

# RR3 Special Interest Group (SIG) on a 'Whole Systems Approach' for women in contact with the criminal justice system

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## About

The [Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group \(RR3\)](#) provides the key interface between the voluntary sector, and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), in order to increase mutual understanding and build a strong and effective partnership. The group is made up of senior leaders from the voluntary sector and meets quarterly with civil servants to provide guidance and feedback on MoJ policy developments.

The RR3 convenes Special Interest Groups (SIGs) to advise on specific areas of policy and practice as the need arises. This SIG, on a 'Whole Systems Approach' for women in contact with the criminal justice system, follows the establishment of the Women's Justice Board (WJB) and the accompanying Partnership Delivery Group (PDG), and was instituted in order to provide feedback to both bodies from the perspective of the voluntary sector working in criminal justice.

This group's [terms of reference](#) sits alongside [the terms of reference for the main RR3](#).

## The Special Interest Group:

This report's findings are drawn from an online roundtable meeting of SIG members, comprising 44 individuals drawn from voluntary and statutory organisations with expertise and experience in supporting women through 'whole system approaches' (WSAs).

The session heard evidence from three experts involved in delivering WSAs for women in Avon and Somerset, York and North Yorkshire and London. Participants then explored the current landscape of WSAs for women across England and Wales and identified the key elements that contribute to success. We sought to include evidence from all four government funded WSA pilots (grant-funded by MoJ and run by Police and Crime Commissioners in Avon and Somerset, Kent, West Mercia and Thames Valley) but were not able to access published findings. Following the deliberations of the roundtable and analysis of those discussions, we did receive some information from the MoJ and have provided this in an Annex to this report. See page 18. We understand that a Rapid Evidence Review of the impact of women-specific WSAs is being conducted and findings from this will be published in the future.

The findings from SIG discussions have been distilled to establish a set of recommendations to support the implementation of WSAs, on a both a national and local level, that recognise the variations in local geographical, social and economic contexts.

## Defining a 'Whole Systems Approach':

In line with the previous government's policy, set out in the [2018 Female Offender Strategy](#), we define an effective WSA for women as delivering gender-responsive, holistic support through joined-up local service provision, which is:

- Locally led
- Partnership-focused
- Evidence-based

In our approach, we also drew on a model of a WSA that Clinks uses to visually represent the points in a woman's journey across the various parts of the criminal justice system and includes the need for evidence building through research and evaluation:



The [Concordat on women in or at-risk of contact with the criminal justice system](#), published in January 2021 was also considered in our deliberations. It provides a framework for joint working at national and local levels to improve the support and outcomes for women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system. It was intended to encourage partnerships between agencies, build on existing successful arrangements, and promote the use of gender- and trauma-informed approaches to reduce the use of custody and increase effective community sentences. However, there were no resources to support implementation, and progress appears limited.

As mentioned above, we were unable to directly review specific learning from all four of the 2022 government funded WSA pilots, but we did hear about the work in Avon and Somerset from the [Nelson Trust](#) and have drawn on this in our findings.

This report outlines findings and recommendations from the SIG roundtable, split into four main sections.

Section One examines three WSAs and their common factors. Section Two explores additional critical success factors, as well as the challenges and barriers to delivering WSAs. Section Three highlights the importance of evaluation and impact, and Section Four provides collaboratively developed recommendations for effective WSA implementation.

## Section One: Mapping the landscape

The SIG heard from four organisations supporting the delivery of a whole systems approach in different areas:

- The Nelson Trust in Avon and Somerset
- Women in Prison in London
- Advance in London
- The St Giles Trust in York and North Yorkshire

Their presentations set out the key elements underpinning the WSAs in each region. Many of these elements are contained within the approaches of all of these regions, which we have summarised as follows:

- Support encompassing each stage of a woman's interaction with the criminal justice system, including those 'at risk' of interaction with the system, through prevention, early intervention, community and custodial sentences, and subsequent support on release
- End-to-end, gender-specific, trauma-responsive services provided by specialist community organisations
- Services meet the needs of women across a spectrum of need areas, with most services co-located at women's centres or community hubs accessible to all
- Access to gender-specific substance use treatment pathways and mental health support
- Access to women-only, safe, secure accommodation and tenancy support
- Lived-experience expertise informing service design and embedded in support models

We provide further detail on elements critical to the success of WSAs in the critical success factors and challenges and barriers section.

### **Avon and Somerset:**

The Nelson Trust is the lead delivery partner in the MoJ grant-funded WSA pilot across Avon and Somerset. They operate women's centres throughout the Southwest and Wales, delivering gender- and trauma-informed community and prison-based services supporting women at every stage of the criminal justice system, from prevention to long-term reintegration. These services, commissioned by central government, local authorities, trusts, foundations, small grants and individual donors, address a wide range of needs and enable strong, co-located multi-agency collaboration with governance, strategy and operational partnerships at their core.

The Office for the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) leads the strategic partnership, embedding the WSA within governance structures and promoting its wider adoption. With OPCC support, the Nelson Trust has enhanced the regional understanding of a gender-informed approach and demonstrated the positive impact this has on the outcomes of women in the criminal justice system.

Through the pilot, regional WSA leadership has been established and embedded across the system. Locating this leadership within the VCSE sector rather than statutory bodies has enabled a broader, cross-sector focus, rooted in lived experience and practical insight into the barriers women face, many of which lie outside criminal justice services. The pilot has explored intersections, such as homelessness and substance use, showing how gender-informed responses in these areas can reduce reoffending.

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Operationally, the Nelson Trust applies WSAs at all justice system touchpoints, providing early intervention, continuity of care, and supportive professional relationships, identified by women as previously lacking. MoJ funding has enabled regional coordination, promoting system change and whole-system thinking. Avon and Somerset's model sits within the Local Criminal Justice Board, though local accountability needs strengthening.

### London:

In London, the WSA follows the [London Blueprint \(2019-2022\)](#) for a Whole Systems Approach to Women in Contact with the Criminal Justice System, led by the [Mayor's Office for Police and Crime \(MOPAC\)](#).

The Blueprint sets out the joint commitment of criminal justice agencies and the wider voluntary sector to recognise the common underlying drivers of crime for women, including domestic abuse, sexual abuse and coercion, trafficking and exploitation, poverty, homelessness, intersectional discrimination, mental health needs, and problematic substance use.

In written evidence to the [Justice Committee Inquiry on Women in Prison in 2021](#), MOPAC [outlined the benefits of this approach and pointed to the importance of investing in credible service providers](#), to which the police, sentencers and the National Probation Service can refer women. The benefits of this approach in London have led to MOPAC now co-commissioning wraparound female offender services with the National Probation Service.

The £5 million invested by MOPAC in women's specialist service providers enables organisations such as [Advance](#) and [Women in Prison](#) to deliver these services using a combination of women's centres and community hubs and sub-contract with multiple smaller, specialist partners, including [Clean Break](#), [Housing for Women](#), [Working Chance](#), [Hibiscus](#), [Safe ground](#), [Inspirit](#), [Birth Companions](#) and [Hearts and Mind](#), to ensure that all cohorts of women and girls can receive support appropriate to their needs.

Services are available at all touchpoints in the criminal justice system and are offered to women and girls deemed to be 'at risk' as well as those who are charged/convicted. They include:

- Comprehensive 1:1 support and advocacy
- Wraparound support from subcontracted and partner agencies
- Group programme support
- Continuity of care
- Support delivered in safe and welcoming spaces and remote support

These comprehensive operational partnership arrangements are underpinned by the strategic governance and multi-agency working structures provided through MOPAC's leadership, and alongside commissioned services, ensure an effective model for delivery of the WSA across Greater London.

### York and North Yorkshire:

In York and North Yorkshire, despite the absence of specific funding to support the development of a WSA for women, statutory and voluntary sector partners have come together and secured commitment and 'buy in' from key agencies, including: York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority, City of York Council, North Yorkshire Council, HMPPS, Public Health, Department of Work and Pensions, and voluntary sector partners such as: [St Giles Trust](#) HMPPS Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) team; [Changing Lives](#); commissioned substance use providers ([Waythrough](#) and [Change Grow Live](#)); Domestic Abuse service (IDAS); Custody Diversion teams; Sexual Health; Youth Justice, Children and Young People's services.

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Following the strategic approach taken in London and Wales, a 'Blueprint' was created and agreed by strategic leaders across the partnership, with quarterly meetings, Key Priority (Task and Finish) Groups initiated and led by specialists and some gender-specific community provision have been established, including substance use pathways, trauma responsiveness and safer accommodation. The York Women's Wellness Centre, run by [Changing Lives](#), provides a 'one stop shop' safe women-only space in the city for multi-agency professionals to co-locate.

A key mechanism for offering support to women in small towns and villages scattered across a large rural county, is the deployment of the Liberty Links mobile service, using two mini-bus vehicles purchased with Combined Authority funding in alignment with addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG) priorities. The buses tour different areas to offer a 'drop in' space for women to stop by for hot drinks, snacks, advice guidance and support. Funding from the Combined Authority also provides for 0.5FTE staff per van.

These services are open to all women and provide an important mechanism for ensuring those with particular vulnerabilities, including risk of criminalisation, can receive early help. Once again, underpinning the success of these services is the commitment of a wide range of key stakeholders and strategic partners.

## **Section Two: Critical success factors and challenges & barriers**

A number of critical success factors in the delivery and implementation of WSAs were highlighted during the course of the SIG's work, in addition to elements set out in the three regions, covered. These are summarised below, followed by a summary of the challenges and barriers to successful WSA work.

### **Summary of critical success factors:**

#### ***Structures:***

Establishing appropriate structures to deliver on WSAs was deemed as essential. Such structures should incorporate a lead organisation, with a clear co-ordination role to ensure effective communication and information sharing between all relevant agencies. The lead organisation should have a form of representation across multiple parts of the system in order to identify common themes and to avoid duplication of service delivery. This must all be supported by accessible and streamlined data systems, combined with joint working arrangements across agencies.

Additionally, there should be accompanying governance structures that support and monitor system-level activity that both promote transformative approaches and hold partners accountable for delivery. These governance structures should be underpinned by strategic objectives, linked to areas beyond criminal justice, such as public health, poverty and children and families.

#### ***Strategic leadership:***

Visible strategic leadership, across all key agencies, and board-level commitment are critical for delivery and accountability with robust governance flowing from senior leader commitment to improving outcomes for women and girls.

Leadership should be based on parity between voluntary and statutory organisations so that both can play their part in a WSA. In too many cases, voluntary sector partners are expected to perform key roles within a WSA, such as providing the pivotal women-centred, trauma-informed support that is essential to success, without appropriate (or any) funding.

#### ***Accountability:***

Accountability should be driven through existing strategic boards, (e.g. Reducing Reoffending Boards, Local Criminal Justice Boards) rather than creating new structures and embedding WSA for women into overall planning and progress monitoring. Where strategic boards already exist, WSAs for women should be incorporated via sub-boards so that lines of accountability are created.

#### ***Cross-agency support:***

Local PCC support has often been decisive in whether a WSA has been successful, and engagement from other public services, including police, probation, prisons and voluntary sector women's specialist is also essential. Other key strategic partners in non-criminal justice areas of service delivery are equally important but can often be difficult to engage. This includes local authorities, combined authorities, health services and public health, Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care, housing and community services, DWP, and education.

There must be an ability to work across a region and map women's journeys through all points of the criminal justice system (including at point of arrest through to prison release into community). The ability to use strategic review to identify gaps in support and systemic blockages (e.g. in access to housing and adopts solutions-focused methods to drive change) is also essential.

Senior leaders across these areas should be encouraged to participate in WSAs by criminal justice partners making the case for holistic approaches and showing how commitment to a WSA for women can contribute to achieving cross-cutting priorities. For example, demonstrating how improving health and wellbeing for women in or at risk of entering the criminal justice system can create positive outcomes for children, families and communities, thereby reducing overall costs to the state.

### **Multi-agency partnership working:**

We have already noted the importance of senior strategic buy-in from key public bodies, including PCCs, Mayors and combined authorities, public health, DWP, education, social care, alongside police, probation and prisons. Senior leaders in all relevant agencies must demonstrate commitment to multi-agency working at strategic and operational level through participation at all levels in the structures set up to establish and monitor progress of a WSA. This entails committing staff and resources and including WSA as standing agenda item on all relevant boards and delivery groups.

Senior leaders should identify champions in all agencies to drive delivery and provide cross-agency training for all professionals (across both the statutory and voluntary sector) in WSA principles and trauma-informed approaches. This approach reduces duplication, strengthens capacity, and lowers reoffending.

The importance of structures that enable strategic governance and accountability for progress have already been referenced but equally important, are structures that enable effective cross-agency operational work.

All partners should commit to developing a multi-agency delivery plan that is based on activity to achieve strategic objectives. Clear lines of accountability for delivering actions under each objective should be agreed with lead agencies/professionals identified. Models of work that support effective joint working should be agreed. Our discussion groups heard about examples, including:

- Co-location at numerous women's centres of various services including health, children and adult social care, housing advice and tenancy management support – which is intrinsically linked to enabling women to regain custody of their children
- Co-location of probation and Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) providers, many of which are voluntary sector specialist women's organisations, in women's centres in North Wales and Cornwall women's centre
- 'Female Concentrator' model operating in Manchester – whereby some probation staff have a majority of women on their caseload enabling expertise in gendered working to develop. However, this can be undermined when cross-system commitment lags behind – to be successful it requires all partner agencies to commit to the approach.
- Communication and links with local Family hubs and schools/nurseries, and other local services for children and families
- Work to engage with broader support services, e.g. Live Well – a scheme in Greater Manchester involving staff from DWP supporting people who are long-term unemployed and have mental health issues

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### ***Shared Outcomes Frameworks:***

Shared outcomes frameworks (housing, health, family, employment) enable clear evaluation and can be used to provide evidence of impact. This will encourage reinvestment and sustainability of WSA models.

### ***Funding:***

Services are commissioned through a variety of mechanisms, including MoJ, HMPPS, PCC, Mayoral & Combined Authority contracts and grants, with co-commissioning arrangements across some areas. WSAs should include funding to provide regional strategic coordination to supports system-level work around gender-responsivity. It is important to note that current WSA services are not all fully funded and are often subsidised through other contracts.

WSAs cannot succeed without ring-fenced, long-term funding which provides full cost recovery and core costs for the specialist women's organisations. Current reliance on short-term grants/commissioning creates competition between VCSE organisations and undermines sustainability.

### ***Data and evidence:***

Data to assess and accurately calculate costs, using models based on volumes of women (and families) predicted to benefit from WSAs must be captured and shared between agencies. Available evidence on costs and benefits, such as in the [Women's Budget Group 2025 report](#), should be used with support from HM Treasury made available to carry out costing work effectively. The costs and benefits of developing a WSA in each area can then be used to inform strategic planning.

### ***Alignment with health and care system priorities:***

Local strategic planning should also align closely with wider health and care system priorities. Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) and Integrated Care Partnerships (ICPs) play a central role in setting local Health and Care Plans, which outline how physical and mental health, substance use, and social care services will be commissioned and delivered across each system. Embedding WSA principles within these plans ensures that the needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system are recognised as part of mainstream population health priorities. This alignment supports joint commissioning, improves continuity of care on release, and strengthens the sustainability of WSA models through shared accountability and pooled resources across justice, health, and community partners.

### ***Embedding lived experience expertise:***

Feedback and expertise derived from lived experience experts are central to building effective WSA models and funding lived experience involvement is critical. Investment is needed to remove barriers (transport, mental health, childcare) to meaningful participation. Commissioning models must include resources for this important work and can be supported through locally pooled funding and collaborative governance.

Discussions confirmed the central importance of embedding lived experience expertise across all levels of WSA, including within strategic governance and accountability mechanisms. We heard that there is often a gap in representation for people with lived experience on strategic boards. For WSA to be effective this must be addressed.

Lived experience expertise is essential in ensuring that race, culture, and language are considered across all areas of WSA. This requires funding for grassroots and by-and-for organisations. We heard directly from women with lived experience of imprisonment and community sentences. They emphasised the value of engagement with women who are 'harder to reach' and stressed the need to identify and support these women to have their voices heard. There are models of engagement that enable this at each end of the spectrum, for example, through lived experience peer mentoring in custodial environments, and via early intervention support for girls in children's homes.

Lived experience input is strongest where women are involved in structured work including task & finish groups, scoping exercises, and projects to inform service design. Women's centres and voluntary sector partners, such as Together Women's "Women's Voice" groups and national initiatives facilitated by the Agenda Alliance, are often best placed to create safe, supportive environments for women to share views. All WSA's will be improved through the ambition to develop co-production methods that genuinely take account of women and girls lived experience expertise.

All partners should be aware of the risks of tokenism and exploitation of those with lived experience expertise. Mitigating these risks should include support to engage but also payment for lived experience contributions, demonstrating that women's expertise is valued. Messages from lived experience experts should be taken seriously and amplified at all stages of planning, design, delivery and evaluation of WSAs.

***The commissioning of small, specialist community organisations:***

Despite underfunding and closures, small, specialist community organisations — often led by and for Black, minoritised, and migrant women — remain central to advocacy, research, and supporting women's rights. They embody best practice through trauma-informed, anti-racist, intersectional approaches. More opportunities to commission these organisations, especially through grant funding and in partnership with larger women's voluntary sector organisations, is essential if local WSAs are to effectively meet the needs of racially minoritised women.

**Challenges and barriers:**

***Multi-agency partnership working:***

Participants highlighted existing gaps and areas in need of improvement regarding multi-agency partnership working. We were told that:

- In some areas, mental health services were difficult to engage in multi-agency work, and it was suggested that mental health service providers could benefit from understanding what was available through women's centres. This could help build stronger partnerships.
- There remain variations in practice across different local authorities, with some pockets of excellent practice in some London boroughs but not in others.
- There is a need for communication between local authorities to build understanding about the benefits of building a WSA, particularly where resources are scarce or in areas where there is less buy in.
- Lambeth was noted as being highly supportive of the WSA and it was felt that if Lambeth could act as a 'champion', communicating the benefits of the approach, this might encourage other local authorities to commit.

***Intersectionality of race and gender:***

Discussion groups highlighted the need for WSA models to effectively identify and address the needs of Black, minoritised and migrant women. Otherwise, there is a risk that their intersectional issues can end up being erased.

We know that Black women face particular discrimination and disadvantage at every point of contact within the criminal justice system – police; courts and sentencing; probation/community sentences; prisons; and release.

Hibiscus reports that “A lot of the women [they] work with describe feeling threatened and intimidated by the police. Women also tell [them that] police officers have used racist remarks towards them when being arrested.”

In an article published in Prison Service Journal, Katy Swaine Williams et al. provide evidence of structural oppression of Black, minoritised and migrant women in, or at risk of, contact with the criminal justice system. Official data clearly shows that this cohort of women are disproportionately represented and disadvantaged at every stage of the UK criminal justice system.

- In 2022–23, Black women were 1.4 times more likely than white women to be arrested.
- Gypsy/Irish Traveller women make up 7% of the female prison population (vs <1% in the general population).
- Over 15% of remanded female prisoners in 2025 were migrant women.

The authors argue that these figures reflect structural oppression rooted in racism, sexism, class inequality, xenophobia, and religious discrimination, all compounded by social and economic exclusion. The result is that many women are pushed into contact with the justice system through lack of protection, poverty, and mistrust of authorities.

Discussions in our groups highlighted the importance of recognising the distinct experiences of Black, minoritised and migrant women, and those facing multiple disadvantage. Concerns were raised about the lack of disaggregated data on race and gender, and the need for more inclusive approaches to policy and commissioning.

There is a commitment from the voluntary sector to ensure these perspectives are not lost and to work collectively to address gaps. However, those working in this area are disappointed in the current lack of focus in policy development, and have raised several concerns:

- Generic WSA models fail to reflect the needs of Black, minoritised, migrant women and their intersectional issues get erased.
- Existing Government strategies, including the 2018 Female Offender Strategy (FOS) and Lammy Review (2017), acknowledge disparities but lack implementation, investment, and measurable goals.
- Previous work undertaken by the Ministry of Justice through the Female Offender Minority Ethnic (FOME) working group made some progress (e.g., training, guidance for staff), but action remains fragmented and limited.
- Police and CPS efforts have been inconsistent, and discrimination in policing and prosecutions persists.
- Immigration enforcement continues to take precedence over women’s safety and rehabilitation, leaving migrant women more vulnerable to exploitation and criminalisation.
- Revelations of racism and misogyny in UK policing, highlighted by the murders of Sarah Everard, Nicole Smallman, Bibaa Henry, and the Casey Review of the Metropolitan Police, underscore institutional failures and reinforce women’s mistrust of law enforcement.

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The persistent inequalities faced by Black, minoritised, and migrant women in the criminal justice system represent systemic, structural oppression. Meaningful progress therefore demands:

- A cross-government intersectional strategy
- Investment in and collaboration with women's specialist services
- Cultural and systems change across justice and immigration institutions
- Anti-racist, feminist leadership that centres women's lived experiences

Without this, discrimination, criminalisation, and harm will continue. Policy and commissioning must explicitly recognise race, gender, and migration status to ensure inclusive approaches.

## **Section Three: Evaluation and Evidence**

Key to demonstrating impact will be WSA systems that include joint targets, shared metrics, and accountability mechanisms across agencies. This will strengthen the ability to capture evidence of impact.

Each WSA should have a dedicated WSA Coordinator role that sits across partners. The role would hold the delivery plan, manage data-sharing agreements, and keep lived experience embedded. There are various models for delivering the role but something that is funded jointly by key strategic partners could help build the evidence base and develop a proof of concept.

Importantly, WSAs have the potential to meet strategic objectives across a range of public policy priorities, not just those focused on crime and justice. Adopting a shared outcomes framework that goes beyond simply reoffending is essential to measuring progress against broader outcomes. Measures of success and data collection should include housing stability, health engagement, family relationships, and employment, measured at agreed checkpoints. If every partner signs up to report on these same indicators, they can be held accountable and demonstrate a clearer case for reinvestment. Evidence produced in this way will increase buy-in and secure commitment from a broad range of stakeholders.

Gathering evidence of the impact of WSA in early intervention and prevention is particularly important since diversionary work has the potential to achieve significant cost savings across a range of public service delivery areas. The benefits of work that takes place prior to or at point of first arrest have been captured in some areas. For example, there is evidence which demonstrates the benefits from the London Women's Diversion Service (LWDS). Established in 2019, funded by the London Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and the MoJ, and led by Advance, the project operates across London, in partnership with other specialist delivery organisations. The service diverts women who have committed low harm offences away from the criminal justice system and into dedicated support services.

## Section Four: Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

To transform outcomes for women at risk of entering the criminal justice system and those subject to criminal justice processes, there is a need for systemic change at local level. This can be delivered through whole system multi-agency approaches, with properly resourced women's centres and specialist women's organisations operating at the heart of both service design and delivery. Such approaches can deliver the essential gender-responsive assessment, case management and trauma-informed support which properly accounts for women's needs, strengths and risk factors and identifies intersectional needs linked to age and race.

The Women's Justice Reimagined Action Plan (2022), led by Hibiscus and partners including Muslim Women in Prison project, Agenda Alliance, Women in Prison, Criminal Justice Alliance and Zahid Mubarek Trust, highlighted many of the components required for the successful delivery of this work, which are emphasised throughout this report. This includes (but is not limited to): measurable objectives, better data, improved staff training, adequate funding and the development of a cross-government intersectional strategy.

As a key takeaway from this report, there are several critical factors that are essential to making a success of the development of a national framework for women in contact with the criminal justice system, described in more detail below. Women's voices must be embedded at every stage of the process, with co-production not simply an ambition in all areas, but a core objective. Lived experience expertise and leadership should inform all levels of WSA – including at the strategic board level. To support this, voluntary sector women's specialist organisations and women's centres are best placed to encourage and support engagement of lived experience experts. 'Harder to reach' women and girls must be engaged, using methods such as peer mentoring and trauma-informed approaches which are key to building trust and resilience.

### Recommendations

**Ensure that the work of the Women's Justice Board prioritises cross-government work to establish whole systems approaches throughout England and Wales for women in contact with the criminal justice system**

- Incorporating ministerial leads from relevant departments to provide oversight of, and accountability for, the work
- Including representatives from within existing groups and bodies, including the women's justice board and the accompanying partnership delivery group as well as both national and regional representatives from relevant statutory and non-statutory bodies, including, judiciary, magistrates, local authority and health representatives
- Invite engagement from senior stakeholders already delivering existing whole systems approaches

**Develop an England and Wales 'whole systems approach' framework for women in contact with the criminal justice system**

- Led by the WJB and driven by the cross-government work on WJB priorities this framework should set out the key elements required for whole systems approaches, drawing on existing best practice
- The framework should acknowledge the need for a tailored approach across different areas, allowing for local innovation but underpinned by national priorities.
- Priorities or standards to be explored should include: early assessment of need; clear and accessible pathways for support; trauma-informed and gender-responsive practice; multi-agency coordination; co-production and co-design of services, with lived experience at the centre of this process
- These priorities should align with ongoing national strategy development in relation to women in contact with the criminal justice system
- Existing commitments, set out in the Female Offender Strategy and the Concordat on Women in or at Risk of Contact with the CJS could be reviewed with the potential for a refresh and an intent to address the omission from the Concordat of appropriate resource to enable joint or co-commissioning

**Embed a regional approach to implementing whole systems approaches:**

- Whilst recognising that the 7 HMPPS Areas do not align with regional or local areas, it would be helpful to explore what role they could play in embedding whole systems approaches so that over time consistent arrangements could be developed across all regions
- One option to support consistency would be to establish local multi-agency WSA boards that could be tasked, in collaboration with other regions, with shared outcome frameworks, measuring key outcomes including wellbeing, housing stability and engagement with services
- To support consistency across local areas and regions, we would like to see a national 'community of practice' for knowledge sharing established. This could include representatives from all regions and local multi-agency WSA boards. Learning from this community of practice could feed into the national inter-departmental working group.

**Establish robust data capturing and sharing mechanisms to foster collaboration, utilising technology, where appropriate:**

- Exploring the viability of a whole systems approach dashboard based upon metrics agreed by the inter-departmental group
- Supported by data sharing agreements at a local and a national level across relevant agencies and departments, utilising technology to ensure that data can be shared as efficiently and as effectively as possible
- Develop a national WSA monitoring framework to support the collection of consistent data across all regional, multi-agency boards

**Establish multi-year funding pots to deliver whole systems approaches:**

- Underpinned by the national framework, the Ministry of Justice and other key departments, including the Home Office, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Department for Education, should secure ringfenced, multi-year funding to support the delivery of whole systems approaches across England and Wales
- Whilst challenging to achieve, such an approach would enable long-term service planning and delivery against cross-cutting, departmental priorities that can be more effectively addressed via pooled funding and joint commissioning
- Incorporating funding streams from the Home Office and other key government departments would also cater for an increased 'upstream' focus, to support women at risk of entering the CJS but not eligible for justice-based interventions
- This should incorporate sustainable funding for women's specialist services in each of the HMPPS areas, with the number to be ascertained based on need; in addition to funding for women-only community hubs and the voluntary organisations supporting women in contact with the CJS
- Funding models could replicate existing best practice, such as the joint commissioning approach taken in Wales to fund its Women's Pathfinder Whole System Approach (WPWSA) and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC)/Probation co-commissioned services in London

**Early intervention, diversion and community-based solutions to be prioritised at a local and a national level:**

- Cross-government work on WJB priorities should prioritise policy initiatives and funding models that focus on early intervention, diversion and community-based solutions
- Funding should follow these priorities, and be ringfenced in order to significantly increase diversionary activity that pursues a multi-agency approach to support women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system
- Diversionary activity must be linked with the commissioning of women's specialist services in every HMPPS region, funding should enable the hiring of specific keyworkers dedicated to following women through different stages of system, leading to greater engagement and the building of trust
- Alongside the minimum standards expected for the implementation of whole systems approaches, national standards should also be developed on diversionary activity that is effectively communicated to voluntary sector stakeholders
- Diversionary pathways must then be embedded at every stage of the criminal justice pathway, including pre-arrest, pre-charge and pre-sentencing so that custody is genuinely used as a last resort

**Increase the utilisation of gender-responsive community sentencing, including the likely increased use of Suspended Sentence Orders and/or deferred sentencing:**

- Establish viable, gender-responsive community sentencing that is informed by the expertise of organisations working with women in contact with the criminal justice system and include lived experience experts
- Such an approach could be supported by the establishment of a national 'community of practice' as mentioned above, bringing together sentencers, probation practitioners, police representatives, health representatives, lived experience experts and voluntary sector stakeholders, in order to establish best-practice in supporting women subject to deferred sentences/community sentences/suspended sentences
- It should also incorporate greater partnership between local police forces, probation practitioners and voluntary organisations, to ensure that all police forces are aware of the voluntary sector support that is available to support women

**Focus on workforce development:**

- Establish national training programmes for all professionals in trauma-informed, gender-responsive approaches
- Explore the viability of establishing national accreditation for women-centred justice practitioners and organisations that meet defined practice standards
- Promote gender-specific, trauma informed environments in all custodial and community settings

**Strengthen the Women's Centre Model**

Funded by the JABBS Foundation for Women and Girls, substantive work is underway to strengthen the women's centre model. The validation of the Women's Risks and Needs Assessment (WRNA) and case management tool demonstrates statistically significant positive correlations with measures of re-incarceration, technical violations, new arrests, and new convictions. A second assessment tool has been developed for use with non-criminal justice involved women – i.e. those who have not been charged but are at risk of arrest and on a potential pathway into the justice system. This has potential for wider application in the context of early intervention, prevention and diversion.

Alongside development support to build the capacity of women's centres nationally, JABBS and the Henry Smith Foundation are expanding the use of the WRNA through the Effective Women's Centres (EWC) Partnership, a research collaboration involving seven women's centres and the University of Birmingham. A new £3 million funding agreement between JABBS and Henry Smith will scale up the EWC Partnership and support the roll out of WRNA to more women's centres.

The recommendation, therefore, is to build on funding for the Effective Women's Centre Partnership through a new women's grants programme:

- By allocating funding to this initiative by pausing the planned re-commissioning of the former Community Rehabilitative Services (CRS) contracts for women – now re-named 'Community Support Services'
- Establish further funding mechanisms via engagement with key government departments so that objectives around reducing violence against women and girls, improving health, education and employment outcomes and supporting families could be included in a wider strategy

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- A combined government and independent charitable grants programme could then be designed, using co-production methods involving women's specialist organisations. This would be offered alongside the existing JABBS and Henry Smith initiative, potentially also including funding from other members of the Corston Independent Funders Coalition and the Worshipful Company of Weavers funding with the aim of supporting WSAs that include WRNA for women across a wide range of local authority areas from April 2027
- Given this would necessitate a gap for the financial year April 2026 – March 2027, it would be important to provide an extension to current CRS contracts and core costs and services and interventions women's grants for one year.

## **Annex One: Government funded women's WSA pilots**

Since 2022, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has funded four Offices of Police and Crime Commissioners (OPCCs)—Avon and Somerset, West Mercia, Kent, and Thames Valley—to improve the integration of women's services, developing and promoting a Whole System Approach (WSA) in their local area to address the often complex needs of women in, or at risk of, contact with the criminal justice system. Initially scheduled to conclude in March 2025, the funding has been extended for an additional year, until March 2026.

Learning from the Avon and Somerset government funded WSA pilot for women was shared at the SIG roundtable and findings are included in the report. Subsequent to this report being produced, we received some information from the MoJ about the other areas and a summary of this is provided below.

### **West Mercia**

Similar to Avon and Somerset, the OPCC in West Mercia works with a local organisation to develop and promote a WSA. Supported by MoJ funding, the OPCC currently funds two 'Lots' of accessible support at Willowdene Rehabilitation to ensure victims/survivors have an appropriate range of specialist services. The contract for 'Lot 1' commenced on 24th February 2022 for a period of 3 years. The contract for 'Lot 2' commenced on 1st April 2023 for a period of 2 years.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Lot 1 -</b> <b>Willowdene WSA- Residential and Day Support Combining the Local Initiatives Nurturing Change (LINC) Service</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Provided by:</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p style="text-align: center;">to cover all areas of West Mercia</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Willowdene's Whole Systems Approach (WSA):</u> Designed to support the integration of the residential and day services in West Mercia into a WSA. The approach brings together multi-agency services to provide an effective rehabilitative and diversionary pathway for women in or at risk of contact with the CJS. The service enables vulnerable women access to gender-specific and trauma-informed provisions via the LINC service, providing access to support services through structured day services and residential placements.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Lot 2 -</b> <b>Out of Court Referral (OOCR) Service</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Provided by:</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p style="text-align: center;">to cover all areas of West Mercia</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Willowdene's OOCR Service:</u> Developed to further improve the integration of Willowdene's WSA by expanding diversion options, enhancing rehabilitative support, and further strengthening the multi-agency collaboration needed to address the complex needs of women in or at risk of contact with the CJS</p>



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An evaluation of this pilot has been carried out and a summary report can be accessed here: [Willowdene Rehabilitation Service Evaluation](#)

### Kent

Funding has supported the development of a dedicated Women's Justice Officer (WJO) role to engage directly with women in custody and the community. The WJO delivers early intervention through custody liaison and cell-based engagement, explains support options, and facilitates referrals into services. Two models have been tested: a holistic referral to a single agency and a multi-agency Women's Justice Panel that assesses needs and allocates support. The WJO also works closely with the Adult Out of Court Resolution Team and Integrated Offender Management to divert women from repeat offending. Key achievements include holding a mock women's justice multi-agency panel session, creating a commissioned services review, developing a provisional female-specific risk assessment for custody suites, mapping service gaps, and benchmarking best practice from other forces.

### Thames Valley

Funding has supported a Custody Navigator scheme operating across three custody suites (Aylesbury, Abingdon, and Banbury). The scheme employs three staff on rotation to engage women in custody, offering early intervention and diversion options. Navigators work closely with NHS Liaison and Diversion (L&D) services to ensure women with complex needs are seen by L&D, while others receive Navigator support. The scheme has built strong links with local providers to refer women into substance misuse treatment pathways. The programme also developed an automatic referral process to partner charities for women in custody, including Alana House in Berkshire and C2C in Milton Keynes, alongside data collection to track engagement and outcomes. Their key achievements include introducing an ethical data-sharing approach, which has been showcased at the national custody conference in September 2024 and the Women in Criminal Justice board in February 2025, attracting interest from other forces.



**Clinks supports, represents and advocates for the voluntary sector in criminal justice, enabling it to provide the best possible opportunities for individuals and their families.**

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