

WHAT WORKS TO REDUCE RE-OFFENDING? A DISTINCT APPROACH TO THE MANAGEMENT OF FEMALE OFFENDERS IN THE COMMUNITY IN ENGLAND AND WALES

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I. WORKING WITH WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY

A. Summary of Policy Drivers

1. Political Focus and Priority

The principles for working with women offenders in the community in England and Wales is derived from the Corston Report¹ 2007. The report was commissioned by the Home Secretary as a response to a high number of female suicides in custody at that time. The report reviewed the experiences of women across the UK criminal justice system and made a series of fundamental recommendations, most notably, that a ‘distinct approach’ to the management of women was required in order to redress the inherent inequalities in a criminal justice system designed primarily for men. A more detailed description of the ‘Corston model’ is provided in section B below.

2. Legislation

There continues to be a strong political impetus for driving this policy area, with current Ministerial direction and leverage from a Cross Government Forum, led until recently by the Coalition Government Minister, Simon Hughes². This political driver was recently enshrined in new UK legislation, which came into force on 1st February 2015 as part of the Government’s Transforming Rehabilitation Programme (TR)³. The Offender Rehabilitation Act 2015 places a new requirement on criminal justice delivery organisations to ‘*identify any specific rehabilitation and supervision activities that are intended to meet the particular needs of female offenders*’⁴.

3. Accountability within the new structure of UK probation services

The TR programme has restructured the delivery of rehabilitative services across the probation and prison services, creating a mixed economy of public, private and third sector providers. Probation services are provided by the public sector National Probation Service (NPS), across 7 geographical divisions, and 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs)⁵.

In order to ensure that the supervision of women as a distinct group maintains a high profile within the TR change programme, specific performance criteria have been included in the new contracts for Probation Providers and Private Sector Prisons. Similarly, service level

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¹ A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System, Baroness Corston, 2007.

² Simon Hughes is currently Minister of State for Justice and Civil Liberties, April 2015.

³ Transforming Rehabilitation: A Strategy for Reform, 2013.

⁴ The Offender Rehabilitation Act 2015.

⁵ The providers who now own the 21 CRCs are a mixture of private, voluntary and a public consortia. These consortia include charities and specialist services that meet the needs of female offenders.

agreement performance targets have also been set for all probation services and public sector prisons.

B. The Corston Report 2007

As outlined, Baroness Corston's review of women in the criminal justice system was a response to a disproportionately high number of suicides by women in custody. The report investigated the experiences of women throughout all stages of the criminal justice system and identified that the reasons women enter the criminal justice system are often different to their male counterparts: for example high proportion of experiences of sexual and domestic abuse; a history of being in care; substance misuse and mental health issues. The impact of women going into custody was also identified as disproportionate for women, as women tend to be the primary carers for children rather than men.

The overall conclusion of this review was that the UK criminal justice system is a system designed for men, meaning that a different or 'distinct' approach is required to redress the imbalance and achieve equal outcomes for women. Specific recommendations were aimed at implementing the distinct approach for supervision in the community, and these recommendations have shaped development of the UK model for community based probation services.

C. UK Model – Towards a Distinct Approach

1. The 'One Stop Shop' Delivery Model

The model for the supervision of women offenders should be an holistic approach – a whole system multi-agency response to meeting the distinct needs of women, with interventions being delivered in 'one stop shop' style women's centres. The one stop shop model is part of a more co-ordinated approach to addressing women's offending related needs in the community. These are centres where women can access a range of different multi-agency services in one [safe], women only environment. These centres should be accessible to both women offenders and women at risk of offending in order to promote diversion from custody and community integration. A best practice example of a 'one stop shop' is the Asha Centre in Worcester, West Mercia⁶, where women can access the centre as part of a community based sentencing option.

2. Best Practice in the Delivery of Probation Services

Commissioning arrangements for women's services should be structured to reflect this design. Women offenders should normally be supervised by female probation officers and given the opportunity to report for probation supervision within a women only environment. Best practice examples include probation officers being seconded in to work in local women's centres enabling the offenders to report into a women only environment, which is more conducive to meeting their rehabilitative requirements. Where this is not feasible probation offices should operate specific 'women only reporting times', in order to ensure that women can report for their supervision in a safe, female only environment. This is particularly important for women who have been victims of sexual and/or domestic abuse. Probation staff should receive specific training in working with women offenders in order to understand and respond to their particular needs and underpin good quality sentencing proposals in pre-sentence reports. Probation providers should work with local sentencers to inform them about the available sentencing options and specific interventions for women, in

⁶ See www.ashawomen.org.uk and also, for further research and evidence into other alternatives to custody for women, please see the report "Equal but Different", October 2011, which highlights the work of Women's Community Projects like the Asha Centre.

keeping with Corston's recommendation that community based solutions should be the norm for non-violent women offenders.

3. Specific Criminal Justice Interventions for Women

Examples of specific interventions (sentencing options) for women in London include the Women's Programme (WP), the Women's Senior Attendance Centre (SAC) Requirement and Rehabilitation Activity Requirement (RAR). The WP is a cognitive behavioural group work programme delivered in a Probation Women's Centre and aimed at women who commit serious acquisitive type offences. The SAC is available to young adult women aged 18-24 years, who are sentenced to attend a number of hours of purposeful activity linked to their rehabilitative needs. A RAR may be similar in content to a SAC and are available in some parts of London where services have been commissioned from third sector providers of women's centres. Activities may also include mentoring either by peers or members of the community.

D. Informed Commissioning

The provision of national common data sets is essential to inform commissioning decisions and facilitate ongoing research and evaluation into what works with women in the community. All UK providers of probation services must provide common minimal data sets linked to the national offender management case record system – 'Delius'. Delius enables us to reports on the following criteria for all women:

- Offence details
- Sentence type
- Personal information
- Risk (of serious harm) level
- Court reports
- Attendance records

The national offender assessment system (OASys) provides another view of each case, identifying the specific offending related needs of each individual across 13 criteria. OASys was developed jointly by the Probation and Prison Services and is a national system for assessing the risk and needs of an offender. It is designed to:

- Facilitate the assessment of the likelihood of reconviction
- Identify and prioritise offending relating needs
- Facilitate the assessment of risk of serious harm
- Assist with the management of risk of serious harm
- Facilitate sentence planning
- Measure change during supervision

This combined information from these data sets is used nationally to commission national interventions and regionally to commission local services.

E. Evaluation

- ✓ We are still learning
- ✓ Building an evidence base to inform practice-longitudinal research with control groups.
- ✓ Independent validation

- ✓ Collation of common data sets
- ✓ Outcomes focus (not process) – 1) reduce re-offending 2) increased compliance 3) reduced custodial sentences 4) reduced harm 5) reduce cost. Times of austerity – principles of value for money and move towards pooled budgets.
- ✓ Service User Voice—what assists engagement/compliance?

F. Recommendations

This paper has identified four key recommendations in taking forward a distinct approach to the supervision of women in the community by probation services.

1. Ensuring political support is in place to drive strategy, behaviours and commissioning
2. A clear understanding of the particular experiences of women in the criminal justice system in order to develop a distinct approach to the management of women which is responsive to their needs
3. This response should be a whole system approach rooted in partnership with other agencies/providers who may be specialists in the field of women's services.
4. Building common data sets to enable evaluation of existing services/interventions and inform the commissioning of future provision.

Appendix A: The UK Probation Female Cohort⁷

Numbers of women supervised by UK probation services:

- 22,000 female offenders currently supervised
- 16,700 Community Orders (76%)
- 3,000 pre-release supervision in custody (14%)
- 2,300 post-release supervision on licence (10%)
- Approximately 800 are assessed as high risk of serious harm

Common offences types:

1. Theft and handling – 30%
2. Fraud and forgery – 17%
3. Violence against the person – 7%
4. Other summary (magistrates courts only) offences -30%

⁷ Snapshot data provided by the National Probation Service England, March 2015.