

# **The Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellowship Programme**

“What Works?” for Women  
Who Offend: A Service  
User’s Perspective

Exploring the Synthesis Between  
What Women Want & What Women Get

Rebecca Clarke

Research Paper 2004/04



**The Griffins Society**

Working for female offenders  
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## The Griffins Society

The Griffins Society is a voluntary organisation working for the care and resettlement of female offenders, including those with a history of mental illness and violent behaviour. The Society was set up in 1966. At that time there was little residential provision for women offenders and the Society concentrated its efforts on filling that gap by providing specialist hostel and move-on accommodation. Those residential projects were transferred to another voluntary organisation in 1997 and the Society decided to alter the focus of its activities. This change of emphasis included establishing the Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellowship Programme in the Social Policy Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2001.

## The Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellowship Programme

The aim of the Fellowship Programme is to provide ‘thinking space’ for those working in the criminal justice system or allied fields who wish to study a particular aspect of the circumstances or treatment of women offenders. Applications are welcomed from anyone with an interest in female offenders, such as magistrates, probation officers, staff of supported accommodation, drug/alcohol counsellors. In keeping with its origins, the Griffins Society welcomes applications from the voluntary sector, as well as statutory organisations. Fellowships are not awarded to people in academic employment, or studying for a degree. Each Fellowship runs for one year and Fellows are awarded a grant. Academic support and supervision is provided by Dr Judith Rungay, Director of the Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellowship Programme. Fellows have full access to all facilities at the London School of Economics.

The views expressed in this Research Paper are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect those of The Griffins Society or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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For further information about the Fellowship Programme and its publications, or to correspond with the author, please contact the Griffins Society:

The Griffins Society  
77 Holloway Road  
London, N7 8JZ

020 7607 2304  
admin@thegriffinssociety.org  
www.thegriffinssociety.org

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# 1. Introduction & Project Rationale

## Background

As a researcher in the criminal justice system I have experience of undertaking research and evaluation projects to explore the effectiveness of community and prison based interventions with women who offend. However, these opportunities have often been short term in their nature, and the research questions and methodologies employed are often driven by the organisation’s aims and climate. The Fellowship offered me the opportunity to undertake research driven by more personal motivation and interest.

The culmination of these experiences highlighted that there were gaps in the existing evidence base on women who offend, including questions generated by my own research. I was keen to continue the momentum of my engagement with the topic, using this to broaden the current vision of how agencies engage with, and deliver services to women in order to reduce their offending related needs, and ultimately to reduce their offending.

## Project Rationale

The issues and questions which emerge from what we already know, and what we acknowledge we have yet to understand, informed the key factors for exploration within the project. Firstly, to understand the common experiences of women in the criminal justice system, how they perceive these experiences to be related to their personal and social needs, and importantly how these then relate to their offending. The second issue evident from recent research and my experience of accessing women within the criminal justice system is the difficulty of engaging this group of service users. Why don’t women access or engage with statutory services available to them, while voluntarily engaging with other agencies? The final and connected issue that I sought to explore was how services for women who offend are delivered, and subsequently experienced by the service user. What types of services are available to women and how do they perceive these services?

The main aim of the project is therefore to generate knowledge and understanding that will inform the design and improvement of services for this group, whilst importantly exploring these issues from the services user’s perspective. The two objectives of the research project were therefore:

- To map the experiences and needs of women who offend, from their perspective – *what do women want from services?*
- To review and explore the effectiveness of current approaches to delivering services to women who offend, again from the service user’s perspective – *what do women get from services?*

## Structure of the Report

The aim of this project was to explore the relationship between what women in the criminal justice system want and need to desist from further offending, and what criminal justice and other associated agencies provide. A review of the literature exploring these issues, together with the information generated from the women’s accounts of their experiences, form the evidence contained in this report. The following chapter gives more detail of the methods used, and describes the women who participated in the research.

In Chapter Three we explore what women want from services, examining the common experiences of women who offend, and what their associated ‘needs’ are from services. By taking into consideration the social, economic and personal position of women in the criminal justice system, it may be possible to determine which factors might be directly linked to their offending and therefore the most appropriate targets and approaches of effective interventions.

The fourth chapter investigates the current theories influencing criminal justice policies and practice, the impact of the ‘evidenced based practice’ initiative of the 1990’s on women, and their current position in the criminal justice system, the community based sentences which are currently utilised for women who offend, and how women engage with these services. The chapter closes by drawing conclusions from recent policy documents and a review by the Fawcett Society on women in the criminal justice system.

The fifth chapter will explore what women who are in the criminal justice system are accessing outside the statutory supervision services. Four projects currently delivering services to women who offend are described, and the common goals and methods of these diverse services are examined. Through the qualitative responses of the women interviewed, the reasons why these services are effective will be considered from the service users perspective.

The final chapter reviews the knowledge generated as a result of the project and considers the evidence of what women want and how this matches the current strategies and services of criminal justice agencies and other statutory and voluntary services. Identifying any practical or theoretical lessons which can be learned – what do we need to explore further and what can we change now? These will be considered in the current context, reflecting on whether the new National Offender Management Service offers a new opportunity to make changes to the approach to delivering services to women who offend.

## 2. Aims & Methodology

### Aim of the Project

The aim of the Fellowship project was to explore the match between what women in the criminal justice system want and need to desist from future offending, and what services are currently provided to address this. In order to execute this aim two key methods were employed: an extensive review of the literature illustrating these issues, and qualitative interviews with women in the criminal justice system.

### A Literature Review

The literature review focused on the two areas of interest in the project:

Mapping the experiences and associated needs of women who offend.

- What are the common experiences of women who offend?
- How do these differ from those experienced by male offenders?
- How do these experiences influence what women require of effective interventions?

Reviewing approaches to addressing these experiences, needs and offending by women.

- What has been the impact of recent criminal justice policies on services for women?
- What evidence of effective interventions for women exists, what are the key findings?
- How do statutory services currently address women’s offending?
- What alternative approaches are available for women who offend?
- How do these agencies deliver their services?

### Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups

In order to explore women’s perceptions of how services should respond to their offending and their experience as service users in the criminal justice system and other statutory / voluntary agencies targeting women who offend, one focus group involving ten individual interviews was conducted.

These discussions with the women explored three main key issues through a number of open ended questions, illustrated below.

1. What are the issues for women coming out of prison / on probation?

- What was your biggest problem when you were sentenced?
- How have past experiences played into your offending / substance misuse?
- How do the roles you might have (family / work / community) affect your decisions to offend?

## 2. What have been your experiences of prison/probation?

- What’s been useful for you?
- What’s not been useful for you?
- How has prison / probation helped?
- What has your relationship been like with staff in these organisations?
- What support did you experience?

## 3. What experiences have you had with other agencies providing help and support?

- What’s been useful for you?
- What’s not been useful for you?
- How have other organisations / agencies helped you?
- What has your relationship been like with staff in these organisations?
- What support did you experience?

## The Participants

The initial intention was to capitalise on existing links with Greater Manchester Probation Service, and in particular the women’s ‘Think First’ programme group. The aim was to undertake interviews with women who do engage with the specific provision to further explore the potential benefits, and importantly also to attempt to access those women who do not engage with the programme to explore what it is they want and get from the probation service.

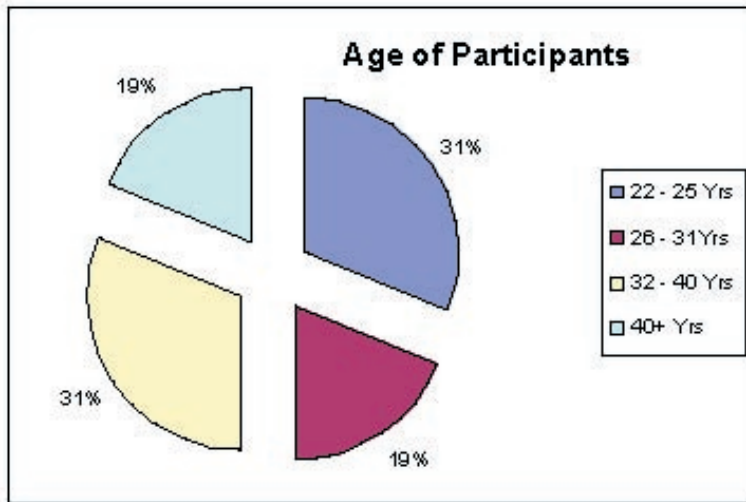
Although two groups of women who were referred to this programme (representing 43 women) were approached to participate in the research and informed that they would be contacted in six months time (approximately three months after the programme completed) for a variety of reasons accessing these women at this later date proved fruitless. It became apparent that other approaches to accessing women on probation were needed. Having already made links with a number of non criminal justice agencies working with women who offend, these services were approached. They identified women using their services also on probation, who consented to participate in the research project.

Where known, the obstacles to accessing women through the probation service were recorded. In chapter four these findings are discussed as an illustration of the current issues associated to accessing and engaging women with services provided through the criminal justice system.

A NHS funded project for women drug users and two voluntary sector women only agencies, through which the participants were accessed, are defined in Chapter five of the report - where alternative agencies and approaches to addressing the needs of women who offend are explored. The following gives details of the 18 women who participated in the focus group and individual interviews, illustrating the diversity of participants involved in the project.

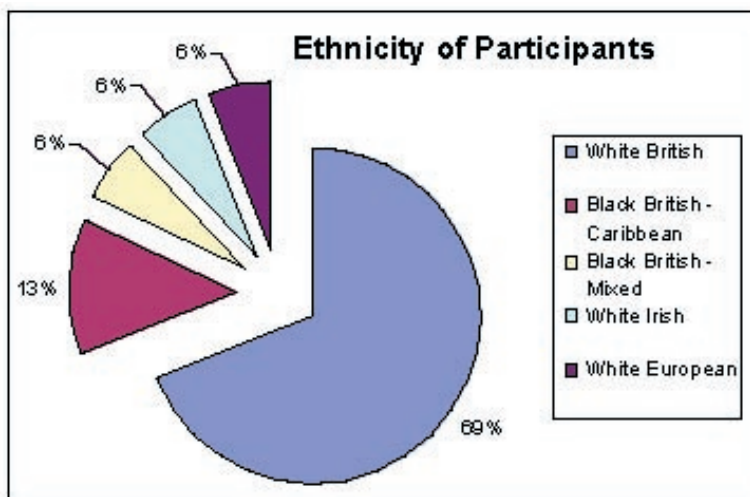


Age N= 18



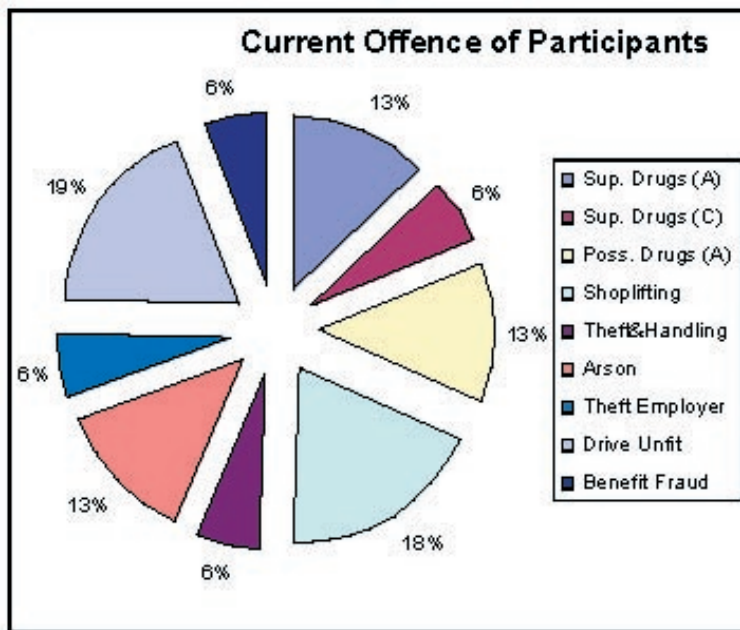
The age of the women varied, the youngest woman participating was 22 years old and the oldest 44 years old. The mean age was 31 years old.

Ethnicity N = 18



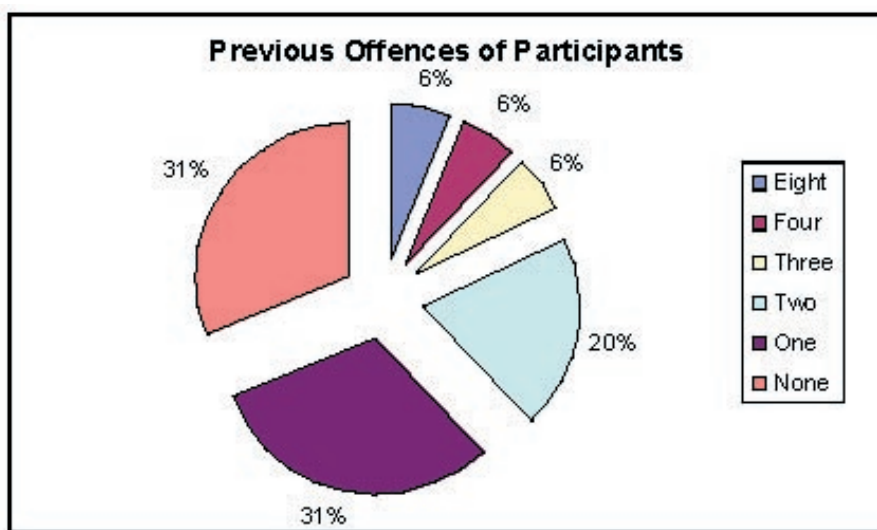
The women who participated represent a variety of ethnic groups. While the majority (n=11) were ‘White British’ a significant proportion were Black British, Caribbean or mixed race.

Current Offence N = 18



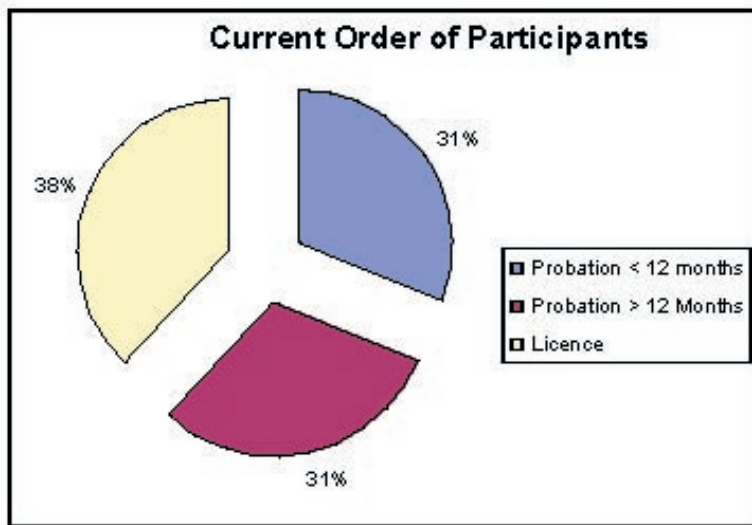
The women had been convicted of a variety of offences, including drugs related offences, acquisitive offences and driving offences. None of the women who participated were serving a current order for violent offences.

Number Of Previous Offences N = 18



The women had a range of offending histories with some having been dealt with in the criminal justice system numerous times and others had no previous convictions. For those who had been convicted before the women reported patterns of escalation and often drugs-related offences linking to acquisitive crime.

Current Order N = 18



The women who participated had received different sentences, the majority of women were serving a community sentence however a significant proportion were on licence period following a custodial sentence. Where the women had been previously convicted many had served short custodial sentences, or numerous community sentences. Only one woman had previously been fined for an offence by the courts.

The group of women involved represent different age groups, and therefore potentially different stages of involvement in crime. The offences for which they were convicted are diverse, and their experiences of the criminal justice system in terms of conviction frequency and sentencing responses vary. This supports the assertion that the eighteen women offer a variety of perspectives of service users<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The women who participated in the research will be referred to as service users and the wider group of women in the criminal justice system as women who offend.

### 3. Women’s Experiences & Offending Related Needs

This chapter will draw together the findings from a review of the existing literature, and the responses given by women in this research project, to explore the common experiences of women who offend and how these relate to their offending. As specific sources of information are discussed and referred to, the qualitative comments from the women participating in this research project will be recounted both to personalise and reinforce what they might mean for individual women.

#### Roles & Demands on Women in Society

It has been argued that women have different pathways into crime and different contexts for offending from men. This is often demonstrated through the different patterns and types of offending by women when compared to those of men. For example the most common offence for women is shoplifting, and while over half of all offences committed by both men and women are acquisitive [financially driven] those of women are often from organisations rather than the person or domestic properties – including benefit fraud, shoplifting, theft and handling. Furthermore, statistical data and ethnographic studies of women’s offending repeatedly illustrate that women’s crimes are fewer, less serious, rarely professional and less likely to be repeated than those by men (Heindensohn, 1995; Worrall, 1996)

Consider, therefore, the following facts about women in today’s society. Forty percent of women, compared to twenty percent of men live on less than £100 per week (Women & Equality Unit, 2003). Nine out of ten lone parents are women. Four out of ten women experience violence in personal relationships at some point in their lives (Office for National Statistics, 2002). These three facts reflect the roles, and subsequent demands, which are specific to women influencing their experiences and the choices they make. It is argued that the gender differences demonstrated through recorded crime and these societal facts, illustrate that individuals offend in the context of their identities and behaviour which have been shaped by experiences regulated by their place in culture and society.

*The kids are top priority but if you’re not right in your own head how can you look after your responsibilities, you just end up feeling more like a failure.*

*My partner was sent to prison, it was down to me to keep the house going. It was all I had left I’d lost my marriage and the kids, well they were taken you know because of the violence I’d let happen. All I could think is if I could keep the house I’d get the kids back. I was claiming and got offered a bit of work, casual like. Couldn’t see a way to manage it so I did both and got caught.*

*The guys I was involved with were always in and out of prison themselves, I went through a lot of domestic violence but these guys were all I knew, what I expected I guess.*

*My dad beat me up all my life, I was never allowed to hit back. And that was just because he loved me.*

## Experiences, ‘Needs’ and Offending – How are they related?

There is nationally and locally produced evidence relating the social and personal experiences of women who offend. This takes both narrative form illustrating the personalised experience, and statistical form indicating the prevalence of these experiences within this group (Dowden and Andrews, 1999; Rungay, 1996; Wilkinson et al, 1996; Clarke, 2003; Gelsthorpe, 2004; Stewart, 2002). The literature indicates that although these factors are often similar to those experienced by men who offend their relationship to women’s offending may be different. However, there is still a lack of understanding regarding these gender differences (Hedderman, 2004). This will be explored in the following discussion, in an attempt to locate the linkages between women’s experiences, their needs and their offending.

A central issue for women in the criminal justice system is their accommodation. Women often report finding difficulties when attempting to access and retain a stable and affordable living situation. A particular problem facing those women who serve a short prison sentence and then return to their community homeless, experiencing the conundrum of being unable to re-establish a family unit without accommodation. As well as problems accessing accommodation this group also faces other accommodation issues, poor physical conditions, attempting to address previous housing debt and safety and isolation are commonly reported. When we consider that many of these women are primary care givers, accommodation is often the primary factor impacting upon the motivation of women to go on and address other needs, within the hierarchy of issues they experience (Carlen, 2003).

*I’ve been sleeping here, there and everywhere living like a tramp. My daughter is still living at my mothers and because I’m on drugs I’m not wanted anywhere, not trusted.*

*There was nothing when I walked out of jail, its not the first time I’ve just had a bag. I’d gone in with an address to come out to but things changed so all I was left with was the NFA grant.*

*If I had a house I’d maybe be part of a community, you know get my kids back and start again. I don’t think I’d be as mad on the drugs cause I’d have something to stay off them for.*

The lack of ‘legitimate’ earning opportunities for women who go on to commit acquisitive offences is often underpinned by a number of social or personal factors such as a lack of skills and employment history, parenting responsibilities and wider issues of self-efficacy. These real and perceived obstacles culminate to prevent women being able to envisage or realise their potential in the wider work community. This is compounded by the ‘poverty trap’ many women who offend relate, where their income from benefits and the cost of childcare mean that going out and taking up education or employment opportunities may result in them being worse off financially.

*I’ve been to see the advisor and its so hard to find something that’s worthwhile for me, I can’t afford to give up the benefits. I’m better off claiming than working.*

*I enjoyed working but when you’re on your own with the kids its just not that easy, good childcare is too expensive.*

*The problem’s going to be the record for me, its on file for life.*

*What are my options, me as a criminal and ex-druggie [laughs] I'd like to get back into caring, what I did before all this, helping people. I tried to get a job and the guy said I'd be perfect but for the record. So you lie but in a job like this they check. You're always going to be judged on the past even if you want to change.*

These issues relating to accommodation and employment often impact upon the sense of isolation women report experiencing. These are in many cases compounded by other negative experiences such as previous neglect and abuse within their personal relationships. The feminist literature has highlighted the extent of these experiences of women in the criminal justice system, illustrating that a startling number have hidden trauma from childhood or adult relationships often from violent men (Rumgay, 2001; Gelsthorpe, 2003). It has also been demonstrated that in some cases this leads directly to their offending through coercion by partners and significant others.

However, there can also be more subtle links which can be drawn between the damaging and coercive relationships women experience and their pathways into offending. In some cases the onset and sustained use of drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine is associated with their partner's drug taking or the need to distance the self from hidden trauma. Recent statistics reveal that levels of drug dependence for women entering custody are now higher than those for men. A recent report suggested that 28% of men entering prison reported having recently used crack cocaine while 47% of women reported its use, similarly 35% of men reported using heroin compared to 57% of women (WORP, 2004; Howard League, 2000). Perhaps most revealing however is the following finding which has emerged from lifestyles surveys of young people (NACRO, 2003). Where for men criminal involvement often precedes drug use, for young women their drug use often precedes involvement in crime.

*There are a lot of people who get on drugs because of their past lives, or because of something that's gone on at that time. There's always something behind it. The amount of girls that I've met in prison or whatever and you hear what's happened to them, the shit that's been done to them, no fucking wonder they want to block it out.*

*There's always been drugs around, from when I was a kid. It was normal, I didn't go to school. I was given my first drug you know to inject by my step dad when I was thirteen.*

Recent research has sought to unpick these links between different aspects of the experiences of women and their offending. Another association identified within the literature is that of drug use and mental health issues for women who offend. The excessive use of prescribed medication for these women's emotional problems, and the use of illicit drugs as self-medication is prevalent within women who offend. The NACRO report acknowledges the largely unmet need for counselling to address the combined experience of traumatic relationships, mental health problems and long-term drug use for these women. (Edgar and Rickford, 2003; NACRO, 2003)

The reported personal experiences of women experiencing acute emotional and mental health problems, particularly in the prison system is often disturbing. Considering the number of women entering prison who have previously been admitted to psychiatric wards in the NHS (17%) and secure psychiatric units (7%) it becomes apparent that for a number of women the prison system is being used as a pseudo mental health facility. NACRO found that there was a significant number of women being held in health care wings of prisons awaiting assessment and beds in other institutions. These experiences are also borne out in the information

reporting incidents of self-harm and suicide among women in the criminal justice system. Although women represent just 5% of the prison population they account for 15% of suicides in prison and 45% of reported incidents of self-harm (Prison Reform Trust, 2003).

*I’ve thought about killing myself yes, a lot. I hate to say it but I’ve even thought about taking my daughter with me rather than leave her. I mean what sort of thought is that, it’s wrong.*

*I’ve had depression for ten years, I was diagnosed at twelve. I don’t know I guess it was the way I was brought up, and the drugs and drink, and where there’s them there’s always violence.*

A dilemma emerges when acknowledging the extent to which these are troubling yet common experiences among women who offend. As a consequence of the types of offences they commit, the role of women in society and their experiences of victimisation, women may not perceive themselves, or be perceived by others as ‘real criminals’. Hudson’s recent work explores the complexity when determining culpability of women in their offending, and how this impacts upon the sentencing (Hudson, 2002).

*It’s different for women they’re [judges] always harsher we’re not meant to be naughty are we. Especially if drugs are involved, it’s always worse if you’re a mother. They think you’re a bad mum.*

Nowhere does it appear more inappropriate that interventions should be driven by theories of crime as identifying purely individual factors, ignoring the issues of wider relational, social and community context within which criminal behaviour occurs. The interconnectedness of these factors and their complex relationship to the onset and continued offending by women illustrates that effective approaches to reduce women’s offending must adopt a holistic approach, one which is broad and flexible enough to address the multiple needs which relate to their offending.



## 4. Services for Women Who Offend in the Criminal Justice System

This Chapter will explore the current organisational context of services for women who offend. Beginning with an appraisal of the modern penal philosophies and the rise of ‘evidence based practice’, to examine how these have influenced the approach to delivering services to offenders, and any particular implications for women. The current position of women in the CJS will then be reported, using statistics on women in prison, evidence of women’s engagement with community based sentences and women’s self-report experience of these services. The chapter closes by drawing some conclusions about the current position of women within the system and what might be anticipated in future.

### Shifting Penal Philosophies & the Rise of Managerialism

*Rehabilitation of the criminal is no longer the primary aim it once was. There is now a focus on punishment predicated upon individual responsibility in the undertaking of criminal acts*  
(May, 1989. p.1)

The shift in the penal philosophy illustrated above has a long trajectory now, and has underpinned the climate in which the criminal justice system operates. The different philosophies of the past, for example the phases through which the probation service has moved, defined by May as ‘Voluntary’, ‘Treatment’ and ‘Punishment in the Community’, have all left resonances on the role of the criminal justice agencies today. However a further and potentially more influential shift in the service has been the requirement of public sector agencies to adopt private sector management principles, namely those of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. This shift has led to agencies, including probation, having to meet the demands of a ‘result oriented culture’, one which is driven by centrally determined aims and quantitative measures of performance. (McWilliams, 1981; Nash, 2004)

Where previously individual autonomy of professionally trained ‘social work’ staff led the activity of the services, more recently the need for accountability and the provision of consistent approaches to public protection, risk assessment and management has dominated the direction of probation work. (SNOP, 1984; NPS Business Plan, 2004)

### The ‘Evidenced Based Practice’ Initiative

A number of extensive reviews undertaken during the 1970’s found that empirical knowledge on the success or failure of attempts to ‘rehabilitate’ offenders, and their underpinning philosophies, was weak and suggested that ‘nothing works’ in addressing the individual and social factors which contribute to crime (Martinson, 1974; Brody 1976). The impact of the conclusions of this research is illustrated below.

*Research carried out in the course of the last twenty years or so suggests that penal ‘treatments’, as we significantly describe them, do not have any reformatory effect, whatever other effects they may have... Are those services simply to be abandoned on the basis of*



*the accumulated research evidence? ... Will this challenge evoke a response by prison and probation officers by the invention of new approaches and methods?* (John Croft Head of the Home Office Research Unit, 1978)

There was a response to this threat, and the early 1990's saw the rise of a counter intellectual argument, which is now generally regarded as the 'What Works?' agenda. This body of work embraced a shift towards a number of principles, which through further meta-analytical reviews, were found to be features that were likely to increase the effectiveness of interventions (McGuire, 1995; Underdown, 1998). Importantly, a key feature considered to increase the effectiveness of initiatives was locating them within the community, therefore suggesting the probation service had a central role in reducing offending. However, the new penal climate driving both sentencing and subsequent practice with those who offend focuses on those features of the individual (their attitudes and behaviour) which are crime causative and impact upon the future risk of them offending. This demonstrates a major shift for the probation service, a profession that has previously been based on addressing offending in its wider social context.

## Implications of the 'What Works' Agenda for Women

The consequences of the new agenda of 'evidenced based practice' for the probation service have been far reaching. First, it has led to the development and implementation of prescriptive and actuarial forms of assessing the individual's risk of re-offending and harm, and their criminogenic needs. (Shaw and Hannah-Moffat, 2001). Second, it has led to the tendency for interventions accepted as 'effective' to be underpinned by cognitive behavioural psychology theories and methods (Underdown, 1998). A key implication has been the establishment of a number of generic principles which any proposed intervention delivered within the criminal justice system is required to meet in order to gain accreditation. This process is governed by the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel (CSAP), an assembled group of leading practitioners, researchers and policy makers who review proposed and planned interventions and determine whether they will 'work' towards reducing crime.

While many would argue that the move to a practice which is underpinned by evidence and a more consistent provision of services nationally would improve the experience of and impact upon offenders, it has been suggested that this approach has failed women who offend. (Haines, 2003; Deakin and Spencer, 2003; McIvor, 2004) The evidence underpinning all recent initiatives is principally derived from male-based research samples, and criteria which have been established are extremely generic in nature. As such, interventions often fail to acknowledge the experiences and consequential factors associated to the offending of minority groups, including women.

While the Panel have made efforts to undertake 'Pathfinder' projects to explore effective practice with minority groups of offenders the generic principles do not allow services to recognise the position of minority groups of offenders, such as women, in society and acknowledge how this position may influence their risk of offending (Durrance and Williams, 2002). As a result of this there remains uncertainty about the universal value of such interventions. So although research highlights the differences between men's and women's offending there has not yet been any separation in evaluative results, and findings are often generalised by using gender-neutral language:-

*...the programme can have a reductive impact on people’s offending...*

## Effective Approaches for Women: Evidence from Local Initiatives

Despite this lack of national evidence and direction regarding effective interventions for women, research and evaluation of locally developed initiatives has in some ways responded to this problem and attempted to explore how effective services for women might differ from effective services in general. There are no clear answers, but research suggests there are a number of features which may improve the effectiveness of interventions for women. (Jones et al, 1991; Morgan, 1995; Morrison, 1994; Durrance and Ablitt, 2001; Stableforth, 2001; Bloom, 2000; Worrall, 2002; Roberts, 2002)

For example, a number of studies have identified the positive effects of creating a ‘women only’ environment – including an opportunity to ‘open up’ and discuss, a reduced sense of isolation, an increase in confidence and the provision of ‘safe’ space facilitating the provision of on-site childcare.

*[Effective practice must] take into account the real differences between men and women, in their learning and relationship styles and life circumstances. They are not just those that admit only women and use the same approach as men. (Bloom, 2000)*

However, as Bloom suggests, there is also a need to respond to women’s learning and relationship styles and life circumstances – this often means exploring factors such as empowerment and relationships and their association to offending. This includes the development of informal and formal support networks by linking women to a wider set of services, and harnessing the capacity for mutual support.

One example of an initiative which attempted to respond to these findings is the Think First for Women (TFW) programme developed in Greater Manchester Probation Area (GMPA). This programme was designed for women, whilst balancing the ‘new’ confines placed upon probation areas to deliver generic centrally accredited programmes. This programme was evaluated over a one year period and the findings reported (Clarke, 2003). The results of this evaluation showed that the availability of the programme as a community sentencing option had an impact on the likelihood of women receiving a custodial sentence, and those women who completed the programme reported that it had a positive impact on their lives. For some women this positive impact was demonstrated in the confidence generated by the peer support. For others, it was the development of personal and social skills. For another group of women it was the easy access to other resources, afforded through the partnership environment within which the programme is delivered.

*It’s been really helpful, they’ve made me feel better about myself by being there and listening. They know about all sorts of places you can go for help. (TFW Participant)*

*I feel as if I’ve got control back over my life, you know power. In the group I was recognised as a whole person, that was important. (TFW Participant)*

Nevertheless a number of problems remained unresolved which were identified through the evaluation. The staff and participating women reported the programme’s lack of acknowledgement of the existing skills of women, and the lack of legitimate opportunities to take forward any gains in order to enact lasting change in their lives. Those women who completed the programme and reported on its beneficial impact immediately

after completing, also reported six months later that the support and ‘safety net’ disappeared suddenly. This lack of continuity led to a dissipation with regards to both the confidence they had gained and the access to resources and support.

*Its as if the safety nets gone from under me since it finished. I’m not sure how long I can keep the confidence on my own. (TFW Participant)*

*The support was good while it lasted, but you lose contact when it ends. (TFW Participant)*

However, perhaps the most worrying finding from the evaluation was the number of women either not starting a programme they were allocated to (38%) or starting but not completing the programme (35%). This concern is further compounded by the knowledge that only a very small proportion (less than 10%) of the probation area’s women clients were ever referred to the programme. This begs the question – what service are these women experiencing in the current probation context?

*What concerns me is the level of resources and the number of women completing. What is happening to the 90% of women on our caseload who don’t get TFW, or even those who start but don’t finish? What are they getting? (TFW Tutor)*

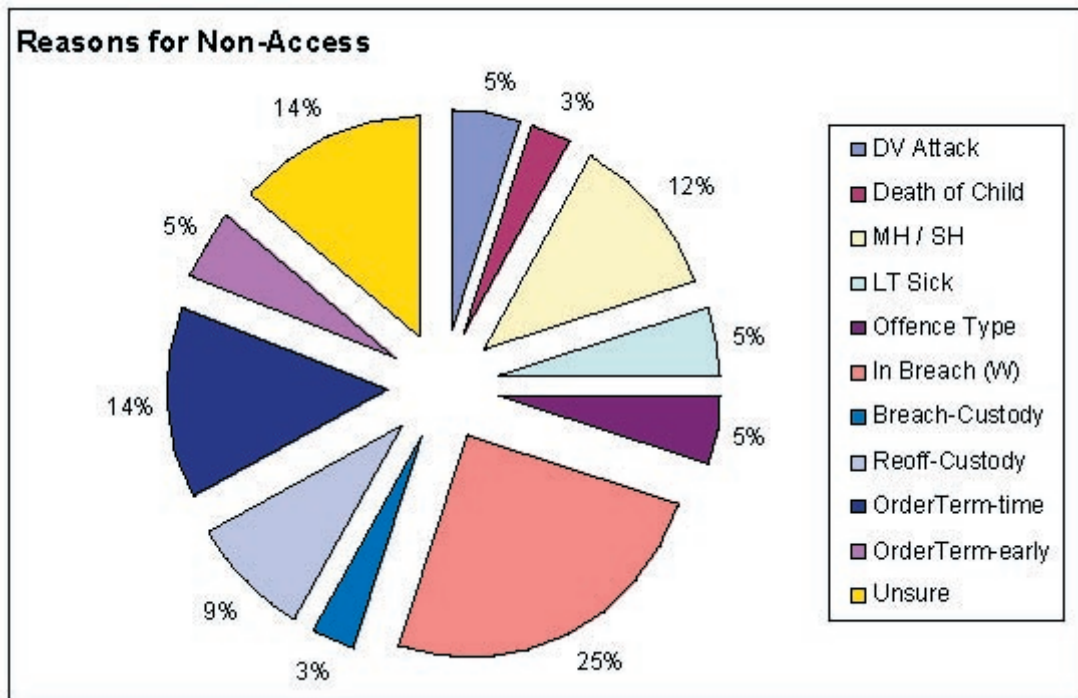
## Current Position of Women in the CJS

This inability to adequately respond to women’s offending through the currently available community ‘interventions’ has no doubt contributed to the increased use of imprisonment for women who offend evidenced in recent statistics. Between 1991 and 2001 the number of women incarcerated increased by 15%, compared to a 6% increase for male counterparts in the same decade. The consequences of this reality are further evidenced by a startling increase in suicides in women’s prisons – in 1993 one woman took her life in custody, a decade later in 2003 thirteen women committed suicide in prison. Women make up just 5% of prisoners yet represent 15% of all prisoner suicides (Statistics on Women, 2002; Prison Reform Trust, 2003). While this may also reflect the wider increased punitiveness of sentencing the experience of delivering a women specific programme in Greater Manchester demonstrated that where an appropriate community based sentence is available and proposed by probation staff there is parity in the use of these sentences by the courts.

A further illustration of the gravity of the current problem, that women do not perceive services as responsive to their needs, is the lack of engagement by women with the probation service. Others have commented upon the ‘collapse’ of traditional casework approach within the service, and its implications for motivation and assisting change. Particularly with individuals for whom offending is closely associated to reduced legitimate opportunities and fragmented lives (Nash, 2004; Farooq, 2003).

The following pie chart illustrates the reasons why during the course of this research project 43 women on probation who had consented to take part but who then could not be accessed at a later point in their community order.

Reasons for Non-Access N = 43



The collated information illustrates that there were a wide variety of reasons why these women on probation could not be accessed. In 20% of the cases it was determined, by their Probation Case Manager, that it would be inappropriate for me to speak with them as they were addressing sensitive issues of being the victim of a domestic violence attack, mental health issues, experiencing of self harm or bereavement or being long-term sick.

However, the main reason (in 37% of cases) for the inability to access women was that they were in breach of their order, either due to non-compliance or re-offending. This is especially disconcerting in the cases of women who had ‘successfully’ completed the groupwork programme and subsequently breached their order. The figures here are also an underestimate as many of the cases in the ‘unsure’ category were of women who were on monthly reporting (having minimal contact) and had missed one appointment. Therefore these women had not been in contact with the service for over two months and were now at risk of breaching, close to the end of their sentences.

This evidence has a number of implications for both Probation research and practice. It does however powerfully illustrate that many women are ‘lost’ in the current system. Even when sentencers utilise community alternatives to custody, the service’s inability to engage with women means their risk of custody is not always reduced but at best delayed.

These findings correlate with what women on probation, accessed through the volunteer agencies, said about their experiences of statutory services including social services, prison and probation.

*If you’re in an emotionally raw state it can be hard to get across what you need and then listen and take in what someone is telling you. Especially if you don’t know them or trust them.*

*As a mixed race child in the 1970's social services couldn't find a way to place me so I was pushed around homes, foster care. I had to stay in over twenty different places in less than ten years. How is that helping people?*

*To me there's nothing worse than services not having a clue what its like for that person. When I was a kid I was always getting beat up by my dad and the social worker would come round but I couldn't say owt. If they'd really understood I wouldn't have had to they would've seen and done something about it.*

*I was angry about having my baby inside, ok I was causing trouble but to be sent to Manchester and have no visits not one even from a social worker at seventeen I was so confused. What had I done that was so bad? How do you get over that?*

*Its [probation] like social services isn't it, you know with all the appointments and not really getting to know anyone or them getting to know you.*

*My experience of these services, you know social services and probation and that is that even when you're meant to see them once or twice a month you're lucky if they show up. Or it's someone else, someone new and you spend all the time explaining'*

*They're quick to deal with you when you fail, you know take kids away lock you up but doesn't feel like they want to get to know you and help you.*

*They say they're there to help but how can they be it takes so long for them to get to know you. Well the person changes, or you only have an appointment every so often, or sometimes I can't make it or they don't show up.*

*Probation is a waste of time, especially if you're on drugs, they'll offer me a DTTO but what's the point you end up in jail anyway because you're not ready or not getting enough support.*

*Yeah I went on a programme, stayed for two sessions they spoke to us like kids its stupid you feel like they're taking the piss, patronising you. Do they really think you don't know what you're problems are you're dealing with them everyday.*

In two cases women reported a positive experience from statutory services. In both these cases this was regarded as being the result of a constructive relationship with an individual worker.

*I did one good thing inside, I got all my gymnastic certificates. There was this one gym instructor who I guess saw some potential and believed in me.*

*I had one good probation officer. She got me linked up with a mother and baby group and got some money for me to set up my own flat. We got on really well, she took time with me and she knew about stuff which could help me.*

The recently published findings of the Fawcett Society's Commission on Women in the Criminal Justice System concluded that women are being 'shoe horned' into a male-based system. It articulated the different issues for women who offend, and the subsequent need for the prison system and community sentences to

respond to these (Fawcett Commission, 2004). They recommended that the probation service develop gender specific community programmes for women, and alternatives to custody be reviewed urgently.

These conclusions mirror some of the action points outlined in the initial report from the government's 'Women's Offending Reduction Programme' (WORP, 2004). This is a multi-agency, three-year (2004 – 2007) strategic plan to address the current problems of effectively reducing offending by women. The initial report identifies a number of issues, in relation to bail and remand; sentencing; community provision; prisoner resettlement; women offender management and crime prevention. However, this initial statement of intention appears to lack an acknowledgement that addressing many of these will require a potentially different and conflicting ethos to that which prevails in the current criminal justice system – the generic principles driving interventions which aim to reduce crime targeting individual factors, rather than addressing social and political issues associated to offending.



## 5. Alternative Approaches to Delivering Services to Women Who Offend

This chapter explores some of alternative approaches to delivering services to women. Four distinct agencies currently available in the U.K. are described, what they aim to achieve, what they provide, and how their service is targeted at women who offend. The common goals and methods of these organisations are examined, as well as the obstacles that they face. The women interviewed for this project were accessing the ASHA Centre, STASH and Clean Break. Their perceptions and experiences are reported to illustrate from the service user’s perspective what can be effective about their approaches.

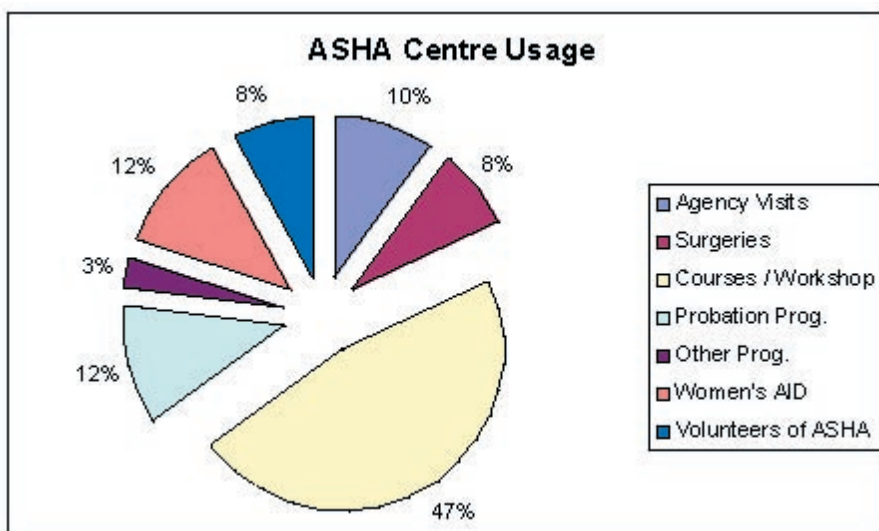
### The ASHA Women’s Centre

ASHA, which means ‘hope’ in Hindi, is a non-profit women’s organisation.

#### Mission Statement ‘Developing Women’s Resources’

*The ASHA Centre aims to benefit women who are isolated by disadvantage from resources that will help them to achieve their potential. The centre offers a safe women only environment with on-site childcare and help when transport is a barrier to accessing resources.*

A recent review of the ASHA Centre’s usage found that, during a one-year period (January –December 2003), 5200 adult women visits were made to the centre; a further 1054 visits were made to the centre by children. The following chart illustrates the proportionate use of different services in the women only site, by its adult women Service Users.



The main use of the Centre is for courses. These range from education such as English; ECDL; Computing, to vocational training such as Home Design; Health & Beauty; Child Development, to personal development courses including Confidence Building and Women’s Studies.

Other well accessed services include the agency visits from local resources such as Health Authority; Home Start; Employment Centre; Social Services etc; the Women’s AID agency based in the Centre; and surgeries offered by other agencies such as CAB; Family Law; and Counselling.

The other main form of usage at the ASHA centre is the delivery of West Mercia Probation programmes for women, accounting for 12% of the Centre’s usage. This results in women who offend being introduced to the centre and being encouraged to take advantage of the other resources onsite to address the wider issues they may be experiencing which are not within the remit of the probation programme.

## Women’s Project @ STASH

STASH is a street level harm reduction project working in Salford and Cheetham Hill in Manchester. It seeks to develop and deliver services following principles of community development and user involvement. The project is funded through Drug Action Team Manchester and National Health Service funds.

### STASH Mission Statement:

*STASH evolved as a user led project and is dedicated to the continued involvement and empowerment of current and former service users*

*STASH is a team of dedicated staff and volunteers who deliver realistic street based services and interventions to reduce drug related harm.*

*STASH continues to be at the forefront of developing services that meet the needs of hard to reach groups and offer positive lifestyle choices.*

*STASH offers a welcoming easy access user-friendly confidential service*

*STASH aims to work with service users and communities to break down barriers, promote understanding and find solutions to local drug problems.*

*STASH works in partnership with a range of other agencies to promote quality, choice and access to services for all.*

The agency operates a Women’s Project, although women can access many of the services throughout the week, on Monday afternoons the centre becomes a women only space. A second site has recently been secured which will house a full time women only project building. The following chart illustrates the range of facilities available to those attending the Women’s Project.

Drama / ART	Activities in the past have included: paintings which have been sold locally; the design of STASH promotional material; and the production of a video on Crack use.
Drug Treatment	Fast access and low threshold Methodone scheme is available on site, specifically for people who may find it hard to engage with CDT. Arrangements can be made for clients to pick up their scripts from STASH, all substitute drugs are taken on the premises.
Health Services	A range of health services are on offer to women, this includes harm reduction services such as needle exchange and condoms, advice services and complimentary therapies such as massage acupuncture.



Courses/Workshops	Education and self development courses are available in a range of topics including reading and writing; Computing; and Women’s Studies.
Childcare/Parent Support	As well as on site childcare the centre offers Parent Survival classes and general support to parents in dealing with other agencies and statutory services.
Transport	A minibus is available to the project and they support new service users by transporting them to their initial appointments. This is also used on trips and other activities outside the centre.
Advocacy	The project ensure they are well linked to other agencies offering complimentary services, and make connections between their service users and potentially useful agencies, including counselling, employment and housing services.
User Forum	This is a mixed gender group managing the services through a weekly meeting which votes on elements of service delivery from the activities available, funding, methods of service etc. They also organise other community activities such as needle collection schemes and attendance at drugs conferences.

The project is well accessed by local women where the majority of referral and engagement is a result of either outreach work or ‘word of mouth’. The project has a good reputation on the streets ‘if you walk in they’ll help you’. Although links are made with other agencies and statutory services this has not led to a volume of referrals through this route. A nearby probation office was offering its own women’s morning, unaware of the resources available at Stash.

## Clean Break Theatre

The Clean Break Theatre Company was founded in 1979 by two women during their sentences at Askham Grange Prison, as a powerful and unique voice for women prisoners and ex-offenders – it is the first and only company of its kind.

Clean Break offers women ex-offenders a voice through which they can express their experiences, and a chance to rebuild their lives through a programme of professional support and education. An annual professional theatre production is the company’s public voice, raising awareness of issues around women and crime.

There are many reasons why women attend the project, based in a safe women only space, including:

- To build confidence and esteem
- To try something new and different
- To use theatre as a stepping stone to change
- To expand educational and employment opportunities
- To learn to communicate effectively
- To meet new people
- To use time constructively
- To gain London Open College Network qualifications

## Education Courses

The education courses offered by Clean Break are associated to skills and confidence provoked through performance and include acting at all levels; Creative Writing and Performance Poetry; Dance and Drumming; Technical Theatre. Other courses which support this learning include the Self Development and Basic Skills modules. Many of the women are encouraged to go on to complete the ACCESS course to Theatre in the Community at Clean Break in preparation for higher education through a mainstream Drama School or University.

## Student Support at Clean Break

All students receive travel expenses, help with child care, lunch money and careers guidance including volunteer placements at other Arts organisations. However, the student support services are also tailored to the individual’s needs and experiences, for example phone calls to encourage attendance or advice regarding welfare rights.

## Clean Break in Women’s Prisons

Some of the women accessing the project hear about Clean Break when they are in prison, links have been made with a number of prisons housing women from the inner London area with workshops and performances being delivered inside the prisons. Another route maybe through the creative writing advice service - while in prison women can send their creative writing to Clean Break and gain free and confidential feedback from a professional playwright.

In August 1998 Clean Break moved to new premises in Kentish Town, North London. The centre brings together all the work of the project, providing high quality facilities including fully equipped studios, meeting rooms and a multi media suite where women come to undertake the education courses detailed above.

The project is well established now and receives regular funding from London Arts Board; London Borough of Camden; London Borough Grants; and Arts Council England. Additional funding is raised each year from trusts and foundations, sponsors and donations.

## 218 The Alternative

*218 is a new service for women offenders. It’s job is to address the root causes of women’s offending*

The project established in August 2003 offers a holistic approach to working with women offenders in Glasgow, Scotland. Providing residential and day programmes of care, support and development designed to stop women’s offending by tackling the substance misuse, the trauma and poverty that drive it. The project draws on many disciplines to develop unique, person centred programmes for all women. The theory underpinning the project arises from an understanding of women’s growth, and the importance of relationships within this.

The genesis of the project is Turnaround which demonstrated that the revolving door syndrome of prison could be broken if the approach was relational and if women are helped and motivated. The initiative illustrated that

projects like these can make financial sense – it costs £9 million to imprison 300 women per year; the project will engage with over 500 women for the same cost. The centre is intended to function as an alternative to imprisonment (both remand and conviction stages), as such women can be referred to the centre from a number of sources including the police, courts, social workers and voluntary agencies.

## What Works?

These are the techniques and measures that are most effective – the philosophy being to find out what works and do more of it. The key features for 218 are as follows:

- Women are Primarily Relational – suggesting that taking time to form safe working relationships with women in key work, consistently being positive and open in manner.
- Model Non-blaming / Non-judgemental Language – to encourage women to be more compassionate and helpful towards themselves be careful to demonstrate this yourself, use accountable language and statements that are person centred.
- Daily / Weekly Goal Sheets – being responsive to when the woman needs a more intensive service, when things are going badly wrong see more of her, talk more and set tiny goals over short periods.
- Beginnings, Middles and Ends – Endings very powerful, for example preparing to leave the unit. Talk about it before it happens, plan how she would like it to be.

## What’s on Offer?

The project is both a residential and day facility and offers a wide range of interventions and support for women drug users. It offers women a variety of therapeutic services including formal and alternative therapies. Those which are formal include both One to One work using basic counselling skills and solution based therapy techniques and Group Work ranging from issues based groupwork to informal discussions over meals. The women are encouraged to utilise Meditation Techniques taught in small group sessions

There are also a number of Alternative health therapies available to assist in detoxification, including Acupuncture, Indian Head Massage and Chill Out Zones where light, music and oil burners are used to enhance relaxation, to aid sleep and withdrawal for the women service users.

Importantly women are encouraged to maintain relationships and links existing prior to entering the project, and throughout there is acknowledgement of strategies for a supported exit which will ensure consolidation of the benefits gained within 218. This is the CORE of a ‘Hub and Spoke’ Model, where 218 will retain and establish care pathway ‘spokes’ in all directions to existing mainstream and specialist social, health care and judiciary services.

## Support

Throughout a woman’s time on the 218 project the support in all its forms is a key component in her reducing and letting go of her substance use, offending and history which may drive these. Practical and emotional support is on offer through the one to one, groupwork and informal peer support – there are a number of ‘packages’ which form the basis of this work. A woman service user suggested that ‘having a stable environment, routine, the methadone, and having the support of other women’ was what convinced her to stay and engage with the services on offer.

The staff recognise the importance of the environment, and how critical this is for the women in terms of ensuring that they can relax and take advantage of the facilities. When questioned about whether the project is a ‘soft option’ staff recounted the support of the local community. Cathy Jamison Scotland’s Justice Minister is equally adamant suggesting ‘It is a rigorous community alternative to which the courts and other services can refer women. It will challenge behaviour and attitudes as well as offer help’. The following quote from Sophia Young, the Manager of 218, illustrates the central factor of the project’s success.

*The primary idea that is going on here is relationships. What works for women is relationships. Women don’t want to hear about anything from you until they know about you. What is your story? Do you have kids? What do you do? Oh, that’s who you are. Ok, what do you have to tell me? (Guardian, 19th February 2004)*

## Common Goals & Methods

There are a number of common threads in the aims employed by these services. All the projects are delivered within a ‘safe’ women only environment, ensuring a confidential service. They are focussed on the individual and their specific needs, personalising a holistic approach for each woman from a variety of services available. A common aim is to reduce the sense of isolation experienced by their service users by increasing their access to a wider set of support networks. All the projects have made links to other available resources, recognising the need for a multi-agency approach. Three of the four projects have clear progression routes, which aim to ensure sustained involvement and support.

In order to assist their service users to meet their potential the projects engender motivation and engagement through promoting choice and agency by the individual. Importantly this means understanding the starting point of the woman and having realistic expectations of that person. In some cases this might also include developing a user-led forum linked to the management of the project.

The approaches used by these agencies follow from these aims and objectives:

- Acknowledging the importance of relationships for women, both the personal relationships of the service user and those with staff in the agency
- Providing a flexible approach to support and advocacy, responding to the needs and previous experiences of the service user
- Encouraging both constructive use of time and personal growth through a mixture of education, personal reflection and development, drama and arts, and alternative health therapies.
- Addressing practical issues such as childcare and transport – either through on-site / agency services or reimbursing costs to the service user.
- Responding to the experiences and views of service users, through forums set up to enable their input or through pro-active approaches to evaluating and ensuring services are user led.

The interviews undertaken for this research project illustrated that it is these features that influence the service user’s experience, and the subsequent effectiveness of the projects.

*I find it easier to talk to people here than I thought I would. I need to talk that's why I come here most days even though I don't have to.*

*Guess I do feel cut off, do it to myself I suppose I don't feel very confident going places. Coming here makes a difference.*

*Some of the staff here aren't even ex-users but for whatever reasons they do understand and want to help. You don't feel like they think they're better than you.*

*I get all my support from here other than that I've got just one mate who's not on it [drugs].*

*Here I can say 'open me up' it makes me cry sometimes but that's ok too now I'm learning to cope with all those feelings. People say lots of things to you like 'you're bad' and you believe it until you come somewhere like this and they actually want to find out who you are.*

*What really appealed to me was the women only environment, I could come here and be myself. I felt understood we share similar experiences. You know we've been in care or in prison, experienced violence or depression, or just got kids playing up at home. If men were allowed in here I couldn't have come and opened up like I have.*

*The self-development course has been really rewarding for me. It was all about me, I'd never done anything like that before I think for women its always about someone else.*

*Its knowing that others have been through situations, knowing its not just you.*

*A lot of it is getting basic support and information, I've spent most of my life not knowing where to go for help. That's why information and the confidence to use it is so important.*

## Common Problems

### Taking the pressure off through appropriate funding...

While these individual stories reflect the success of these agencies at working with women who offend, there are also problems that are commonly encountered by projects such as those discussed here. These were anecdotally referred to by the project's staff. The main problem is sustaining these services for women who offend and gaining a long-term commitment to funding. The projects often operate on temporary basis, resulting in staff working in an environment of uncertainty, and service users being continually at risk of losing critical support. Even at Clean Break, where the project has experienced both longevity and a good financial turnover, a struggle is experienced each year where staff feel the pressure and often only through innovative approaches to fundraising is that demand met.

### Increasing access and bridging the 'gap'...

A further issue that such agencies commonly experience is the problem of developing pro-active links to the statutory services their users are also attending. The differing philosophies and priorities can often

mean that the links are reliant upon the effort of individual members of staff, rather than being supported by organisational processes. Many of these projects report the struggle to gain referrals from statutory services, while ironically those working in the statutory sector are often crying out for appropriate agencies to refer service users to. This is an extremely complex issue. It speaks to the wider problem of increasing access to effective services for women who offend and also effectively bridging those working within the statutory sector to these agencies – whilst ensuring that the services are not colonised by the criminal justice system and as a result lose their effectiveness.

### Realistic expectations for a complex problem...

One final concern requiring consideration is the acknowledgement that even services such as these have limitations, as with any single project or intervention it cannot be regarded as a panacea. It is only through the mobilisation of a number of different areas of policy that a greater impact will be made. The following account illustrates both this, but also the potential gains of involving non-criminal justice agencies in the delivery of effective services to women who offend.

In the late 1980’s the Commissioner for Corrections in Canada established a Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women. Its aims were similar to those of the current Home Office Women’s Offending Reduction Programme initiative here in the UK. The report *Creating Choices* produced in 1990 outlined five main principles: empowerment; meaningful and responsible choices; respect and dignity; supportive environments and shared responsibility. While recommendations were accepted and implemented, the vision many of those involved had hoped for did not appear.

*This well intentioned reform initiative inadvertently reinforces traditional conceptualisations of punishment and further entrenches our reliance on the prison (or in this case more ‘women centred prisons’) as a solution. (Kelly Hannah-Moffat, 2002 p. 203)*

It was anticipated that all women would engage. However as with any initiative there will be those for whom it is either inappropriate or who are not ‘ready’ to engage. In the Canadian experience these women were further pathologised, deemed ‘unempowerable’ and as a result sent to secure wings in men’s institutions with little or no initiatives available.

Of the women interviewed for this research project two referred to this problem of placing expectations on services that they can and will always appeal to all women, that they suit everyone’s needs, and that women will not question the value themselves from time to time.

*I heard about this four or five years ago but it didn’t attract me then. I wasn’t ready. As far as I was concerned ‘they’ couldn’t help me, I’d done my time and that was it.*

*At the end of the day it’s up to me. Sometimes I wonder why I’m coming here. I mean what changes. Yes I can feel better but sometimes I stop coming for a while because it feels as if its making things worse.*

## Emerging questions...

- These issues are important to bear in mind when considering the future, and how to take forward services for women who offend.
- To what extent can services within the criminal justice system be reformed and modified for women?
- Should the criminal justice system adopt the approaches of the voluntary sector? What can be expected of such an initiative?
- How can the funding of these services be improved, whilst ensuring that they retain their autonomy?
- How can these agencies increase access for women who offend? Should this be driven by greater links between statutory sector and voluntary agencies?
- If at all, in what way should these services and the statutory criminal justice system be connected?
- As with the 218 Alternative should other sectors be able to deliver services within the criminal justice system?
- How do we recognise the diversity among women who offend and develop a more skilled approach to addressing women’s offending?

These questions are explored in the following and final chapter, exploring the conclusions drawn from the research project and beginning to identify clear recommendations for the future.



## 6. Conclusions & Recommendations in the Current Context

The aim of the project was to explore from the service user’s perspective the relationship between what women want, in order to desist from offending and what women are currently accessing from criminal justice and other non-statutory agencies. Clearly there is a large disparity between the two, particularly when considering what women currently experience from criminal justice agencies such as the Prison and Probation Services. Moreover, the criminal justice system seems unable to accommodate the needs of women, in ways which women view as effective.

### What do women want from services?

The findings from literature and the service user’s perspectives illustrate that the needs of many women who offend are multiple. As a result of their personal histories, place within society and past experiences of statutory sector agencies effective services must consider the following needs.

In many cases it is crucial to acknowledge the importance and subsequent impact of women’s roles and experiences in the domestic sphere and wider society, such as parenting, care giving or in personal relationships, on their choices to offend. Recognising that the offending of a large majority of women supports this assertion. It is because of this, and the types of offences women commit, the current concepts of risk and penal theories may be inappropriate. Therefore the application of male-based assessment tools, such as OASYS, will need to be skilfully applied.

The goals agencies set for their work with women who offend must acknowledge that issues such as accommodation and family are central to both motivating and enacting change. Also, in other areas such as education and employment, agencies must set realistic goals for the women they are engaging, recognising issues such as the ‘poverty trap’ for women on benefits, and the likelihood that many women will need to build confidence prior to developing work specific skills.

In enabling and encouraging women to access services the practical issues faced by them as a result of their roles and experiences must be addressed, for example providing childcare or assisting with safe transport. For some women these issues may also be emotional and require other responses, such as providing a women only environment.

Where the woman’s offending is associated to drug use or mental health problems it will be crucial to acknowledge the underlying issues which influence the onset and continuation of these issues. There is substantial evidence illustrating the linkages between drug use and mental health problems and histories of neglect and abuse. Recent reports have demonstrated that there is currently a largely unmet need for counselling services for women who offend. An effective service must be able to identify these needs and respond appropriately either through their own services or through robust and confidential partnership arrangements.

These all illustrate that the experiences, roles, social and personal needs and offending are interconnected for many women who offend. Therefore effective services must acknowledge this and respond holistically.



## What do women get from services?

This ‘holistic’ approach seems ambitious, and almost paradoxical for services lying in the current context of criminal justice. The probation service seems unable to respond to these women and this often results in women breaching community orders and merely delaying rather than preventing imprisonment. The entry of women into both the prison and probation systems often has the effect of exasperating and compounding their problems rather than resolving them.

Women are currently ‘shoe horned’ into a system which has been designed in response to male offending, and which is influenced by the political issues, penal aims and methods of a society concerned with reducing risk. Where attempts have been made to develop a more ‘women centred’ approach some gains have been made. However, the current imprisonment rates, the proportion of women in prison who are on remand, and the levels of breach for community orders all illustrate that the current approach within the CJS is not effective for many women who offend.

The approach to delivering services, coupled with women’s commonly negative experiences of social services and criminal justice agencies, means women who offend are often difficult to engage and distrustful of statutory services offering ‘help’.

Those who have closely observed the Canadian Correctional System’s experience, arguably one step ahead of the U.K, now acknowledge that it may be unfeasible to provide effective services to many women who offend within the criminal justice system.

*Canada’s history of women’s imprisonment reveals that building an institution based on the perceived needs and experiences of women prisoners, employing only female staff, and integrating feminist, maternal and therapeutic discourses with a penal regime is not original or radical... it does illustrate that certain institutional dynamics have continually undermined the successful implementation of reformer’s ideals. The dominant feature of penal reform is its seeming inability to fracture the prison / punishment nexus. (Kelly Hannah-Moffat, 2002 p. 217)*

The women participating in this project, whilst being sceptical about the potential of criminal justice agencies at addressing their offending related needs, reported voluntarily engaging with other agencies which they perceive as providing support networks, both formal and informal.

There were repeated experiences of service users accessing voluntary sector agencies, seen to be: providing safe environments, reducing the sense of isolation, offering flexible and continual support, addressing their practical issues, and revealing their potential by having realistic expectations and a personalised approach - agencies who listen to their users, don’t label them and are prepared to deal with the ‘whole person’.

However, as was identified by the staff from the voluntary sector agencies that participated in this research, these services are often only reaching the tip of the iceberg. Some of the women interviewed confirmed that they themselves had failed to access these community support agencies previously and this may reflect the experience of a vast number of other women who offend. Therefore strategies, which acknowledge this problem and attempt to ensure wider participation, are essential.

Yet, the voluntary sector often lacks the necessary infrastructure to engage women on a large scale. They are in

a position to deliver services to them. However, they are often small agencies, and while their strength is that they work in a specific location with a specific group and are responsive to the needs of their service users, they cannot meet the needs of women on a much larger scale.

## The Role of the Voluntary Sector: Is NOMS an opportunity for change?

The review of criminal justice services conducted by Patrick Carter in 2003 has led to the establishment of the National Offender Management Service, a merging of prisons and probation to manage offenders more effectively. The report concluded that there should be a wider range of custodial and community options available for sentencers, and that the provision of these interventions should be opened up to ‘contestability’. This was endorsed by the government in their response to the review ‘Reducing Crimes: Changing Live’ (Home Office, 2004).

*We want the most cost effective custodial and community sentences no matter who delivers them.* (Blunkett, 2004)

The development of NOMS could provide an opportunity for services in the voluntary and private sector, such as those explored within this project, to develop more systematically their work with women who offend and contribute to reducing crime. However, there is concern that many of the voluntary sector agencies who are working effectively with those who offend may be too small to ‘compete’ at the anticipated regional level. There is some cautious optimism in the voluntary sector that, through the development of partnerships and collaborative approaches, these constraints may be overcome (Martin, 2004). The new National Offender Manager has identified that understanding issues of funding and reducing barriers for voluntary and community sector is urgently needed (Knott, 2004).

A more recent announcement by Charles Clarke, the new Home Secretary, in March 2005 confirms plans devote £9.15 million to pilot ‘radical’ new approaches to meet the specific needs of women offenders - first announced in the 2004 spending review (HM Treasury, 2004). Speaking at a Fawcett Society press conference Charles Clarke said:

*Community supervision and support centres are an innovative solution to the particular issues that women offenders face. This initiative is especially significant because this is the first time the Government has allocated funding specifically to tackle women’s offending. ... I am concerned about the increase in the women’s prison population in recent years and the wider impact and disruption this has on their children and families. Prison should only be used for those who really need to be there. These new initiatives will tackle issues like drug dependency and mental health problems in the community at an early stage, and help ensure that custody is used only as a last resort.* (Clarke, 2005)

This illustrates the potential for re-stating the problems of women’s offending. Perhaps raising questions about whether attempts should be made to reform within the system, or to look for approaches to diverting a large proportion of women who offend from the criminal justice system to other agencies better able to address their offending related needs.

## The Future - Thinking Outside the Box

We can learn from looking over our own ‘parapet’ in the U.K. There are ‘new’ criminal justice models being developed in European countries such as Croatia where the utilisation of early diversionary models form a significant aspect of their response to offending (International Probation Conference, January 2004)

Other recently published research in America by the Open Society Institute (OSI) evidences the potential benefits of reinvesting criminal justice funds into capacity and community building projects (Tucker and Cadora, 2004). The OSI illustrated that a large proportion of the money from criminal justice and social justice policies was being channelled into the same neighbourhoods, while often creating conflicting results. They suggest a redeployment of funds which the state would normally spend on incarceration, to blend with other funding streams which focus on local community restoration projects to ‘allow communities to rebuild the physical infrastructure and social fabrics of their own neighbourhoods.

One size does not fit all, so we have to be imaginative in finding the right ‘mix’ of services which respond to the diverse offending by women. We need to find ways which prevent women from entering the CJS so early, where their needs and subsequent offending could be more effectively addressed by alternative agencies. Parallels already exist within the area of Child Protection where ‘family units’ (charitable in this case, for example National Children’s Homes) exist to undertake assessments of parenting skills on behalf of Social Services, to determine the level of intervention required for the family.

This begs the question, are there two (or more) groups of women currently in the criminal justice system – women who offend and those who are women offenders? The former posing little risk to their communities who through services which can address the woman’s personal and social needs, can reduce their offending. This would require a robust diversionary approach to ensure that such services are available and increase access to these agencies by the appropriate women. The latter are those women who, for reasons of risk or punishment may also require sanctions delivered by criminal justice agencies.

Where this is necessary programmes, which are appropriate for these women, will need to be developed within the National Offender Management Service. As will systems for effective assessment and clear sentencing guidelines which address the issues specific to women. What can projects such as 218 The Alternative offer? Attendance at this project is an order of the court, and therefore enforceable, but it is delivered in a way which is separate yet bridged to the statutory criminal justice system. The Scottish Executive Justice Department have commissioned an evaluation the 218 Project, which is currently being undertaken, including a baseline phase, process evaluation and outcome evaluation. It is anticipated that the results of this will be available by the end of 2005.

## Recommendations

While many of the conclusions drawn here reflect philosophical principles and debates, where change would be unfeasible without the extremely unlikely event of a revolution, there are a number of concrete ways forward for both understanding and practice which emerge. These, outlined in the following recommendations, if implemented would increase the prospects of delivering effective services and reducing offending by women.

- To explore the opportunities for diverting those women identified as low risk and high need offenders from the CJS to other agencies better placed to address their offending. This will require available provision for pre-court assessors to propose, and importantly the support and confidence of the courts and Sentencers in such disposals.
- To develop the credibility, availability and visibility of voluntary sector services for women who offend, working to these evidenced principles and approaches. This would be achieved through wider funding of the delivery Women’s Projects, including planned evaluation and endorsement.
- To engage with and include the views of service users when developing services for women who offend both within and external to the criminal justice system.
- To increase the access of women offenders to available services and resources within the voluntary sector by recruiting other service users to act as peer advocates. This may include utilising these individuals to make credible links between statutory and voluntary sector agencies.
- To encourage innovative partnerships between statutory and voluntary sector agencies that share the wider goal of addressing women’s offending, whilst recognising the benefits of the voluntary sector retaining its autonomy and unique approach.

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- Information on ASHA, [ashaproject@btinternet.com](mailto:ashaproject@btinternet.com)
- Information on Clean Break, [general@cleanbreak.org.uk](mailto:general@cleanbreak.org.uk)
- Information on STASH, [stash@waterlooproject.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:stash@waterlooproject.fsnet.co.uk)
- Information on 218 The Alternative, [infor@218.org.uk](mailto:infor@218.org.uk)