

## **ONCE IN A GENERATION OPPORTUNITY - IMPLEMENTING THE INDEPENDENT SENTENCING REVIEW FOR WOMEN**

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### **Abstract**

The Independent Sentencing Review represents a once in a generation opportunity to make the criminal justice system fairer and more effective. This article suggests how several recommendations for women might be implemented, drawing on pioneering research and evidence of ‘what works’. This includes, first, the important role of gender-responsive tools, in particular the Women’s Risk Needs Assessment (WRNA), recently validated in the UK for the first time by the University of Birmingham. Adopting tools that meet these standards is essential for ensuring pre-sentence reports identify a much wider range of needs and are gender- and trauma-responsive. Through this, practitioners are better able to tailor appropriate support for women to improve wellbeing against numerous metrics, while reducing re-offending (linked to Recommendation 6.3). Secondly, it discusses lessons from the Birmingham women’s Intensive Supervision Court (ISC), with emerging evidence showing great promise through its use of the WRNA and strong partnerships with women’s centres and numerous agencies, to inform the Government’s ISC expansion (Recommendation 6.1). Thirdly, we emphasise the importance of early intervention through women’s centres (linked to Recommendation 6.2) and other integrated and multi-disciplinary support, preventing the need for sentencing altogether. Combined, this article highlights evidence and opportunities for ‘how’ we capitalise on the Independent Sentencing Review’s momentum.

### **Introduction**

The Corston Report (2007) was pivotal in advocating for the radical change that is needed for women in the criminal justice system. At its core, it highlighted the vital need for a holistic, wrap-around approach that aligned with women’s unique needs and pathways into crime. Whilst this sentiment was largely well received and a number of great steps towards progress were made, there were several missed opportunities, both in terms of policy, and ensuring effective long-term stability (Gelsthorpe and Russell, 2018). In the wake of the Independent Sentencing Review (2025), which we believe is ambitious given the current social and political climate, it is critical such opportunities are not again missed. Whilst the review makes a number of recommendations that we believe have the potential to genuinely improve the lives of many women in the criminal justice system (CJS), careful implementation is required, learning from the existing and growing evidence of ‘what works’. This article first highlights some of the most pertinent recommendations for women in the review, outlines the key contemporary evidence before suggesting some opportunities for effective implementation.

### **The Independent Sentencing Review**

For the purpose of this article, we focus on the implementation of five of the recommendations in the Independent Sentencing Review (2025) that appear to us to have the potential to have most impact for women.

- Recommendation 6.1: Expand the availability of Intensive Supervision Courts to address prolific offending.
- Recommendation 6.2: Provide more sustainable and long-term funding to Women’s Centres.
- Recommendation 6.3: Ensure female offenders receive appropriate support by (1) expanding the use of liaison and diversion and (2) considering a women’s specific pathway as part of Drug and Alcohol treatment requirements.
- Recommendation 7.2: Increase funding available for the third sector to support the Probation Service to manage offenders in the community and enable increased commissioning of local organisations.
- Recommendation 7.3: Expand the use of the third sector to support offenders on community sentences and licence, to help the Probation Service prioritise resource and improve outcomes for offenders.

## **Evidence into what works for women**

Women's specialist services have been working tirelessly for decades, supporting thousands of women to improve their lives. However, effective monitoring of impact and evaluations have been somewhat limited (Gelsthorpe and Russell, 2018). The sector is therefore often underestimated, doubted or underfunded; so often caught in a cycle of having to prove themselves but without the resources to do so. A persuasive evidence base is however emerging. New research by the Women Crime and Justice Research group (WCJR) at the University of Birmingham (2025) helps showcase the impact of women's services, supporting what many in the sector have advocated for years. This is that women's journeys into the criminal justice system are unique and complex, criminal justice-involved women face many intersecting needs, and effective treatment requires a tailored, wrap-around approach. Such needs are of course experienced by men also. However, as the discussion below highlights, the prevalence of violence against women and girls, exploitation and associated trauma, clearly make for a significant distinction and unique injustices. This evidence, amongst growing research into innovative practices such as Intensive Supervision Courts (ISC) can help guide how the recommendations of the Independent Sentencing Review can be effectively implemented.

### ***The Women's Risk Needs Assessment***

The Women's Risk Needs Assessment (WRNA) is a comprehensive trauma-informed assessment designed specifically to be used with criminal justice-involved women. The assessment asks questions across multiple and recognised sub-scales of needs and strengths including housing safety, employment, mental health, abuse and substance misuse. On the basis of such questions, a unique web of needs and strengths can be determined for each woman, and a clear assessment of risk can be established, with appropriate interventions being suggested. There are of course various other forms of assessments, but the WRNA stands out for its depth and evidenced application of recognised scales, e.g. on mental health. The WRNA further assesses various factors related to women entering different stages of the criminal justice system, involving multiple components such as case file review, semi-structured interviews, written surveys and case management treatment plans (Summers and Pemberton, 2024). While other 'earlier intervention' assessments are being explored, the WRNA assessments are tailored to address the specific needs and risks faced by women on probation, in institutions (prison), and in the pre-release stages from institutions (Summers and Pemberton, 2024). Whilst the tool was initially developed in the U.S, and validated in multiple other countries, the University of Birmingham have recently undertaken a process to ensure the WRNA is adapted to the sociocultural context of the UK (Pemberton et al., 2025a).

The WRNA has just been validated for the first time in the UK, in a collaborate project with the Ministry of Justice. In short, this means that there is statistically significant evidence that the WRNA's assessment of needs and strengths allows for a reliable prediction of risk of reoffending (Pemberton et al., 2025a). Running alongside the WRNA validation, the University of Birmingham WCJR group have also developed a Gendered Wellbeing Assessment (GWA). This is a comprehensive trauma-informed quality of life assessment for women with complex needs, but without criminal justice involvement (University of Birmingham, 2025). The WRNA, and going forward the GWA, are delivered in a number of women's centres in the UK as part of the Effective Women's Centres Partnership, with further national rollout planned for the coming years (The JABBS Foundation for Women and Girls, 2024a). The GWA is therefore fundamentally about how the system, including women's centres, can shift and collaborate to help women much sooner – by building a more comprehensive understanding of needs earlier and within a context of stronger partnerships and referral routes with health and support agencies.

The notion that women's pathways into the criminal justice system are unique and gender specific is well understood amongst criminologists (Singh et al., 2019). There is also an increased understanding about what unique needs criminal justice-involved women face, such as abuse, parental stress and mental ill-health (Voorhis, 2012). This is largely understood in a qualitative sense, especially by those who work closely with this cohort of women on the frontline. The WRNA, however, is unique in its ability to quantitatively capture needs amongst this cohort - accurately, comprehensively, and with greater reliability. The possibility to conduct analysis into the unique interactions and cumulative effects of various needs and strengths is therefore unlocked. Based on a study of 506 women from three women's centres, it was identified that:

- 81.4% of women had a mental health diagnosis, over four times more than the general population (NHS Digital, 2014), or referral with over 60.0% finding that the symptoms of their mental health conditions impacted their daily functioning.

- 80.8% had experienced physical or sexual abuse as either an adult or child. This is four times higher than the general population (Office for National Statistics, 2022).
- 51.2% reported substance misuse to be involved with their current offence, with a further 29.6% using drugs as a coping mechanism.
- 51.6% have experienced homelessness or have lived in hostel/shelter accommodation.
- 64.6% feel they can depend on themselves (self-efficacy).

(Summers et al., 2024a)

Not only is the prevalence of need clearly significant amongst this cohort, but statistical analysis has demonstrated more precisely the intersection between needs. This found that the increased severity of particular needs can concurrently escalate the severity of others. This, again, will not surprise anyone working on the frontline, but the research adds credence to the arguments many in the sector have made for generations. Here, substance abuse, mental health and abuse are shown to be particular drivers of compounding needs and complexity (Summers et al., 2024b). In turn, the complex connections between needs drive involvement with the criminal justice system. More specifically, it finds:

- Those who experience abuse as adults and children are likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mental health problems and substance abuse in general.
- Childhood abuse has a strong link to homelessness and mental health issues that in turn go on to drive substance abuse, which in turn drives antisocial friends, employment/financial troubles and involvement in the CJS.
- Abuse as an adult is a driver for employment and financial problems.
- Substance abuse is a strong predictor of antisocial friends, and the reverse is true almost to an equal degree. There is a 'vicious triangle' between antisocial friends, housing safety and substance abuse. The problem is propagated where prison drives more experiences of antisocial friends and substance abuse.
- A persistent pattern is that mental health problems both past and present drive substance abuse, which can, in turn drive mental health issues.
- PTSD and previous mental health issues are strong predictors of anxiety and depression, which drives substance abuse.

(Summers et al., 2024b)

These trends were further reflected in the validation (i.e. the evidence of the WRNA's predictive value) - women identified as high risk by the WRNA due to their combination of multiple severe needs, were 6.1 times more likely to reoffend compared to those in the low-risk category (Pemberton et al., 2025a).

### ***Women's centres and holistic offers***

Since the Corston Report (2007), the number of women's centres has grown significantly, in line with the reports recommendation to develop a large network of holistic 'one stop shops' for women (Plechowicz, 2015). Women's centres are solely for women and typically staffed by women, creating safe spaces to foster empowerment and provide support across practical and emotional needs (Plechowicz, 2015). They aim to support 'complex and interlinked unmet needs and develop the strengths of women who may be overlooked within mainstream statutory provision' (Pemberton et al., 2025b:2).

Capturing the impact of women's specialist services is challenging not least due to budget limitations. The WRNA will help support quantitative evidence to highlight the success of women's centres in reducing reoffending and improved wellbeing. This will cement findings from the meta-analytical review of Summers et al. (2025), showing gender responsive<sup>1</sup> interventions are 42% more effective at reducing reoffending than gender neutral interventions. Therapeutic interventions, which are those that adopt participative group practices to support recovery from mental illness and substance abuse, are 24% more effective. Those interventions that seek to address multiple needs together, such as substance misuse, mental ill-health and trauma, are 34% more effective. This is further corroborated by a Ministry of Justice (2024a) analysis which found that the reoffending rate was

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<sup>1</sup> Gender responsive approaches recognise women's distinct needs, psychological development, and life experiences. As such, they disrupt gendered pathways into the criminal justice system, address inter-related needs simultaneously, use a range of methods (including an assessment such as WRNA), are designed with and for women, and are delivered in a physically and psychologically safe space for women (Summers et al., 2025).

26% for women supported by the women's centre Together Women, compared to 35% who received no support. Reoffending frequency was also less in the support group (1.1) compared to the comparison group (1.5).

The safe spaces and empowerment fostered by women's centres are also significant. WRNA analysis shows that self-efficacy (i.e. self-belief in the ability to succeed) is negatively correlated with most other needs and thus when it increases, the severity of needs is reduced (Summers et al., 2024b). This is further confirmed by the WRNA validation which highlighted that self-efficacy emerged as a significant protective factor against convictions and offending probability (Pemberton et al., 2025a).

### ***Women's Intensive Supervision Courts***

Intensive Supervision Courts (ISC) 'divert offenders with complex needs away from custodial sentences and into enhanced community-based sentences which address underlying causes of offending' (Ministry of Justice, 2024:6). The aim is that support is delivered by a multi-disciplinary team which includes social care, housing, probation, police and other services and is overseen by a single judge. As you might expect, the true level of integrated support services is likely to be patchy in reality. Vitaly however, ISCs have, so far, ensured that a cohort of women that would have otherwise been imprisoned have instead received intensive support in the community.

In the context of the Birmingham women's ISC, women's centres are key to delivery of the community support elements and to undertaking a WRNA with the women involved (Doal and McNeil, 2025), a sentiment that was echoed by the interim review of ISCs (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Women who have been through the Birmingham women's ISC have spoken favourably of the impact it has had on their lives e.g. "they could have put me in jail or anything, but they gave me a chance, it's been a lifeline" (Anawim, 2025). Early outcomes are positive: 65% of those involved would have otherwise received a custodial sentence, and significant improvements to individuals' wellbeing, mental health, self-esteem and substance misuse reductions have been reported (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Evidently, far more research is needed to have confidence about the nuances of what ISCs can achieve, building on the existing evidence base of problem-solving courts internationally (Castellano, 2011). Pragmatically speaking, for now, those who have seen the work of ISCs first-hand recognise the immense impact of this novel process. Current prisons minister Lord Timpson OBE notably states that "the best day I've had on this job [...] was going to the Intensive Supervision Court in Birmingham, it was incredibly uplifting" (Hansard, 2025).

### **Implementing the Independent Sentencing Review**

Whilst there is still significant opportunity to enhance the evidence base for effective work with criminal justice-involved women, there is a clear direction of travel or understanding of 'what works'. Below, we focus on three key overarching suggestions for the effective implementation of the Independent Sentencing Review. These are the use of gender responsive tools; early intervention in women's centres and other holistic early help offers; and the roll-out of women's ISCs. These suggestions are of course interrelated.

#### ***Gender responsive assessment tools***

Effective sentencing requires a thorough assessment of needs and risks as part of a pre-sentence report (PSR) to ensure not only the safety of victims but to reduce reoffending and improve outcomes for offenders. Here, with use of tools such as the WRNA, the burden can be reduced for probation with third sector organisations such as women's centres being able to provide detailed assessments of women's needs and therefore deliver appropriate interventions. This will allow for probation to be more tailored in their management of offenders. In turn we have the chance to increase the likelihood of community sentences genuinely supporting prevention by addressing the root drivers of their offending. Such assessments need to be sensitive to the unique gendered pathways into crime.

Implementation enablers:

- Regional probation services should ensure they consider how they engage with, fund and support local women's centres who use the WRNA. The Effective Women's Centres Partnership has led to the adoption of the WRNA by seven women's centres (The JABBS Foundation for Women and Girls, 2024a) but roll-out to more women's centres nationally is planned in the coming months and years (The JABBS Foundation for Women and Girls, 2025). Partnerships such as these can allow for more tailored PSRs,

thereby enabling probation to prioritise more effectively and provide tailored community sentences that address identified needs.

- Probation should apply lessons from the WRNA in further developing and/or evolving their own assessment tools and offender management. This can help support probation to make more accurate assessments of risk for women and ensure risk assessment tools are trauma informed and gender responsive. Such learning can also help support the proposed trial for a new risk offending system within probation (Ministry of Justice, 2025a).
- Liaison and Diversion teams (NHS England, 2025) should utilise the outputs of assessment tools like the WRNA, in partnership with women's centres, to identify needs and to ensure appropriate sentences and referrals. The WRNA can establish a detailed picture of a woman's health, social and drug and alcohol needs and can therefore suggest the interventions that will have the greatest impact on reducing reoffending. Sentences and offender management decisions can therefore be made so as to have the most positive long-term impact, especially health and wellbeing.

### ***Early intervention in women's centres and other holistic offers***

Third sector organisations such as women's centres and those providing whole-family holistic early help should be prioritised. This includes alignment with the government's proposed new Best Start Family Hubs which will act as a one-stop-shop for families (Department of Education, 2025). This is to prevent re-offending and the need for sentencing in the first place, but also to expand the use of community offender management and diversion. Doing so requires sustainable and long-term funding for women's centres to reduce the burden on probation and allow them to expand their offer to provide numerous interventions earlier and collaborate with local early help providers.

Implementation enablers:

- A proportion of the new £700 million announced for Probation (Ministry of Justice, 2025b) should be ring-fenced for women's centres, specifically for community diversion at 'earlier' stages of contact with women in crisis. This would expand the capacity for women's centres at a time where fewer women are expected to be sentenced to custody. This could likewise mean that a proportion of probation caseload could feasibly be allocated to women's centres. By allocating funding from probation budgets there is also an implicit duty for regional probation teams to work collaboratively with women's centres, utilising them for community sentences and rehabilitation - highlighting risk before it escalates.
- Integrated and multi-disciplinary early help and intervention services should be seen as key partners in prevention and community sentencing. Individuals are less likely to reoffend or commit crime at all, if their needs are being addressed and this plausibly extends to their families. Enabled by detailed assessments such as the WRNA and GWA, prevention services and sentencing should also consider the needs of the whole family. The Families First Partnership (FFP) announcement by the Department for Education represents new national investment in multi-agency family help services in local authorities (Stanley, 2025). The FFP should be utilised to ensure better collaboration between the Ministry of Justice, other government departments and early help initiatives. We recommend a more concerted effort from government to ensure join-up between agendas to widen access to compassionate community support.

### ***The roll-out of Women's Intensive Supervision Courts***

Women's centres and the WRNA, where possible, must be seen as crucial to the effective rollout of women's ISCs to support detailed PSRs, provide holistic support for women and to provide access to a variety of other relevant services. Those assessing the ISCs new Expressions of Interest (Ministry of Justice, 2025c) should ensure this is carefully considered when selecting areas for new women's ISCs, recognising the learning from the Birmingham pilot (West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, 2023).

Implementation enablers:

- Learning from the existing pilots should be shared and utilised by those who establish new ISCs to ensure new courts are multi-disciplinary and are sensitive to the variety of partners which are necessary for success. The JABBS Foundation for Women and Girls (2024b) has funded the Centre for Justice Innovation to create ISC and diversion networks, supporting sharing of best practice and operational

delivery. We recommend government, agencies and the third sector engage with the networks to gain support with both new ISCs and early intervention through community diversion. The Expression of Interest (Ministry of Justice, 2025c) asks for partners with which the applicant will work. Establishing a genuinely integrated partnership early is incredibly important for addressing multiple complex needs. Expressions of Interests should be judged accordingly.

- Women's centres must be funded to manage the additional casework and resource required to be involved in an ISC and this should be considered as a necessity in funding allocated to ISC roll-out. In the case of the Birmingham women's ISC it was the Police and Crime Commissioner that funded the women's centres for their involvement. However, it was an imperfect short-term arrangement and more long-term funding is needed to ensure sustainability (Doal and McNeil, 2025). Co-location of services, such as drug and alcohol treatment providers working in a joined-up way at women's centres, is likely to be fundamental in order for ISCs to succeed.

## Conclusion

The Independent Sentencing Review (2025) offers a once in a generation opportunity to transform outcomes for women in, or at risk of entering, the criminal justice system. To ensure this is realised, implementation must learn closely from the lessons of 'what works' and the growing evidence base; prioritising gender-responsive, trauma-informed and multi-disciplinary practice. The review will succeed if it is able to recognise and build on existing examples of success.

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