

## **Changing Lives' response to the Welsh Government's Inquiry into Poverty (September 2014)**

### **Introduction**

Changing Lives provides specialist support services for thousands of vulnerable people and their families, every month. Through our pioneering and innovative work we help people to make positive, lasting changes in their lives. We work with people experiencing homelessness, addiction and a range of other problems by reaching out in to our communities. We offer specialist support services for women and families, and provide employment opportunities for our clients.

The Women's Turnaround Service (WTS) , funded by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), is an all Wales service that offers a holistic service to women in Wales aged 18 and over that have offended or are at risk of offending. Our trained staff provides information, guidance and support tailored to the individual's needs in a friendly and women-only environment. We work with women on a one to one basis and deliver group programmes.

We offer support and advice on:

- Health & Well-Being
- Finance & Debt
- Children & Families
- Domestic Abuse
- Skills and Employment
- Substance Misuse
- Housing
- Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviour
- Support for Sex Workers

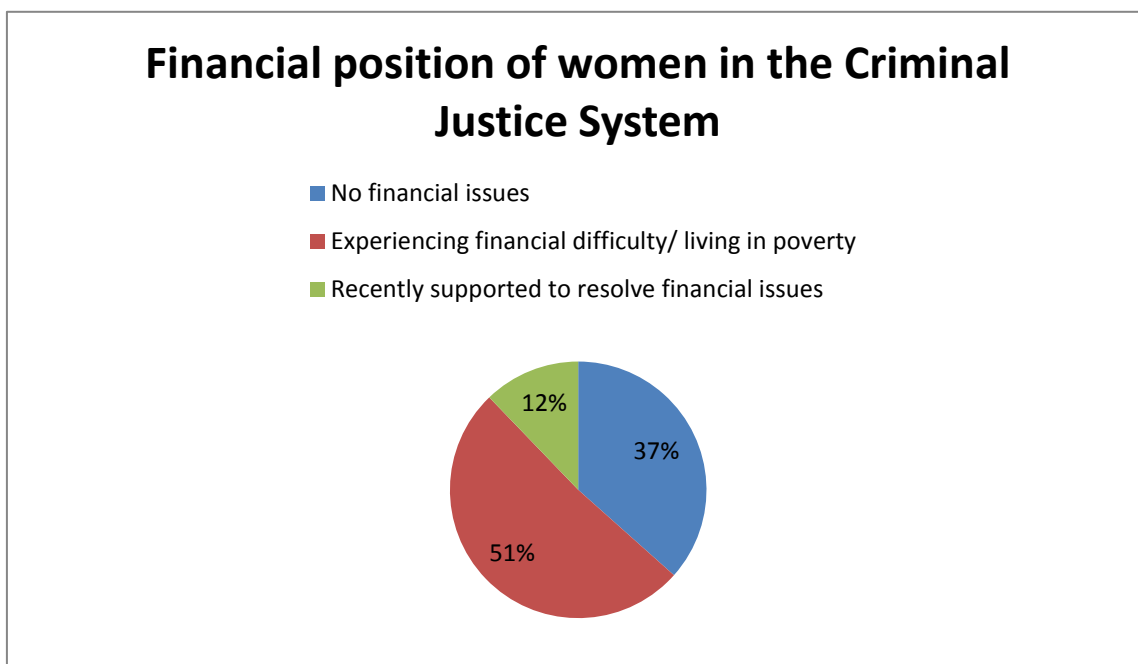
The focus of our response is on the impacts of poverty, particularly destitution and extreme poverty, on women in the Criminal Justice System. We are concerned about the impact of extreme poverty and destitution on the women that we support and would like to highlight to the Welsh Government the extent of poverty and their causes amongst our service users. As an indication, we provide 10 food parcels a fortnight to our service users in Cardiff alone and we are also aware that many of them also receive support from local food banks.

It is acknowledged that women commit more acquisitive crime rather than being perpetrators of serious violence, criminal damage and professional crime<sup>1</sup>. Their criminal activity is often linked to their poverty, as well as previous and current experiences of abuse and violence. Women are also more likely to be the primary

carers, which means that their financial circumstances and incarceration will impact directly on their children.

### 1. Prevalence of poverty

The women that we support have multiple and complex needs often across a number of the nine pathways for reducing reoffending. However, the pathway focusing on *Finance, Benefits and Debt* features quite highly in women’s lives. In the last financial year (2013/14), WTS worked with 47 women who identified debt and finances as their first and main priority need. In addition, during a snapshot look at the needs of women supported by WTS in July 2014, just over half of our service users (21 out of 41) faced poverty and/or destitution.



### 2. Causes of poverty

Some of the main issues that place the women that we support in poverty and or destitution are:

- **Impact of the Welfare Reform**
- **Domestic abuse and financial exploitation**
- **Lack of appropriate support mechanisms for women released from custody**
- **Substance misuse**
  
- **Impact of the Welfare Reform**

The impact of the Welfare Reform on women's lives has been significant. In the above chart, 12% represents women who had received support from WTS with their finances. This includes women who had their benefits sanctioned, required support to apply for the appropriate benefits or were impacted on by the Housing Benefit size criteria restrictions.

- **Domestic abuse and financial exploitation**

Over three quarters of the women supported by the WTS have current or previous experiences of a form of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) including domestic abuse, sexual violence and involvement in prostitution. In addition, in our July 2014 snapshot, a third of women who were experiencing poverty this was directly linked to domestic abuse or financial exploitation by family members. Some examples include:

- Women who are left with liabilities and debts in their names once they've left long-term controlling relationships.
- Women who have lost (or have never been allowed to acquire) the life skills to manage their finances, tenancies etc. They accumulate debt, face eviction and end up with in custody for non-payment of Council Tax, acquisitive crime etc. Women with learning disabilities in particular are overrepresented in the Criminal Justice System (20–30%)<sup>ii</sup> as they are particularly vulnerable and require additional support to prevent them from offending and/or reduce their chances of re-offending.
- Women who support their adult children to the detriment of their own financial stability and wellbeing. For example, one of our service users lives in complete destitution due to her son's gambling addiction.

- **Lack of appropriate support mechanisms for women released from custody**

Women released from custody receive a limited release grant that is often not sufficient for their survival over the period required to reinstate their benefits. The below case study is representative of many women that the service supports upon release from HMP Eastwood Park. This situation is often compounded by the fact that many women do not have any family or social support networks that they can rely on for support.

Claire (not her real name) is a 30 years old woman living in the Swansea area. She was sentenced to 22 months in prison for intent to supply and whilst she was in prison she completed the 12 step programme to stop using heroin. Claire has multiple and complex needs including previous childhood abuse, violent domestic abuse, substance misuse and self harming. As a result of the domestic violence, Claire was not able to protect her young son and he was removed from her care.

On release from prison on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2014, Changing Lives staff picked up Claire from the gate and continue to support her to the present day. Due to her circumstances and mental health needs Claire was claiming ESA prior to going to prison and on the day after her release made a claim for ESA benefit with the support of Changing Lives staff. On the same day, she was supported to present herself as homeless at housing options where she was given emergency B&B accommodation in Swansea.

Claire had a £47 discharge grant on release, to sustain her until her benefits claim was processed and paid. However, Claire did not receive her benefits until 28<sup>th</sup> July, which meant that she was had to survive on £46 for 20 days (£2.30 per day).

In addition, Claire did not manage in B&B accommodation. She came in contact with previous associates and she was not mentally well enough to be on her own in accommodation that did not feel a safe option for her and where she had no money or food. She started sofa surfing and borrowing money from family and friends to survive.

Because of the circumstances of her release with very little access to money, appropriate accommodation and her mental health problems, Claire has relied on her violent ex partner for money and a place to stay. She is in a cycle of borrowing money, paying it back, then borrowing again. She is living in poverty and this is impacting on her mental health and life choices regarding accommodation and finances.

Currently Claire is being supported to make changes to her circumstances; a new homelessness application has been completed and she has been supported to access and attend mental health services. She has also been referred to a domestic violence specialist. Poverty remains an issue where little changes have taken place for Claire. It is very difficult to help and support with this when a person is entrenched in a cycle of borrowing to survive; this undoubtedly impacts on the other issues she faces.

- **Substance misuse**

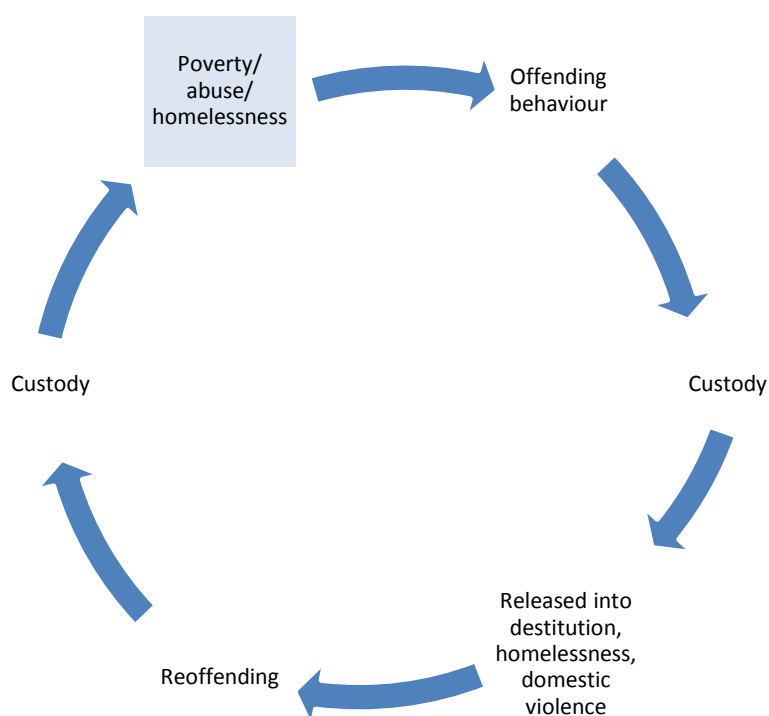
Substance misuse adds an extra barrier to women's journey into financial stability and a lifestyle away from crime. Women who are in co-dependent relationships are particularly vulnerable as often their partners rely on them to secure the funds for drugs and alcohol.

### **3. Recommendations**

Seven years have passed since the publication of the Corston report into the vulnerabilities of women in the Criminal Justice System. However, despite its recommendations, many women still are not in receipt of appropriate support that would prevent them from offending. Whilst gender based violence and offending intertwine, more joined up approaches are required to provide women with the right support at the right time. A more collaborative approach to supporting women in the Criminal Justice System would allow a seamless transition between specialist services.

Housing is a key criminogenic need that can lead to recidivism of criminal activity. However, provision is often patchy and unsuitable to the needs of vulnerable women. Some of our service users have been faced with the stark choice of being inappropriately housed, sofa surfing, returning to abusive relationships, exchanging sexual favours for accommodation or rough sleeping. For some of our service users, custody seems like a safer option to having to survive in destitution. The human cost of incarceration to the women and their families as well as the cost to the public purse (between £38,643 to £53,438 per annum) <sup>iii</sup> is immense. We are further concerned by the impact of the upcoming Housing Bill that will remove priority for women released from custody.

Many of our service users are trapped in a cycle of abuse, poverty and offending that our service helps them break out of.



However, there are many barriers and limitations ingrained in the system such as long waiting times for benefits to be reinstated, strict eligibility criteria for accessing housing, unsuitable housing provision, lack of specialist services for people with a dual diagnosis (mental health and substance misuse), to mention a few. We feel that a cross party commitment at a policy level is required to address some of the issues that prevent women from receiving appropriate statutory support upon release and when they are in crisis. Providing enhanced packages of support to women at an early stage will reduce their chances of reoffending, it will improve their health and wellbeing and it will ultimately lead to the reduced use of public services, generating savings for the state.

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<sup>i</sup> Corston, J. (2007) *The Corston Report – A report by Baroness Jean Corston of A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System*, Home Office

<sup>ii</sup> Loucks, N. (2007), *No One Knows: offenders with learning disabilities and learning difficulties*, Prison Reform Trust

<sup>iii</sup> MoJ (2012) *Judicial Engagement, Women in the Criminal Justice System – A briefing for Probation Trusts*