



Equality and Social Justice Committee: Women's Experiences in the Criminal Justice System

Response from Safer Wales

1. Safer Wales, is an award-winning community safety charity with over 20 years' experience delivering community safety services, including women's, gender, and trauma-informed services, primarily in Wales. Across Safer Wales, our teams continue to engage people, working with them to improve their safety and well-being, as well as that of their families and communities. We provided direct support to approximately 2,000 people during the year, with approximately 85% being women and girls. In addition, 1000's people have been able to access community radio, Radio Cardiff and connect to communities across Cardiff through music, discussion, news, and local events. We are service delivery focused and our experience enables us to engage women directly or to represent the views of women's experiences for consultations, policy, media, research, victim, and survivor panels. We reduce women's risk of entering and escalating through the CJS, as demonstrated through our services, particularly our Women's Services for women involved in the CJS including:
 - a. Women's Pathfinder Whole System Approach (WSA)
 - b. StreetLife: reaches, engages, and empowers women exploited through prostitution across South Wales and Gwent
 - c. Women's Prison Independent Domestic Sexual Violence Advisor (IDSV) Service (VAWDASV) for women returning to Wales from HMP Eastwood Park and Styal, engaging women in custody and supporting through to the community
 - d. Castle House Women's Centre (Cardiff City Centre) – trauma-informed, safe space, where probation staff holding female cases are co-located in Castle House Women's Centre
 - e. One women's Centre – part of a partnership, funded until May 2023, delivering a centre and support for women in HMP Eastwood Park through to their communities in Wales
 - f. Ethnically Diverse Specialist provision for women involved with the CJS
 - g. Voluntary Community Service, including volunteer mentoring

- h. Youth Services – Includes supporting and empowering young people, particularly girls, up to 25 years of age, at risk of involvement in the CJS, criminal, gang-related harm and sexual exploitation.
- 2. As a community safety charity, multi-agency partnership working is core to our values and approach to increasing community safety. We work in partnership with public, private and Third Sector agencies. This approach ensures the needs of the women we support are recognised and services are better equipped to respond. For example, in partnership with partners involved with the Women’s Justice Blueprint, we worked collaboratively to identify barriers and respond to specific needs of ethnically diverse women in or at risk of entering the criminal justice system. Our established partnerships with criminal justice statutory agencies and ethnically diverse-led community partners enabled us to develop a designated service to highlight issues impacting ethnically diverse women involved with the CJS, working towards enhancing responsive services in line with Wales CJS Race Equality commitments. We believe the recognition and support for local innovation will further inform development and delivery of effective services for women in Wales. It is important that the delivery of the Women’s Justice Blueprint incorporates a flexible approach, informed by local characteristics/need/communities, so fostering innovation, whilst simultaneously sustaining provision will be a challenge, particularly in this current economic climate.
- 3. Our way of working maintains and develops our already strong and robust partnerships, evidenced through our work with the Probation Service. Our strengthened operational partnerships and developing buy-in resulted in co-location of probation within Safer Wales Castle House Women’s Centre, which has been delivering women’s probation services through the centre, since 2015. Working together we developed a culture and model of delivery widely recognised as sector best practice across England & Wales , whilst continuing to improve sustainable services for women at our Women’s Centre. Women’s Centres, such as Safer Wales Castle House Women’s Centre provide safe spaces for women and vital access to wider statutory and voluntary services.
- 4. A Senior Probation Officer expressed some of the benefits of Safer Wales Castle House Women’s Centre *“The diversity and frequency of the activities at Safer Wales are really excellent...The activities on offer provide a safe and supportive environment for the women. They allow the women to take part in pro social activities, have emotional support and learn new skills. It also offers Probation staff a different means of engaging with the women ie on a holistic basis so we can talk to them in a “non offending” capacity... Myself and the Women’s Probation Team have been delighted to work alongside Safer Wales, as part of a ‘whole system approach’ to supporting women, and have seen first hand how much the women are enjoying being here and the positive contribution the service is making to supporting individual wellbeing and resilience building.”* This co-located approach is recognised within the Women’s Justice Blueprint and Safer Wales welcomes the increased number of women’s co-located provisions across Wales. To further realise the Blueprint’s ambition to support women to engage with services in the community and

for all women to benefit from such arrangements, we need further co-location arrangements for women's services across all geographical areas in Wales.

5. Safer Wales welcomes the Women's Justice Blueprint (Female Offending Blueprint). It establishes a unified vision for women's justice in Wales, demonstrates collective commitment and through the inclusion of key objectives and deliverables, it provides an accountable, multi-agency document.
6. It is worth noting that involvement of key partners and people with lived experience continually informs the work being delivered through the blueprint. This is notable through our delivery of WSA and Safer Wales work with ethnically diverse women involved with the criminal justice system, as well as multi-agency partner involvement with the workstreams across the blueprint. Another example is the recognition of the significant impact of stigma on women who have been or are involved in the criminal justice system and a move towards the use of less stigmatising language and a more strength-based approach. One example of how the impact of language reinforces stigma associated with involvement in criminal justice is the terms used to describe this work. The decision to move to Women's Justice Blueprint, rather than Female Offending Blueprint is a welcome one. However, stigma surrounding people who have been involved with the criminal justice system poses a significant and ongoing challenge, one which reduces women's access to services and increases barriers (personal and systemic) to positive progression. The Women's Justice Blueprint has started this journey and we are keen to see this develop further.
7. Significant challenges still exist, challenges driven across our public services, these significantly impact on women involved in the CJS and their families. Examples include: the availability of housing for people, particularly for women who present with many needs and vulnerabilities, including health, substance use and VAWDASV; current cost-of-living crisis, leading to increased pressures and vulnerabilities for many women. Many of these issues are devolved matters. One such example is the lack of appropriate accommodation, which impacts upon women serving community sentences, as well as those on release from prison. As a Welsh Women's Aid Member and provider of WSA services, Safer Wales experiences first-hand the difficulties for women involved in the CJS, who are fleeing VAWDASV, to access appropriate and safe accommodation. Barriers to appropriate accommodation, such as women's specific needs (eg substance use, mental health) and the stigma relating to women who have been involved with the CJS, reduce opportunities for women to live safer, healthier lives. The demand for housing in Wales is huge, however unsuitable accommodation for women when they are at their most vulnerable creates a toxic situation. The availability of appropriate accommodation, with

attached specialist services is essential. The Women's Justice Blueprint brings together key partners in Wales. With the support from Statutory partners and Welsh Government, it is essential that Local Authorities and Community Safety Partnerships have ownership and are equally committed to the delivery of the Blueprint to ensure support is appropriately targeted and supported.

8. The Women's Justice Blueprint ambition to reduce the number of women in the system, including reducing women's imprisonment will, if successful, have a positive impact upon such challenges referenced above. Activities and deliverables identified through the Blueprint has the potential to help ensure support is available and reduce women's escalation through the CJS. If the projected increase in prison population, predicted by UK Government is realised, then this is concerning. It is crucial that now, more than ever, a focus on ensuring that increased use of prison is not inevitable, that sentencers know what community options exist and what wrap-around services are available to women. Our experience tells us that community sentences are more effective than short term prison sentences for women; community sentences enable more robust and meaningful engagement for the women. The development of the Women's Residential Centre must be seen as an alternative to prison custody for women, who would otherwise have gone to prison: a diversion from prison. That women will remain local and access community provisions, keeping them connected to their communities.
9. In addition, the increased Police numbers could pose a challenge to our collective ambitions. It is vital that Wales continues to focus on reducing women's imprisonment, that newly recruited Police Officers are aware of this ambition, know and understand the disposal options available to them, particularly diversion and out-of-court disposals. Our experience of working with the Police through WSA and our other services in South Wales and Gwent have witnessed and contributed to a significant positive shift in culture and operational practices. The Police have recognised the benefits of services such as WSA and StreetLife in engaging and supporting women and helping reduce their involvement in CJS. This learning and culture need to continue.
10. Delivering justice for Wales requires an integrated approach. The strength of partnership working and focus on trying to knit together and align working, as demonstrated through the Women's Justice Blueprint is admirable and shows Wales determination to improve and vision to achieve justice in Wales. Welsh Government and CJS partners in Wales have a demonstrable track record in developing strong, aligned partnerships, as demonstrated through the development of the Women's Justice Blueprint and the Youth Justice Blueprint (including adopting and championing a Children First approach to Youth Justice). However, whilst we still have two separate governments responsible for

commissioning and delivery of justice services for Welsh people, genuinely integrated approaches remain dependent upon strong and robust relationships and partnership working. Ultimately, introducing significant elements of insecurity regarding medium and long-term strategic and financial planning, innovation, and delivery. In practical terms, this risks delays in confirming funding, which has implications for providers, who often carry the risk and for the women who are supported who rely on sustainable, suitable, safe services; increased demand on capacity (impacting on all sectors) to navigate the complex devolved and non-devolved matters and relationships required; complex and sometimes segregated funding opportunities which risk duplication, impede access for Welsh NGO's (particularly smaller NGO's) to participate, and risk introducing conflicting priorities or not maximising alignment with current Welsh direction.

11. For women involved in the criminal justice system, including women leaving prison, it is vital that trauma-informed support is available to all women in Wales at all stages of the CJS. A notable outcome identified through the Women's Justice Blueprint is the delivery of diversion schemes across Wales for women involved with the criminal justice system. There have been some areas of additional support for women who are not diverted, however delivering a more comprehensive WSA model such as that in South Wales and Gwent, beyond South Wales and Gwent would benefit all women in Wales.
12. Safer Wales has been invited to set out our experiences of delivering the Women's Pathfinder Whole System Approach. We hope the panel finds the information relating to our additional experiences of delivering the Women's Pathfinder Whole System Approach (WSA) below informative and useful. The earlier we engage women, the better and services such as the Women's Pathfinder Whole System Approach, including 18-25 Early Intervention Services (WSA) delivered by Future 4 (through Safer Wales, G4S, Llamau and INCLUDE) in South Wales and Gwent does this.
13. As a member of Future 4 and responsible for the delivery of WSA (since it being commissioned in 2019), Safer Wales has had very positive experiences of partnership working with all partners, including our statutory partners. Safer Wales believes this is underpinned by the aligned vision and purpose for the delivery of the work. We all wish to reduce the number of women entering and escalating through the criminal justice system. Prior to WSA, Safer Wales was involved in the development of the Women's Pathfinder, including delivery of the Cym Taf CJS Diversionary pilot for women. One of the challenges that we encountered from partner agencies was "why women?" It has therefore, been vital to engage our partners and create buy-in, particularly from people serving on the frontline, eg the Police. Through the development and delivery of this work we have witnessed culture change, proactive approaches, and increased use of

professional judgement to aid women's access to our services, particularly WSA, but also broader Safer Wales provision. This is a significant shift and the aligned vision established through the Women's Justice Blueprint, alongside direct partner interaction, has facilitated this.

14. In the last 2 years, WSA in South Wales and Gwent, has supported over 2,000 women who have been involved in the CJS. Through robust partnership links, we have received referrals from a wide variety of agencies, including Police, Probation Services, Substance Use Services, Local Authorities and Third Sector organisations. WSA offers gender-specific support to women at any stage within the Criminal Justice System and engages women at the earliest opportunity:

- Women at risk of involvement with the criminal justice system
- Diverting women who have been arrested from escalating further through the CJS
- Women who have been charged and going through the Court process
- Women who have been sentenced – community or prison sentence
- Women who have completed their statutory orders, but still require some support.

15. Understanding the distinct needs and vulnerabilities of women involved in the CJS, we work closely with community partners including VAWDASV services, mental health, Housing and Social Services to ensure tailored support is offered including supporting women to meetings and appointments with new services.

16. Research has shown that Women who have offended are more likely to have a mental health need than men who have offended. The prevalence of mental health issues in the justice system are high, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Annual Report (2020) noted that 71% women in prison reported mental health issues, compared to 47% of men. Our team will work with mental health providers, social services and other key partners to enable the women to access the support they need. A woman who had received WSA support messaged her caseworker, saying: *"I hope u now that I am so thank full for everything you have done to help me I don't no who I'd be today if I didn't meet u I was heading down the wrong road i was on the egde of loosing my little boy I was unwell and so lost I couldn't understand what was happening to me I would of rathered of been dead and that's the truth u saved me and listened to me u didn't judge me for my mistakes and u gave the the best advise I can never thank you enough u don't get enough credit for all the work that u do to help me but I hope u no that I so thankful and il never forget xx"*

17. WSA work with partners to safeguard women including accessing refuge, crisis team, drug and alcohol services. We have qualified IDVA's on our team, attend local MARACS, support women at Child in Need meetings and work alongside Social Services to support women in accessing the support needed. A woman who disclosed significant domestic

abuse, substance use and financial needs benefitted from WSA support and our work with local partners and multi-agency information sharing arrangement, resulting in increased safety, reduced substance use and improved finances messaged stating *“Thank you (caseworker) for everything you have done for me and without your amazing and constant support, I would not be where I am now! I promise to keep in touch and moving forwards, I thank you again from my heart”*. This demonstrates the impact of the Women’s Justice Blueprint ambition to work collaboratively with partners to offer targeted, person-centred support.

18. Our teams are co-located in Custody Suites across South Wales and Gwent and work closely with police to ensure support is offered at the earliest opportunity, as well as working directly with women in the community setting. Women can access our WSA and Safer Wales services as part of an out-of-court disposal, including diversion from CJS Women are supported at all stages of the criminal justice process and beyond completion of statutory licence.
19. Our experience of delivering WSA has been one of collaboration and drive to innovate and improve services. Throughout the delivery of this service, we have met regularly with operational partners and discussed ways of improving women’s access to WSA. Examples include: Joint training to partner agencies, such as the Police, Magistrates/Court Service; development of pilot work such as pre-sentence courts; identify and respond to gaps, for example development of the provision for ethnically diverse women in the CJS.
20. Independent evaluation of the service, undertaken by Corbis Brite has found that women made positive progress through their support with WSA. Support is having a statistically significant positive impact on women’s outcomes in a range of areas, such as: Health & wellbeing; Life skills; Healthy relationships; Employment; Accommodation; Financial
21. These innovations, contributing to the ambitions of the Women’s Justice Blueprint have been developed through the WSA journey, with our partners and maximising the benefits that our Future 4 organisations bring, for example our Women’s centres, through INCLUDE and Safer Wales, our IDVA and specialist sexual violence support, including Safer Wales Prison IDVA service, supporting women experiencing VAWDASV and StreetLife provision, which provides services for women exploited through prostitution. All contribute to the continual development of delivery surrounding the blueprint.
22. The following case study demonstrates the complexity of need many of the women face, but also the strengths they have to improve their lives when appropriate multi-agency support is available.

Kath (not her real name), was referred to WSA from probation, had been recalled to Prison for Theft. Kath had an extensive history of offending and entrenched illicit substance misuse addiction. She is well known to services in the area and has been sentenced to custody several times. Kath has had her children removed by social services in the past, due to her chaotic lifestyle and has found it difficult to engage with services, due to how she feels she has been judged in the past.

Kath had multiple needs, which included needing support to: Gain stable housing; Access to an opiate substitute prescription and support around other substance misuse; reduce built up rent arrears & debt; help with benefit claims; to safeguard Kath from exploitation through prostitution; to work through trauma from historic domestic abuse and to link with social services to gain contact with her children.

It was difficult to build a relationship with Kath due to her distrust in services. However, Kath had established a good relationship with her probation officer. To develop a trusting relationship with Kath, WSA initially worked alongside the probation officer. This joint approach worked and WSA was able to engage with Kath independently and beyond her statutory licence with probation. This included supporting her throughout the pandemic, assisting with food parcel deliveries and emotional support: vital for her well-being and throughout this working with her, where she could review her priorities and refocus on where to go next. A lot of direct support was provided through WSA, helping Kath to trust other services. Some of Kath's achievements were:

- Successfully completing her probation period, in the community
- Remaining on her Bupropion prescription and continuing to engage in appointments with services.
- Gaining supported housing (as she was now managing payment plans for her rent arrears)
- Kath transitioned out of supported housing and is now in permanent accommodation
- Through encouragement and support, Kath developed a relationship with social services and now has regular contact with her children

Kath no longer needs support from WSA, although she knows she can contact us if she ever does. She has reported feeling that she was doing really well, felt safe and had built up her own skills and able to manage without the support.

23. Safer Wales recognises that together, we have travelled (and continue to travel) a significant journey here in Wales and the Women's Justice Blueprint continues to provide a focus and recognition of the needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system.

There is still much work to be done and we look forward to a continued collaborative approach to realising the Women's Justice Blueprint ambition. It is vital that we collectively continue to reduce gender-based inequalities in the system, reduce the number of women escalating through the criminal justice system and crucially working toward safer communities.