help me. It took getting into trouble with the police before I got any help [from L&D services].

Greater coordinated action across government departments, and locally

There has been more progress in joined up working at a local level...but without joined up working at national level the funding shortfalls and lack of supportive infrastructure will continue to hamper progress.

Already highlighted as a barrier (see page 15), coordinated departmental action, joined-up working and effective local partnerships were also raised by stakeholders as essential elements in reducing women’s imprisonment and improving outcomes.

It is only through collective will, ownership and accountability that we will see change on the ground. Housing, healthcare and mental health services, substance misuse services, voluntary sector women’s services, employment agencies – all of these need to work together in a whole system approach. Advisory group member

Examples of a ‘whole system approach’ (WSA) demonstrate where partnership working can deliver for women. The approach taken by Greater Manchester,⁹⁷ for example, has long been held as positive practice. The recent report from the WJB recognises the importance of this approach and recommends a structured national WSA for women:

Reducing women’s imprisonment through a whole system approach means taking every opportunity to refer women in, or at risk of, contact with the CJS into community-based, women-specific support... This requires strong ‘buy in’ from multiple local agencies... To ensure consistent delivery, we propose a jointly agreed ministerial governance model enabling structured bilateral engagement between UK Government departments and Welsh Government portfolios.⁹⁸

Stakeholders further highlighted the need to coordinate departmental priorities and policies that might complement or conflict with a WSA for women. For example, three areas frequently cited were assaults on emergency worker offences and being ‘tough’ on shoplifting, which may have a disproportionate impact on women, and the links between women’s experiences of domestic abuse and their offending:

Women in prison have often been victims of much more serious offences than those of which they have been convicted.⁹⁹ Given this, it would be helpful if the future strategy from the Women’s Justice Board is closely linked to the government’s 10-year strategy to end Violence Against Women and Girls’. Advisory group member

Consistent cross-departmental central government strategies would also support consistency of practice, including a commonly agreed position on what constitutes a positive outcome in criminal-justice terms, focusing on prevention and restorative justice. Advisory group member

Many stakeholders linked the building of local partnerships with the need for better information sharing between local agencies, shared training and strengthening mechanisms for multi-sector sharing of good practice and challenges, alongside opportunities to explore solutions.

97 Kinsella et al. (2018). *Whole system approach for women offenders final evaluation report*. Manchester Metropolitan University PERU. https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621414/1/WSA%20FINAL%20REPORT%2018_05_30.pdf

98 Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Women’s Justice Board report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-justice-board-report>

99 PRT. (2019). *Prison Reform Trust briefing on the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill: Pre-legislative scrutiny, April 2019*. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/102126/html/>

Training and information sharing

There needs to be training and practice protocols embedded across criminal justice agencies and services on the specific needs of women.

All stakeholders highlighted the need for enhanced training and information sharing. Shared training with others working across the criminal justice system was seen as especially valuable, as was the direct involvement of women with lived experience.

Sitting down with somebody working in a completely different part of [the] criminal justice [system] was an eye opener. I got to hear about their priorities and challenges, which were so different to mine. It kind of made sense. And now I have somebody I can contact if I need information or help, rather than just sending off an email and hoping for the best.

Stakeholders also spoke of the need for targeted training, for example, concerning minoritised women, and targeted information sharing to ensure sentencers have a good understanding of local sentencing options for women.

There used to be visits arranged to local services and regular meetings with probation but that doesn't happen so much now. We do need more information about changes or developments in women's services and regular updates.

Recent research exploring probation practitioners' attitudes towards working with women found both positive engagement and ongoing challenges. The study identified gaps in training and organisational support for working with 'this often complex group', alongside evidence from practitioners who preferred working with women and who believe positive outcomes are achievable with the right support. These findings are useful for sustaining specialist teams for working with women and embedding gender-informed practice.¹⁰⁰

Time for meaningful relational practice

Spending meaningful, quality time with the client would be the change that's needed; more of a focus on human interaction, but there's never enough time.

Effective support for women relies not only on expertise, knowledge and training, but also on the quality of interactions and relationships. Stakeholders highlighted the increased amount of time needed to build trust between practitioners and the women they work with. Supportive relationships were crucial to a woman's progress through her sentence, a point illuminated by the following quotes from women with lived experience:

My probation officer told me she was proud of me. I'm not used to that; it felt good.

My probation officer is constantly changing and then I'm having to tell new people all the information again. It means there's a lack of ability to build trusting relationships with someone who's in charge of you.

Some stakeholders said that insufficient time was allowed for relational practice, while stakeholders with lived experience said that probation supervision often felt like a 'tick box' exercise, with supervision being less about support than monitoring.

Probation has the potential to offer meaningful, practical support, such as someone to talk to, or guidance on accessing services to overcome barriers post-release. To achieve this, the overall approach must prioritise care, trust-building, and empowerment over monitoring and restriction.
Stakeholder with lived experience

Stakeholders raised concerns about the Workload Management Tool (WMT), which supports probation officers in managing and prioritising their workload.

The Workload Management Tool is designed with men in mind and we're trying to support women who present with very different needs and risks. Time is always a problem; women need more time.

Many felt that the WMT does not reflect the realities of working with women, echoing recent research that showed that it

... did not go far enough in allocating sufficient allowance to practitioners working with women.¹⁰¹

100 Rushton, C. & Morley, C. (2022). *The paradoxical paradox: exploring probation staff attitudes towards working with women*. The Griffins Society. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec3ce97a1716758c54691b7/t/675447686f2eba0740db60ce/1733576553228/griffins-research-paper-2022-04-full-paper-final.pdf>

101 Rushton, C. & Morley, C. (2022). *The paradoxical paradox: exploring probation staff attitudes towards working with women*. The Griffins Society. p.33 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec3ce97a1716758c54691b7/t/675447686f2eba0740db60ce/1733576553228/griffins-research-paper-2022-04-full-paper-final.pdf>

Concerns about time, workload and the balance between monitoring and relational practice are longstanding across probation. In February 2025, HMPPS established the Our Future Probation Service (OFPS) programme that, amongst other things aims to reframe process-driven activity towards a more purposeful, strengths-based and relational model. The approach sets expectations around practitioner involvement. This includes time for meaningful engagement and coordination of support in response to individual need, while maintaining an appropriate focus on risk and public protection. A report by the National Audit Office¹⁰² described the OFPS programme as ‘a bold and innovative approach’, while noting that ‘the significant gap between actual and required capacity and slow progress in improving productivity means the challenge it [HMPPS] faces is huge.’

4. What examples of positive practice exist?

Stakeholders described many examples of positive practice. Some were small, while others had a wider local or regional focus and many were led by voluntary sector women’s services. What follows is a distillation of the most frequently cited positive practice alongside some examples. It is not exhaustive: one practice example described below, the Women’s Services Map, and the section on resources highlight many more positive practices.

Whole System Approach

Already cited throughout this report, a WSA was seen by stakeholders as both positive practice and necessary in tackling the drivers to women’s imprisonment and improving outcomes. The recent report from the WJB acknowledges the value of a WSA for women and recommends ‘intensive support for developing local whole system approaches.’¹⁰³

Practice example: West Midlands Women and Girls Delivery Group

The West Midlands Women and Girls Delivery Group works to improve criminal justice responses to women and girls, focusing on gender-specific, trauma-informed approaches. Established by the Police and Crime Commissioner, it focuses on reducing reoffending and improving safety. Key aspects of the group’s work include:

- **System Reform:** Addressing the specific needs of women in the criminal justice system, ensuring they are treated as victims rather than solely as offenders, as many have experienced trauma and abuse.
- **Strategic Collaboration:** The group acts as a subcommittee of the Local Criminal Justice Board, coordinating partners to embed a ‘whole system approach’ to female offending.
- **Key Focus Areas:** Supporting the West Midland Police VAWG strategy, which covers rape, serious sexual offences, domestic abuse, stalking and harassment.
- **Key Partners:** Collaboration with the West Midlands Victims Advocate, the JABBS Foundation and various women’s specialist services.

The group aims to ensure that women in the criminal justice system receive a trauma-informed response and that those at risk are supported through specialised services.

For further information contact womensprogramme@prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Women’s Centres/services

*Women’s Centres take an approach that encompasses all aspects of a woman’s life and provide services and support from housing and finances to domestic abuse and harmful substance use. Women’s Centres are based in local communities and enable women to maintain relationships with family and social networks, whilst also building and developing wider support systems.*¹⁰⁴

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the importance of Women’s Centres was front and centre in stakeholder responses to identifying positive practice; their value has long been demonstrated.¹⁰⁵ They play a vital role in reducing offending and reoffending by co-locating a range of health, social care and justice services in safe, non-stigmatising environments¹⁰⁶ and are especially beneficial in the delivery of CSTRs for women.

¹⁰² National Audit Office. (2025). *Building an effective and resilient Probation Service*. <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/building-an-effective-and-resilient-probation-service/>

¹⁰³ Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Women’s Justice Board report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-justice-board-report>

¹⁰⁴ Women in Prison. (2022). *The value of Women’s Centres*. p.5. <https://womeninprison.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/The-value-of-Womens-Centres-report.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ Women’s Budget Group. (2025, 15 May). *Women’s organisations delivering the Women’s Centre Model are struggling to survive*. <https://www.wbg.org.uk/article/womens-organisations-delivering-the-womens-centre-model-are-struggling-to-survive/>

¹⁰⁶ Radcliffe, P. & Hunter, G. (2013). *The development and impact of community services for women offenders: an evaluation*. ICPR.

The economic argument in support of Women's Centres is proven: the cost of support for each woman at a Women's Centre ranges from around £1,000 to £4,000 per year, depending on need, while a place in prison is around £52,000.¹⁰⁷

Practice example: Women's Services Map

The Women's Services Map website was launched in September 2023. It is the UK's first directory of women's centres and specialist services for women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system.

The directory currently covers 111 Women's Centres and classifies 420 specialist services for women. Use of the site has increased, with 25,782 sessions recorded (a 42% rise) and number of users up by 44% to 19,137.¹⁰⁸

Users of the website can [search for their local women's centre](#) and services by using an [interactive map](#), postcode search or by filtering services by organisation or specialism. Contact details for all featured organisations, as well as guidance and instructions for how to make direct referrals and self-referrals to services are listed.

Information about organisations and projects that deliver services and support direct to women in each of the twelve [women's prisons](#) is also listed.

<https://www.womensservicesmap.com/>

As shown in the above practice example, the Women's Services Map, there are many positive examples of Women's Centres and specialist women's services. One, Hope Street, is shown below, while others such as Willowdene Farm¹⁰⁹ and Trevi¹¹⁰ have long pioneered similar provision.

Practice example: Hope Street

Hope Street offers a community-based alternative to women receiving short custodial sentences, being unnecessarily imprisoned on remand or released from prison to homelessness. Women on a community sentence can meet requirements in a safe and nurturing environment, where their children can be safely with them. Hope Street aims to help women address the root causes of the issues they are facing, equipping them with skills and giving them an opportunity to build a new life. Hope Street provides:

- a 24-hour staffed residential hub, with accommodation for up to 24 women and their children
- individually tailored programmes, including opportunities for women to improve their education, skills and life chances
- activities that allow women to fulfil the requirements of a community sentence including unpaid work and accreditation that will provide better future employment opportunities
- supported move-on housing to help prepare women for their own home
- ongoing outreach support for women and their families for up to 12 months.

<https://onesmallthing.org.uk/hopestreet>

Early intervention and diversion away from custody

Early intervention and diversion only work when health, justice and community services act together to provide coordinated support. Without clear, well-resourced pathways, women are drawn further into the criminal justice system. Advisory group member

Having identified some of the barriers to early intervention and diversion from custody (pages 13-16), stakeholders cited three main areas of positive practice. These were:

- NHS Liaison and Diversion services and third sector led diversion services for women
- Intensive Supervision Courts
- Community Sentence Treatment Requirement.

¹⁰⁷ Women's Budget Group. (2020). *The case for sustainable funding for women's centres*.

¹⁰⁸ National Women's Justice Coalition. (2026). *2 Year Review*. p.3. <https://wearenwjc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/NWJC2513-Year-in-Review-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁰⁹ See <https://willowdenefarm.org.uk/>

¹¹⁰ Formerly known as 'Trevi House', see <https://trevi.org.uk/>

NHS Liaison and Diversion (L&D) services play a critical role in identifying and supporting individuals who have poor mental health, a learning disability, substance misuse or other vulnerabilities when they first encounter the criminal justice system as suspects, defendants or offenders. The service helps to ensure the right support is put in place from the start. Staff can make referrals to health and social care services, and enable diversion away from the criminal justice system, if required. L&D services record all information about a person's health needs and, with the person's consent, share these with relevant agencies so they can make informed decisions about case management, sentencing and disposal options¹¹¹. All L&D services are required to

*...develop a gender specific female pathway to holistically address the specific needs of women in the criminal justice system. A dedicated female practitioner will be nominated in all services. For ongoing support, the service will offer all females who come into custody a choice of gender for their practitioner or support time recovery worker, who will provide a gender sensitive approach to screening and support effective onward referrals to gender specific services.*¹¹²

There also exist a small number of **diversion services for women, led by Women's Centres** including, but not limited to Advance London¹¹³, Brighton Women's Centre¹¹⁴ and the New Chance project led by Anawim (see practice example).

Practice example: New Chance project ¹¹⁵

New Chance is an award-winning specialist project for women who have been arrested, with the aim of diverting them away from the criminal justice system at an early stage. The project provides women with the opportunity to turn their lives around and offers trauma-informed support, group work, advocacy and the provision of advice, guidance and information.

An evaluation by the University of Birmingham demonstrates that reoffending amongst New Chance service users with mental health issues was 35-37% lower and those who had substance misuse issues had a 51-55% decrease in reoffending.

New Chance is led by Anawim, Birmingham's centre for women, in partnership with other women's services across the West Midlands and has recently been awarded a new three-year contract by the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.¹¹⁶

<https://anawim.co.uk/>

Intensive Supervision Courts (ISCs) combine intensive probation supervision with coordinated wraparound support from local services under the oversight of a dedicated ISC judge or magistrate.

In June 2023, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) launched four ISC pilots. Three (Liverpool, Teesside and Bristol) focus on substance misuse, while a fourth in Birmingham supports women. Momentum for expansion has continued, and in August 2025, the MoJ sought expressions of interest for further ISCs, with implementation expected in 2026-27.¹¹⁷

The Birmingham women's ISC offers a gender-responsive, holistic model where women at risk of short custodial sentences instead receive a community sentence with targeted, wraparound support.¹¹⁸ Women's Centres and the holistic, trauma-informed support they offer, are an essential part of the ISC model's success.

A process evaluation of the ISC pilots published in November 2025¹¹⁹ found the Birmingham pilot demonstrated positive outcomes for women, including improved mental wellbeing, reduced substance misuse, engagement in education, volunteering or employment.

111 NHS England, *About liaison and diversion*. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/health-just/liaison-and-diversion/about/>

112 NHS England. (2019). *Liaison and Diversion Standard Service Specification*. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/liaison-and-diversion-standard-service-specification/>

113 See <https://www.advancecharity.org.uk/>

114 See <https://womenscentre.org.uk/>

115 Anawim. *Three more years of New Chance*. <https://anawim.co.uk/news/three-more-years-of-new-chance/>

116 West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioners. (2025 November, 3). *PCC invests £1.3m in scheme to help women turn lives around*. <https://www.westmidlands-pcc.gov.uk/pcc-invests-1-3m-in-scheme-to-help-women-turn-lives-around/>

117 Centre for Justice Innovation. (2025). *Problem-solving courts. A guide to practice in the United Kingdom*. https://justiceinnovation.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2025/cji_pscmc_2_0.pdf and Ministry of Justice. (2025, August 7). *Intensive Supervision Courts: Expression of Interest*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intensive-supervision-courts-expression-of-interest>

118 Ministry of Justice. (2023, June 28). *Pioneering initiative to force offenders to get clean or face jail time*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pioneering-initiative-to-force-offenders-to-get-clean-or-face-jail-time>

119 CFE Research and Revolving Doors. (2025). *Process evaluation of the Intensive Supervision Courts pilot: Final Report*. Ministry of Justice.

The financial case for ISCs is strong. A financial analysis of a women's problem-solving court found the average annual cost of a women's problem-solving court placement (WPSC) is £11,325, compared to £13,386 for a six-month custodial sentence, and that by sending a woman through a WPSC instead of custody, a financial break-even point is reached after 78 days in prison.¹²⁰

The recent report from the WJB recommends supporting 'effective expansion of women's ISCs.'¹²¹

The **Community Sentence Treatment Requirement (CSTR)** seeks to address the root causes of offending behaviour and improve health outcomes. Individual treatment requirements address alcohol misuse, drug misuse and poor mental health, and may be combined. Recent years have seen increased investment and development of CSTRs. An evaluation by the Ministry of Justice (2024) demonstrates the benefits and positive outcomes of the Mental Health Treatment Requirement (MHTR).¹²²

A recent evaluation of primary care MHTRs¹²³ found significant improvements in psychological distress, anxiety and depression scores for women after completing treatment. The evidence also suggests gender-specific support, for example, women-only spaces, results in better engagement and outcomes. Women are over-represented within the MHTR population, which may reflect the high level of often unmet mental health need amongst women who offend.

NHS England has played a central role in developing and driving forward take-up of CSTRs. It will be important to monitor progress in the context of current health reforms.

Practice example: The Good Loaf

The Good Loaf in Northamptonshire is a bakery which provides training and work placements for women in contact with the criminal justice system. Through accredited programmes and supportive employment, it helps women build confidence, gain skills and access community support.

Evaluation of The Good Loaf as an 'out of court disposal' has shown positive benefits for women including:

*...building resilience, self-esteem and wellbeing...increasing their understanding of health and unhealthy relationship behaviour, increasing their confidence, changing how they perceive and respond to situations and learning new skills such as CV writing and budgeting.*¹²⁴

<https://thegoodloaf.co.uk>

120 Centre for Justice Innovation. (2025). *Women's problem-solving courts: a financial analysis*. https://justiceinnovation.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2025/20250609_wpsc_final_vdraft_pb.pdf

121 Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Women's Justice Board report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-justice-board-report>

122 Chalam-Judge, R. & Martin, E. (2024). *Evaluation report: The impact of being sentenced with a community sentence treatment requirement (CSTR) on proven reoffending*. Ministry of Justice.

123 Callender, M., Cahalin, K. & Allen, B. (2025). *An evaluation of primary care mental health treatment requirements in England and Wales*. Institute for Public Safety Crime and Justice. p.14. https://pure.northampton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/87326113/Callender_et_al_2025_An_Evaluation_of_Primary_Care_Mental_Health_Treatment_Requirements_in_England_and_Wales.pdf

124 Cahalin, K., Callender, M., Binley, J. & Smyth, L. (2023). *Evaluations of the use of the Good Loaf as an Out of Court Disposal option for women who have offended: September 2021 – August 2023*. Institute for Public Safety Crime and Justice. p.5. https://pure.northampton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/75450686/The_Good_Loaf_OOCD_Evaluation_Report_Oct_2023_.pdf

Resources

This section briefly describes three resources freely available for use by all those concerned with reducing women's imprisonment and improving outcomes.

1. 'Tactical Toolkit': police response to women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system

Recognising the importance of understanding women's lived experience to deliver an effective and preventative policing response, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) has developed a 'Tactical Toolkit' whose overall aim is to:

Prevent harm and offending by improving policing's response to women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system [by] working in partnership [to] develop, implement and evaluate initiatives tailored to women's offending behaviours, needs and vulnerabilities.

The focus is on early intervention, when women first encounter police as suspects/offenders, with a view to making best use of available 'disposals' to reduce reoffending. The Toolkit further notes that:

Effective responses to women can also have much wider implications for extended family units, and potentially circuit-break intergenerational adverse childhood experiences that can contribute to subsequent criminal behaviours.

The Toolkit provides an overview of initiatives, services and resources relevant to women in contact with the criminal justice system and is arranged under the following headings:

- Diversion from the criminal justice system
- Targeted care & support
- In police custody
- Focused deterrence
- Whole system strategies.

Each entry shows the 'disposal type', for example 'out of court resolution', a summary of the initiative/service/resource and in which police force area it is located.

Further work is planned, including exploring opportunities to:

- Develop national evidence-based guidance to develop policing's response to women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system.
- Identify, develop and standardise the availability of gender-responsive early intervention and diversion services, supporting an increase in the use of 'out of court resolutions' for women.
- Support the development of the (financial) business case in partnership with agencies leading on women-centred initiatives.

The Tactical Toolkit is available [here](#). For further information contact cat.hemmings@npcc.police.uk

2. The Women's Risk Needs Assessment (WRNA)

The WRNA is a gender-responsive, trauma-informed assessment tool designed specifically for use with criminal justice-involved women. Initially developed in the US to address the limitations of traditional assessment tools, it is currently used across England and Wales by Women's Centres involved in the Effective Women's Centre Partnership.¹²⁵

An evidence and practice briefing offers practical guidance for those interested in using the WRNA to identify women's risks, needs and strengths. Drawing on a literature review and insights from practitioners and academics, it aims to support practitioners, policymakers and commissioners in understanding the role the WRNA can play in building a gender-responsive justice system.¹²⁶

One of the principal benefits of the tool is that it enables a more detailed understanding of a woman's needs and specifically seeks to uncover more clearly those issues that disproportionately impact women and their pathways into crime. This includes issues of abuse, domestic violence and sexual exploitation. In turn it can better guide the practice of the kinds of support women need.

Dr Tom McNeil, CEO, JABBS Foundation for Women and Girls

¹²⁵ The JABBS Foundations for women and girls, *Effective Women's Centres Partnership*. <https://jabbswomenandgirls.org.uk/projects/effective-womens-centres-project/>

¹²⁶ Centre for Justice Innovation. (2025). *The Women's Risk Needs Assessment (WRNA): An evidence and practice briefing*. <https://justiceinnovation.org/publications/womens-risk-needs-assessment-wrna-evidence-and-practice-briefing>

3. Women's Local Data Resource

Developed by the Prison Reform Trust, this resource informs understanding of local trends in the use of imprisonment for women in England and Wales. The intention is to encourage informed debate about the operation of the criminal justice system at a local level and the steps all decision-makers can take to reduce re-offending, protect the public and improve outcomes for women in their area.

The resource provides a detailed breakdown of the use of imprisonment for women in each local police force area in England and Wales. It includes 'at a glance' data tables summarising the use of custody between 2014 and 2024 and individual factsheets. Each factsheet provides information on recent trends in the use of immediate custody for women, regional comparisons and a breakdown of the offence types for which women are sent to prison.

Analysis of data reveals a postcode lottery of women's imprisonment, with significant variations across police force areas. This variation may be due to more coordinated and effective local strategies around supporting women in contact with the criminal justice system. In the West Midlands, for example, collaborative efforts between police, courts and women's services have led to more integrated and responsive approaches to women's offending. Analysis of court data shows the West Midlands has seen a 40% decline in the use of short sentences for women (under 12 months) in the last 10 years, compared to an overall 24% decrease in the same period.¹²⁷

The resource can be found [here](#) and on PRTs website:

<https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/womens-local-data-resource/>

¹²⁷ Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Outcomes by Offence Data Tool. Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2024. and previous versions*. See also <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/2014-24-women-sentenced-to-less-than-12-months-immediate-custody-overview-table.pdf>

Recommendations

Overall, prison does not always rehabilitate women and can sometimes make their situation worse. Many women with lived experience say that more support in the community, rather than punishment, is the key to helping women move forward and stop reoffending. When women get the right support, they do better. Stakeholder with lived experience

The following recommendations are based on what was learned during this programme and most relate to the recent report and recommendations from the Women's Justice Board (WJB).¹²⁸ With that in mind, our first recommendation is that the government should accept the report from the WJB in its entirety. Recommendation 2 concerns governance arrangements relating to the Women's Justice Reform Programme (WJRP); recommendations 3 to 7 concern strategic and operational activity relating to the WJRP; recommendation 8 concerns lived experience and applies across the criminal justice system; recommendations 9 and 10 are targeted at specific parts of the criminal justice system; and recommendation 11 concerns housing.

1. The government should accept the 15 recommendations from the WJB in their entirety (see Appendix 3) and ensure clear, measurable targets to reduce women's imprisonment and improve outcomes, underpinned by adequate funding. If any recommendations are rejected, the government should explain why.

Women's Justice Reform Programme: governance arrangements

2. The WJRP should be:
 - a. supported by strong ministerial leadership from the Ministry of Justice to ensure the active support of relevant government departments (including but not limited to the Home Office, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government and the Department of Health and Social Care). Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure departmental engagement and accountability.
 - b. properly financed, including financial support for third sector services for women and Women's Centres. An analysis of costs to determine realistic funding requirements should be undertaken, with a published plan on the allocated budget and how it is spent.
 - c. required to publish a statutory annual report on progress and lay a copy of the report before both Houses of Parliament. The report should include data on reductions in women's imprisonment, increased take-up of community alternatives to imprisonment and improved outcomes for women.

Women's Justice Reform Programme: strategic and operational activity

3. A substantial reduction in the use of remand and recall should be prioritised. A tracker measuring the impact of the Sentencing Act 2026 on outcomes for women should be developed and monitored to provide evidence of reduction in remand and recall.
4. 'Intensive support'¹²⁹ for developing local whole system approaches should include opportunities for shared learning, problem solving and training; this in turn will enhance relationship building across the local WSA 'community' and should include members of the judiciary.
5. The women's Intensive Supervision Court model should be available nationwide, underpinned by 'wraparound' support from specialist women's services and Women's Centres.
6. Existing arrangements to support early intervention, prevention and diversion away from custody should be maximised. For example, out of court resolutions,¹³⁰ the NHS women's liaison and diversion pathway and community sentence treatment requirements supported by Women's Centres.
7. Arrangements for women leaving prison, including women on recall should be integrated into the WJRP.

¹²⁸ At the time of writing, the government has not yet responded to the WJB's report or indicated whether it accepts or will implement its recommendations. This report nevertheless draws on the WJB's analysis and proposals, including the concept of a Women's Justice Reform Programme (WJRP), which we endorse as a framework for change. We recognise, however, that the WJRP has not yet been adopted by government and may not be implemented as set out by the WJB. The 11 recommendations made in this report are framed on the basis that meaningful reform requires acceptance by government of the WJB's report and full implementation.

¹²⁹ See recommendation 1b, WJRP

¹³⁰ See, for example, NPCC Tactical Toolkit, page 39

Lived experience of the criminal justice system

8. Women with lived experience of the criminal justice system should be involved as equal partners in designing services for women. Feedback mechanisms should be established that enable women to contribute to ongoing monitoring and evaluation of services, ensuring they remain responsive to women's needs.

HM Prison and Probation Service

9. HMPPS should continue to strengthen probation practice with women, including through:
 - a. The application of the Women's Policy Framework and associated operational guidance to shape the design and delivery of supervision, services and interventions for women, ensuring practice is trauma-informed, strengths-based and responsive to individual need.
 - b. Supervision approaches that enable purposeful, relational engagement with women in day-to-day practice, tailored to individual need and delivered alongside a proportionate focus on risk and public protection.
 - c. Ensuring that services and activities accessed by women on probation are gender-informed and proportionate to need, with effective use of specialist provision alongside mainstream services
 - d. Implementation of operating models that support sustainable workloads and enable relational, needs-led practice to be delivered consistently.
 - e. Strengthening the role of women's leads in each region as the primary mechanism for capability-building, sharing good practice and resolving operational challenges, and for maintaining effective links with national activity, including the WJRP.

Ministry of Justice and HM Courts and Tribunals Services

10. The Ministry of Justice and HMCTS should be proactive in engaging with the Judicial Office and the Judicial College to raise awareness of the WJRP and to explore how best information can be disseminated to the judiciary. Opportunities for gender-informed training should be explored and include women with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

Ministry of Justice, HM Prison and Probation Service and the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

These two recommendations have been taken from a joint report by London Prisons Mission, St Martin-in-the-Fields and the Prison Reform Trust, published in 2020.¹³¹ They remain relevant today.

11. The Ministry of Justice, HM Prison and Probation Service and the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government should:
 - a. develop a cross-government strategy to address the housing needs of individuals in contact with the criminal justice system as outlined in HM Inspectorate of Probation's 2020¹³² report on accommodation, with specific measures for women.
 - b. review the operation and effectiveness of the 'duty to refer' in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, particularly in relation to the housing needs of women in the criminal justice system.

We've been promising better outcomes for women [in the criminal justice system] for 20 years and all we seem to do is repeat the same promises, run a few pilots and carry on as before. Yes, some progress has been made but we need more and we need it now. We can't go on failing women – the costs for everyone, human and financial, are simply too high. Advisory group member

¹³¹ St Martin-in-the-Fields, London Prisons Mission & PRT. (2020). *Safe homes for women leaving prison*. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/old_files/FINAL%20Safe%20Homes%20Initiative%20briefing.pdf

¹³² HM Inspectorate of Probation. (2020). *Accommodation and support for adult offenders in the community and on release from prison in England*. <https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/document/accommodation-and-support-for-adult-offenders-in-the-community-and-on-release-from-prison-in-england/>

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Cover image: Andy Aitchison.

Advisory Group members

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- Dr Gemma Birkett, Co-Director of the Centre for Justice Reform, City, University of London
- The Rt Hon Lord Keith Bradley
- Kate Davies CBE, Director of Health and Justice, Armed Forces and Sexual Assault Services Commissioning, NHS England
- Dr Jenny Earle, Independent Advocate and former director of PRT's 'Transforming Lives: reducing women's imprisonment' programme
- Cat Hemmings, Senior Police Advisor – Joint Police Reform Team National Police Chief's Council
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Particular thanks to Dr Jenny Earle for her contribution and active support throughout the programme.

The programme was led by Emily Evison, Policy and Communications Officer (women's programme lead), Prison Reform Trust.

Summary of Women's Justice Board recommendations for reducing women's imprisonment¹³³

Women's Justice Reform Programme

1. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and Welsh Government should establish a two- to three-year Women's Justice Reform Programme, led jointly by a dedicated team of MOJ and Welsh Government officials, working closely with the MOJ Female Offender policy team, HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Women's Group and external stakeholders, to provide oversight for delivery of all the actions proposed in this report and to lead three projects over the next year:
 - a. Driving gender-informed implementation of the ISR and IRCC.
 - b. Intensive support for developing local whole system approaches.
 - c. Transforming the funding of women's specialist services and unlocking other sources of support for women.

Anti-racist, intersectional approach to addressing disparities

2. An anti-racist, intersectional approach should be adopted for all this work, to address disparities faced by Black, Asian, minoritised and migrant women, and those with other protected characteristics.

Early intervention, prevention and diversion

3. Introduce incentives, accountability mechanisms and support to ensure all police forces have gender-specific, trauma-informed diversion pathways for women, including a strong focus on reducing arrests and increasing deferred prosecution.
4. Improve scrutiny of, and expand referrals into, the NHS female L&D pathway to ensure consistent, effective practice everywhere.
5. Strengthen decision-making by police and prosecutors about victims of VAWG who are accused of offending and provide effective defences.
6. Address disproportionate criminalisation of women for non-payment of fines resulting from TV licence evasion, Council Tax or truancy.

Community solutions

7. Reduce remand and recall for all women through legislation and focused work under the Women's Justice Reform Programme.
8. Support effective expansion of women's ISCs.
9. Improve resettlement prospects by removing barriers to employment.
10. Conduct a rapid study into the circumstances and needs of longer-sentenced women currently in prison, to support individual sentence progression and draw out learning to reduce future imprisonment where appropriate for women accused of more serious offences.

Pregnant women and mothers

11. Legislate to end imprisonment of pregnant women in all but the most exceptional cases; embed and strengthen improvements in care of pregnant women where imprisonment cannot be avoided; develop and promote residential alternatives to custody for pregnant women for use as bail accommodation or as part of a community sentence.
12. Promote non-custodial sentencing of mothers of children under 18 through directions and awareness raising with sentencers.
13. Improve outcomes for pregnant women and mothers in contact with the CJS.

¹³³ Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Women's Justice Board report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-justice-board-report>

Young adult women

14. Develop and publish a Young Women's Strategy in the next year aimed at preventing young women's entry into the CJS and imprisonment, particularly for care-experienced, young women and victims of VAWG (including modern slavery, human trafficking and criminal or sexual exploitation), aligning strategically with youth justice reforms and including a strong focus on reducing remand and increasing access to 1:1 support, mentoring and suitable housing.
15. Provide specific health and wellbeing support for young women in contact with the CJS, including those in prison.

Despite nearly two decades of cross-party commitments, the number of women in prison has remained largely static. This report examines why progress has stalled, drawing on the insights of women with lived experience, practitioners, sentencers and partners across health and social care. It highlights the persistent overuse of remand, short sentences and recall that continue to drive women into custody unnecessarily.

Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment sets out practical steps to deliver the change that has long been promised. It calls for strong ministerial leadership, sustainable investment in women's services and a genuinely joined-up, whole system approach.

I have worked in the criminal justice system for nearly 30 years. Some of the devastating injustices women faced then, they still face now.

It was a privilege to be invited to become a member of the Women's Justice Board together with some of the most knowledgeable and experienced people in the sector. Our mission was to advise and influence government to finally enact the evidence, to walk the walk and not just talk the talk.

There are many traps that women and girls who fall into the criminal justice system face. Too often their needs are not recognised or understood early enough. Even when they are, there are not enough suitable alternatives to divert them away from custody.

One of the key recommendations made by the WJB was to strengthen the pathway towards early intervention and invest in community alternatives to custody. But responsibility for these recommendations doesn't solely sit within the Ministry of Justice. They require a whole system approach. It is only through collective will, ownership and accountability that we will see change.

The time to slope shoulders has passed. We need to make sure that every part of the justice system and beyond sees this as their collective concern and makes the unnecessary criminalisation of women a thing of the past.

Pia Sinha, CEO, Prison Reform Trust