

Children, families and housing

Many contributors picked up on the issue of women being separated from their children while in prison. There are relatively few female prisons, which inevitably means women are more likely to be incarcerated further away from their families. Addressing this is particularly urgent as women are far more likely than men to be the primary carer of children.

As one contributor points out: *"If we had more community sentences we wouldn't have half these problems of women being separated from families."* BME Floating Support Worker, St Mungo's

If a woman's children are taken into care while she is in prison, this can also impact on her housing situation as local authorities are less likely to consider her as in "priority need" of housing, putting her at greater risk of homelessness on release.

The **ReUnite** project told us that 91% of children whose mothers are in prison are placed in some sort of formal or informal care while their mother is away. They outlined their approach to ensuring mothers in prison, who will be homeless upon release get the right help at the right time. They liaise with prisons, Probation and Social Services and housing providers, cultivating mutually beneficial relationships "to ensure that women and children are reunited in suitable, stable housing as quickly as possible."

In the last year we have supported 28 women into suitable, safe housing. Twenty-four of those women have been reunited with their children in a family home and four women are in single person accommodation while they work towards regaining care and custody of their children. ReUnite

Offenders, victims and empowerment

"The critical link made in the Corston Report between victimisation and women at risk of offending remains persistent. Women in Prison data reveal that 79% of their service users report experience of domestic violence and/or sexual abuse." Clinks and Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group.

"Specialist services should be gender specific and should address commercial sexual exploitation and other forms of sexual exploitation separately." Howard League for Penal Reform

The supported housing scheme for homeless women, **Bethany House** wrote of how they have joined up with **Eaves** to develop staff skills to better meet the needs of their many clients who are victims of sexual violence and involved in prostitution.

As significant as the recognition that women offenders are often also victims is, it's vital to note that the evidence also clearly illustrates that the right help at the right time must also respect women clients as active decision makers, empowering clients to help them make their own good decisions. We will let the submission from **Sova**, a community charity which helps women steer clear of crime speak for itself.

Our experience has shown us that for people to see new possibilities for themselves, they need to believe they can make good decisions....They need financial stability and the chance to work.They need a home. Quite simply, they need a second chance.

Thank you again to all who submitted. If you would like to view all the submissions in full for this theme, please visit www.rebuildingshatteredlives.org and click on the Criminal Justice System theme.

Catherine Hennessy, CEO icap and formerly Director of Development and Partnerships at Revolving Doors

St Mungo's, Griffin House,
161 Hammersmith Road, London W6 8BS
Tel: 020 8762 5500 Fax: 020 8762 5501
www.mungos.org

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Registered Charity No. 1149085 Company No. 8225808
Housing Association No. LH0279

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Rebuilding Shattered Lives

Rebuilding Shattered Lives theme round up: Women, homelessness and the criminal justice system

Led by Expert Group member Catherine Hennessy, CEO icap and formerly Director of Development and Partnerships at Revolving Doors



Catherine Hennessy,
CEO icap and formerly
Director of Development and
Partnerships at Revolving Doors

Introduction

Thanks so much to everyone who contributed to this theme with their research, evidence, and thoughts and on how to get the right help at the right time to women involved in the criminal justice system who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. This theme attracted a particularly diverse range of organisations: we are delighted to present a showcase spanning across the country and throughout the criminal justice pathway of community, police, courts, custody and probation.

One of the things that really came out from the submissions was the importance of taking a holistic approach to service provision. We were struck by the pervasive determination to understand female offenders, not as statistics nor as miscreants, but instead as *women*: often mothers, often victims but foremost as *people*, situated in society – invariably at the margins – with a broad and diverse range of interconnected problems and needs.

Thanks again to everyone who submitted evidence, and also to all those who have joined the campaign to date.

To view any of the submissions in full, see the website, www.rebuildingshatteredlives.org and click on the Criminal Justice System theme.

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Summary of Submissions

Five years on from the Corston Report

The landmark 2007 Corston Report¹ identified the need for distinct, radically different, strategic, proportionate, woman-centred and integrated approaches for women in the Criminal Justice system.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many submissions took the report and its findings as a starting point. A consensus quickly emerges from the submissions that five years on progress towards a Criminal Justice System in the image of the Corston recommendations has been disappointing.

“[M]any of the damaging effects identified [by the Corston Report] – for example the disproportionately harmful impact of prison on women and their children and the futility of short custodial sentences – remain ingrained in the system.”

Clinks and The Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group

Encouragingly, during the course of the theme there was significant movement towards the Corston’s recommendation that Government send a strong message that prison is not the right place for non-violent women offenders. As highlighted by several submissions, on 22 March 2013 the **Government** published **Strategic objectives for female offenders** which includes as one of its four key priorities, the commitment to enabling more women to be rehabilitated in the community.

Many contributions reiterated Baroness Corston’s call for more consideration of the specific needs of women offenders, with a number of organisations showcasing their services that have been developed to address this. For example **Brighton Oasis Project** featured their **Drug Rehabilitation Requirement** community sentence:

“Our services for adults are gender specific to address the underrepresentation of women in treatment services and address their specific needs. We use a holistic approach in working with women and recognise that making them feel safe is a prerequisite to change in behaviour.”

The need for more female specific provision was also raised by women who told us about their own experiences:

“We need more female bail hostels, in Luton there was a male one but none for women so it was more of a struggle to find accommodation on release [from prison].” St Mungo’s client, Outside In Women’s Group

One stop shops

Another key message from the Corston Report picked up by the submissions was the need for more integration between health, housing and criminal justice. Despite frustrations raised about lack of progress at the national level, a holistic approach, often providing a host of different services under one roof was at the root of many local solutions you proposed. For example:

“Anawim women’s centre in Balsall Heath, Birmingham... acts as a one-stop shop for women with multiple needs such as substance misuse, poverty, homelessness and domestic violence...A range of different agencies come into the centre and Probation staff are co-located reducing the need for women to attend appointments at other locations.”

¹ Home Office (2007) The Corston Report, A report by Baroness Jean Corston: A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice system <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/Corston-report-march-2007.pdf>



In particular, having access to statutory services such as Probation in a safe, female only environment where housing and other support is also available was identified as particularly beneficial. **Alana House** in **Reading** showcased their female-offender services, noting that:

“Other statutory and voluntary groups that provide these services are often uncoordinated and in different locations. For women with chaotic lifestyles, this makes it difficult to get help. Alana House is a ‘one-stop-shop’ where women can get the majority of the help they need in one place”

Community sentences

In line with Corston, many submissions suggested that more community sentences for women was a positive step away from what has in the past been only sporadic and fragmented women-specific criminal justice service provision. **Clinks and the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group** envisaged: *“a holistic, whole systems approach which addresses the specific needs of girls and women and maximizes the positive contribution of women’s community facilities.”*

They made the case that even custodial units should be community based, with holistic support provided, and that all courts should have a dedicated female support worker to inform them of the implications of custody for vulnerable female offenders and options for diversion, as recommended by Corston.

Opportunities for diversion

As highlighted by **RAPt** their submission, “female prisoners are 35 times more likely than the general population to be suffering from mental health disorders.”² The Government has recognised³ the importance of diverting people with certain mental health needs or disabilities away from custodial sentences, or where appropriate out of the criminal justice system entirely.

We heard from organisations which have developed strategies to address women offenders’ mental health needs. The mental health charity **Together** have three dedicated **Women’s Court Liaison and Outreach Projects** in **London** which proactively offer a mental health assessment to women appearing in the courts they work in, and provide information on the day which supports sentencing. They have also produced a guide for Criminal Justice professionals to help them recognise and respond to the health and wellbeing needs of women offenders.

Together also highlighted how a lack of safe and stable accommodation often means women are refused bail or struggle to comply with bail conditions. They showcased their partnership with **St Mungo’s** and **NHS Trusts** which resolves this issue by ensuring women can access appropriate accommodation on the day they appear in Court.

Designed by men for men?

Central to the Corston report was the recognition that “[w]omen have been marginalised within a system largely designed by men for men for far too long.” Many submissions highlighted the importance of tailoring provision to address the specific needs of women. However, there is clearly more work to be done.

Barnardo’s highlighted that: *“The current... form used by youth offending teams (YOTs) to assess the risk of offending for young people in the youth justice system is gender neutral. It asks no questions about the specific risks to girls who offend, or their vulnerabilities.”*

It is encouraging that the **Government’s Strategic objectives for women offenders** includes *“Tailoring the women’s custodial estate and regimes... [to] meet gender specific standards and locate women in prisons as near to their families as possible”* as a priority.

² See Ministry of Justice (2010), Green Paper Evidence Report, Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders <https://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/consultations/green-paper-evidence-a.pdf> and Hansard: 12 Jan 2012 : Column 17WS

³ Department of Health (1998) Psychiatric Morbidity Among Prisoners In England And Wales http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/Publicationsstatistics/DH_4007132