

Justice Committee

Inquiry: Rehabilitation and Resettlement

Submission from Changing Lives

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Changing Lives is a national charity with around 100 projects across England, supporting people facing challenges such as homelessness, addiction, contact with the criminal justice system, sexual exploitation, long-term unemployment and more.
- 1.2. We deliver the following services for women in the criminal justice system:
 - 1.2.1. Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) in Northumbria, Cleveland, South Yorkshire, West Midlands, Warwickshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire. We provide a holistic service for women through the gate and on community or suspended sentences.
 - 1.2.2. Support to women in prison related to accommodation; finance, benefit and debt; and social inclusion, family and significant others. We also recently took on a contract to support unsentenced women. We currently work in HMP Low Newton, HMP Foston Hall and HMP Drake Hall.
 - 1.2.3. Conditional caution schemes in Northumbria, West Midlands and Nottinghamshire, which provides early intervention to prevent reoffending and escalation to court.
 - 1.2.4. The Women's Enhanced Support Service in Stoke on Trent, funded by the Ministry of Justice Innovation Fund to provide intensive support to women who have experience of using the psychoactive substance 'monkey dust'.

2. Rehabilitation in prison

- 2.1. Short Sentences
 - 2.1.1. Short custodial sentences hinder rehabilitation and resettlement. Women risk losing their house, job and children without sufficient time in custody to address the reasons behind their offending.
- 2.2. Remand
 - 2.2.1. Prior to services being commissioned in September 2024, support for unsentenced women was limited. Staff described them as the 'forgotten group' in prison despite having many of the same resettlement needs as those sentenced.
 - 2.2.2. The increasing overuse of remand for women disproportionately affects racially minoritised and migrant women. Recent Ministry of Justice statistics¹ found that, while white prisoners make up 73% of the sentenced population, they make up only 66% of the remand population.

¹ [Offender management statistics quarterly: April to June 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

- 2.2.3. Women on remand face uncertainty around their release date, complicating housing arrangements. Our team works with women to help maintain their existing housing where applicable - they can continue to claim housing benefit for up to 52 weeks when they are in prison but unsentenced, but often someone needs to get in touch with the landlord on their behalf to inform them that the property will be empty but assure them that the rent will be paid. For women expected to be homeless upon release the team can inform the council prior to a woman's court date to advise that she might be presenting as homeless on that day.

2.3. Prison-based resettlement support

- 2.3.1. It can be difficult balancing the need for both rehabilitation and resettlement activities within the prison regime, especially for those on short sentences. Housing is often the highest resettlement priority, but prison staff often undervalue the importance of things like housing assessments meaning it can be difficult for staff to get hold of women to complete resettlement activities.
- 2.3.2. Where possible it is good practice for community workers to have face-to-face engagement with women prior to release, but this is difficult when people are imprisoned out of area – a challenge which disproportionately affects women.
- 2.3.3. Examples of good practice:
 - 2.3.3.1. HMP Low Newton introduced resettlement markets connecting women with services such as homelessness teams and drug and alcohol services. These are also open to unsentenced women who have their court date within the next 12 weeks.
 - 2.3.3.2. HMP Low Newton holds pre-release meetings at 8, 4 and 2 weeks prior to release between agencies to clarify roles. This takes place within the prison so the women are allowed to attend if they wish.
 - 2.3.3.3. DWP staff support people to ensure housing benefit continues to be paid where applicable (i.e. during short sentences or when on remand) and applying for Universal Credit prior to release. Previously people would not be able to apply for Universal Credit until the day of release and would then have to wait several weeks before they received their first payment, or otherwise immediately fall into debt if they took an advance payment loan.

2.4. Day of release

- 2.4.1. The day of release can be a particularly challenging time for women and the support provided can make or break their resettlement journey.
- 2.4.2. Many women must travel long distances via public transport due to being imprisoned out of area or due to a lack of approved premises for women – there are none for women in the North East with the nearest being Leeds. Women then have to attend multiple appointments which may be in several locations, sometimes even in different towns and cities.

- 2.4.3. While some will go the extra mile, staff have sometimes witnessed a lack of flexibility from other agencies. For example, one woman supported by Changing Lives was released on 23rd December. She had been given accommodation over an hour's travel on public transport from her probation office. Changing Lives asked her probation officer to meet the woman at her accommodation as it would be difficult for her to make that journey in addition to all her other appointments, but they said no as all staff were office-based that day due to the proximity to Christmas.
- 2.4.4. Meeting women at the gate can be particularly beneficial for those are at risk of exploitation, as perpetrators will often also be waiting for them on the day of release.
- 2.4.5. We recommend greater provision of support to help women travel to and attend appointments, and greater flexibility and co-location of appointments.
- 2.4.6. An example of good practice is the 'departure lounge' model used by several prisons. These are located in or near the prison site and allow people to access several services all in one place including probation, housing, benefits, and addiction and recovery services.

3. Rehabilitation in the community

3.1. Caseloads

- 3.1.1. High caseloads in probation and commissioned services limit the quality and quantity of support. As one staff member described it, "Good old-fashioned rehabilitation has been diluted".
- 3.1.2. Programmes like our Women's Enhanced Support Service (WESS), which provide intensive support with small caseloads, are rare but effective. Many women are firmly entrenched in criminal lifestyles or have experienced institutionalisation as a result of their custodial sentence. It is unrealistic to expect them to adjust easily to life in the community, yet they are often not offered the intensity of support that they require. The WESS is still in its early stages but we are seeing positive results particularly around building good relationships with women who often struggle to engage with services that are not suited to their needs.

3.2. Gender-informed practice

- 3.2.1. The predominance of men in the criminal justice system means women's unique needs are often overlooked. Some probation teams have staff who specialise in supporting women, but this is not the case everywhere. We recommend workforce development which focuses on gender specific specialisms.

3.3. Joint working

- 3.3.1. Our experience is that joint working with other agencies, particularly probation, is generally good and works best when staff are co-located (e.g. in community hubs).

- 3.3.2. Services like Changing Lives often bridge gaps between agencies. When agencies attempt to defer responsibility to others, we can intervene to minimise the negative impact felt by the women. Due to funding pressures, services will often do exactly what they are commissioned to do and not much more, no matter how much they might like to. If a woman does not quite fit the criteria, she is denied support. There is a clear need for more flexible funding which can be responsive to the changing needs of women.

3.4. Recall

- 3.4.1. This section focuses on recall, but many comments also apply to breach of community or suspended sentences.
- 3.4.2. Short recalls (i.e. 14 days) are ineffective, offering neither sufficient incentive to comply with community conditions nor meaningful time for rehabilitation in custody. Some women recalled to two weeks or less fall through the gap for discharge grants, meaning they are released from custody with nothing.
- 3.4.3. Women are often recalled too quickly, without allowing them sufficient chances in the community when things go wrong. For example, as discussed in section 2.4, there is a lot of pressure placed on women on the day of release from prison yet, if they fail to attend their probation appointment, they may be recalled straightaway.
- 3.4.4. A failure to comply with licence conditions is often seen as a failure on the part of the women, when in many cases it is a systemic failure. Women are set up to fail and then punished for not coping in a system that is not designed to meet their needs. We talk more about specific issues related to housing and addiction in sections 3.6 and 3.7.
- 3.4.5. Prisons should not be used as a place of safety but, while community services remain inadequate, returning to custody is sometimes the best option to allow women to stabilise their lives. Examples of inadequate community services we particularly want to highlight are inappropriate housing with a lack of gender-specific, trauma-informed options; long waiting lists and barriers for mental health support; and insufficient funding for intensive one-to-one support for those who need it. In the long-term, community services need significant investment so that prison is not the only place that women can get the right support but, until that support is there, recall may remain necessary for some women.
- 3.4.6. We recommend maintaining the option of recalling people to custody but only in the most serious of circumstances – e.g. when someone has committed a serious further offence or their risk to others has increased.
- 3.4.7. The first stage when someone breaks a condition of their licence, except in the most serious of circumstances, should be to increase the level of support rather than the level of punishment. For example, if someone is not complying with conditions of staying at a certain location, alternative accommodation should be explored (e.g. with more intensive support or in a different area).

- 3.4.8. There needs to be a shift from blaming people for not engaging with services, to looking at whether the services are actually accessible and fit for purpose. If the reasons for people not engaging with services or complying with conditions are linked to the services themselves or the wider system, it is not right for people to be punished for that.

3.5. Voluntary engagement

- 3.5.1. Services often have to end support once the mandatory period of supervision or community order has ended. Women are often only assigned a few rehabilitation activity requirement days to work with Changing Lives which limits the amount of meaningful work that can be done. A key part of our work is developing trusted relationships with the women which takes time. It is often just as they are making progress that the sentence ends and the support also has to cease. While staff put exit plans in place, the feedback we often receive is that the women would rather work with us, at least for a while longer. This unfortunately is not usually possible as staff need to be able to maintain manageable caseload sizes.
- 3.5.2. While more time to work with women would be beneficial, we are not advocating for excessive increases to the mandatory days. We instead recommend that funding is provided to allow commissioned services to continue to work with the women who wish to for a time after their sentence or supervision period ends. While we still could not hold women in the service forever, this would allow us to work at the women's pace rather than one decided for them.

3.6. Housing

- 3.6.1. Nationally there is a shortage of suitable housing for women which can be highly detrimental to rehabilitation.
- 3.6.2. Women are often only deemed to be priority need for housing if they are really vulnerable (e.g. severe mental ill health, domestic abuse). To try and prove themselves vulnerable, women have to retell their whole life just to try to get a temporary room in a hotel. If they are turned down by the council this reinforces the idea that nobody cares about them and can have negative impacts on future engagement with both housing teams and other services.
- 3.6.3. Community Accommodation Service Tier 3 (CAS3) – temporary accommodation for people leaving prison – is generally good but there is not enough of it. People can only stay in CAS3 accommodation for up to 84 days but it would be beneficial if there was also longer-term housing provision targeted at people leaving prison. Given the other challenges in securing accommodation, a stay in CAS3 can sometimes just delay homelessness rather than properly tackling it. The box may be ticked for ensuring people do not leave prison into homelessness, but they are still at risk of becoming homeless or having to enter unsuitable accommodation once the 84 days are up.
- 3.6.4. CAS3 generally works best for people with lower-level needs but not for women whose needs are more complex.

- 3.6.5. Ideally women should be offered a range of housing options with flexibility to move between them as their needs develop. People leaving prison are often experiencing institutionalisation so a careful balance must be struck between not further entrenching that while also acknowledging the reality of what people can manage immediately following release. We recommend a staggered approach to supporting people out of institutionalisation, starting in prison itself and empowering women towards independence.
- 3.6.6. The reality is that many women we support have limited options, and the few options that are available are not fit for purpose. As one staff member described it “There are places we would only send a woman if we were desperate – but sometimes we are desperate. Some women perceive the available accommodation as so awful that going back to prison is the preferable option. This is not showing that prison is ‘easy’ but that life in the community is often too hard.
- 3.6.7. Where gender-specific, trauma-informed accommodation does exist, women in the criminal justice system are often excluded due to their criminal record, addiction or mental health. It is precisely these experiences which mean they need such an environment, yet they are denied access. Sometimes the only option that women meet the criteria for are large mixed-sex hostels which one staff member described as going “straight back into chaos”. In these environments it is easy to be drawn back into previous cycles of behaviour and old associates, including those who may be abusing and exploiting the women.
- 3.6.8. Another area where women find their options limited is the local authority they are housed in. Many will prefer to return to their previous local authority, particularly if they have family and friends there, but many women would benefit from starting afresh in a new area, especially if they are escaping abuse and exploitation. This can be difficult due to requirements to have a local connection, therefore we recommend developing pathways between probation and local authority housing teams to make it easier for women to be housed in different local authorities if that would be beneficial for their desistance from crime.
- 3.6.9. Even when women are offered suitable accommodation, it can be difficult for them to adjust. This is why wraparound support and a flexible approach are vital. For example, when beds are left vacant it is common to evict the women to make the bed available for someone who will actually use it. While this may be a pragmatic solution to a lack of bed spaces, it can be a massive setback to the person who has been evicted once they feel ready to return. We advocate for offering multiple chances where possible, rather than excluding people as soon as they fail to engage on the terms set for them.

3.7. Addiction

- 3.7.1. Many women use drugs or alcohol to self-medicate to deal with unresolved trauma. This contributes to the housing challenges described in the previous

section as many supported housing providers will not take those in active addiction.

- 3.7.2. Transition from custody to community needs to be managed better for those experiencing addiction. We still see women not getting their prescription (e.g. methadone), especially if they are being released out of area. We have also had women miss an appointment with their local addiction and recovery service only to be told that the next available appointment is not for two weeks.

4. Non-custodial sentences

4.1. Out of court disposals

- 4.1.1. We advocate for diversion from the criminal justice system at the earliest opportunity. Not only does this reduce the pressure and financial costs for courts, prisons and probation, but it can produce better outcomes for women and their families. We have seen positive results from schemes aimed at women given conditional cautions and recommend wider rollout of such schemes with appropriate funding.
- 4.1.2. This should include support for offences initially dealt with as civil matters such as non-attendance at school and non-payment of council tax or TV licenses. These are offences that disproportionately affect women. The vast majority of these cases that reach court result in fines, but we still see several women who end up in prison due to non-payment of fines which only further compounds the issue.

4.2. Bail support schemes

- 4.2.1. There are significant gaps in support at different points in the criminal justice system. There is a postcode lottery for out of court diversion schemes and, even when they do exist, not everyone will fit the criteria. There is limited provision between charge and sentencing or if a lower-level disposal such as discharge or fine is given.
- 4.2.2. We therefore recommend the national rollout of a bail support scheme which could support someone from the point of arrest through to charge, conviction and sentence. Not only do such schemes reduce the risk of reoffending through early and sustained intervention, but they also benefit the sentencing process as it can be demonstrated whether a person has successfully engaged in the community, risks are better understood and needs are already in the process of being addressed.