

The nature and effectiveness of the MoJ's strategy for women offenders and those at risk of re-offending/integrated across government:

- Corston recommended “distinct radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach” delivered via specialised women’s centres to work with women offenders which would ‘address the roots of offending and aim to reduce exclusion and isolation through provision of specialised and long-term interventions and providing gateways to mainstream services.’ Our experience in Shropshire and Telford is that there is little real support for this across the agencies despite there being no women’s provision at all.
- In Worcestershire, ASHA Women’s Centre is a specialised women’s centre that received MoJ funding, via NOMS, to deliver a service to Worcester and this has been welcomed, to the extent that we have co-located Probation staff within ASHA to provide a streamlined service to women offenders, enabling women to report to Offender Managers in the supportive environment of ASHA, accessing resources/services swiftly etc.
- Our experience as Lead Partner in the ESF funded AIM Partnership is that other government departments do not have a brief to develop women only provision. Delivery of the Corston Report’s recommendations should be not just the responsibility of central government; women offenders’ needs must be met by every level of government The AIM Partnership is a multi sector partnership based in the West Midlands region funded to develop innovative approaches to the employment needs of offenders and their families and has targeted the specific needs of women. Our finding is that there is too little understanding at regional and local level of how to meet the needs of women offenders and too much reliance on references to Corston in place of proposals for action. The key lesson still to be learnt from Corston is that responding to (and reducing) women’s offending is not just a matter for the criminal justice system, it is the responsibility of all departments of government at all levels.
- The nature and effectiveness of the MoJ’s governance structures for women offenders
- NOMS independently decided the grant/outcome targets expected of women’s centres and this largely related to referral targets and engagement targets across the 7 pathways as well as supporting women who have been abused/raped/experienced domestic violence and supporting women who are/have been in prostitution – as per Corston’s findings. NOMS set out clear reporting requirements, every quarter. However, the reporting and targets were all about “engagement” as opposed to outcome based and therefore little evidence has been collected regarding how many women reduced their level of alcohol/drug use or abstained, in what way children, families and relationships had improved etc. In the absence of measurable outcomes, the “engagement” data has served little purpose. In addition, there is no data/evidence linking levels of engagement to reduced re-offending.
- In April 2012, NOMS grants for Women’s Centres were devolved to local Trusts with ring fenced funding for the Women’s Centres already receiving the grant. On one hand NOMS said they would leave it for local Trusts to decide how they managed this grant and then put in place a quarterly reporting requirement – of data that was significantly different to that data set previously requested by the Women’s Centre. For ASHA, this caused considerable confusion with them feeling they had to collect too much data and not knowing who in NOMS they now needed to report to; with us as a Trust trying to enforce that they now needed to send the data back to us. Our NOMS Community Contract Management Team was also unaware of the new data reporting tool that had been devised. ASHA have several contacts in NOMS whom they go to directly (e.g.

in the Women's Policy team) and clearly the information provided by one team in NOMS has not always been consistent with what our Community Contract Management Team.

The extent to which the gender equality duty has become a lever for mainstream service commissioners – outside of the criminal justice system – to provide services which tackle the underlying causes of female offending

- Very little evidence of this, including Health; depression, mental health, self harm, alcohol and drugs are key areas of need for women however the Health and Wellbeing Boards do not make reference to women's health and, specifically, women offender health is not a priority. Our experience has been that it has been difficult for Probation to get representation on Health and Wellbeing Boards in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, where we could be in a position to have greater influence on these issues.
- ASHA, our Worcester Women's Centre also have a limited vision of service delivery and are also unable to deliver across West Mercia which leaves a substantial unmet need. Other local partners, including YSS our strategic partnership, do however tap into resources for small scale women's projects.

The suitability of women's estate and regimes, range, quality and sustainable community provision for different groups (under 18s, BME, foreign nationals, mental health etc)

- Corston stated that "custodial sentences for women must be reserved for serious and violent offenders who pose a threat to the public and women, unlikely to receive a custodial sentence should not be remanded in custody". However, approximately 60% of remanded women do not go on to get a custodial sentence. It is also evident that women, as prime carers, need to be in establishments as close to home as possible. In West Mercia however, there is no facility to hold women locally. There is also limited community provision and Sustainability of women's projects is not supported beyond current funding arrangements. For example, Here4women folded in Hereford at very short notice, despite being highlighted as example of good practice by HMIP only a year before. There is very little provision for BME, foreign nationals or women mental health specific services; although such services are accessed via ASHA and our strategic partnership with YSS through the Lloyds TSB Mental Health grant.
- Nick Hardwick, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, in his Feb 2012 Lecture – "Women in Prisons: Corston 5 years on", states that "all our evidence is that women do best in smaller open or semi-open conditions – allowing contact between women and their families. Very few women pose the same threat as men re: escaping or uniting together to overthrow the authority of the prison". This lends itself to the idea of small, local community based options. West Mercia are developing a women's Residential Alternative to Custody, community option; a community order which includes a 7 week residence requirement, and can include curfew and unpaid work as additional requirements. Maintaining their accommodation, contact with family and education, training and employment and addressing health and areas of need are key components to the proposal. Interestingly ASHA have advised they do not have the appetite for a residential women's project, in Worcester or the wider West Mercia criminal justice area and we are pursuing other interested parties, specifically Willowdene Care Farm who are also able to offer a social enterprise holiday let scheme where the women will learn and gain experience and qualifications in the hospitality trade.
- We have also, through the AIM partnership, piloted approaches for working with women to develop a range of skills via a seven-week personal development course in the context of improving their employability. The course aimed to support the development of women's thinking and listening skills, and to enable them to develop personal responsibility and self-efficacy. Many of these skills being those that women require for successful competition in the labour market. The programme has been delivered to three cohorts with a further enhanced programme planned for Autumn 2012 in partnership with Willowdene Care Farm. Conscious that each participant needs to tread an individual path in terms of their personal development, the AIM women's mentoring project has provided an individually tailored approach along with the benefits of peer support through group work approaches. An important feature of the programme has been the offer of work experience placements and opportunities to volunteer in or to develop social enterprises.

- Another AIM pilot is the groundbreaking partnership arrangement between Worcestershire Supporting People and the *FIP and YSS to deliver interventions to the families of offenders. The Worcestershire FIP is a family support service based on the Think Family model and links to the 'troubled families' agenda. The application of intensive, holistic, employment focused support for ex offenders and their family members was piloted. The offenders identified by this project are those who have complex needs that are beyond the scope of the standard pathways services. Expanding FIP support with a focus on women and dependent children would be welcome, rather than just a focus on male offenders or young men at risk of anti social behaviour.
- The AIM Partnership operates across the region and across statutory, private and voluntary sectors. Experience from AIM is that our action research delivered through our pilots is identifying a strong need for specialist provision in ETE services that meet the needs of women offenders; the best results have been those delivered in partnership.

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Notes

*FIP: Family Intervention Project. The Worcestershire FIP is a family support service based on the Think Family model.

YSS: a social inclusion charity providing support for those at risk of social exclusion. Previously known as Youth Support Services.