

**CORNWALL VOLUNTARY  
SECTOR FORUM  
PROMOTING CHANGE  
PROJECT**

# The Resettlement of Women Offenders: Learning the Lessons

A research project focusing on the experience of the female offender

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**Jill Annison, Patricia Gray and Lesley Simmonds 18 November 2016**

**Lankelly Chase**



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The Lankelly Chase Foundation is committed to using its independence and resources to bring about change that will transform the quality of life of people who face severe and multiple disadvantages (SMD); people on the extreme margins of society who are most exposed to social harm.

This echoes the Devon and Cornwall Office of Police and Crime Commissioner’s commitment within the Police and Crime Plan “to work with the Chief Constable and partners to introduce new services and systems designed to prevent reoffending and to stop people from offending, investing in the three key areas of: prevent, deter and intervene”.

The findings of this research specifically focus on the experience of the female offender.

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### Executive Summary

- A team of academics from the School of Law, Criminology and Government at the University of Plymouth were approached by the Women’s Rape and Sexual Assault Centre in Cornwall (WRSAC) to carry out a piece of independent research. The team worked in partnership with WRSAC to achieve this.
- The research was initiated by Cornwall VSF as part of the Cornwall Promoting Change project, jointly funded by The Lankelly Chase Foundation and the Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Commissioner. Further funding was provided by a University of Plymouth research facilitation grant.
- The purpose of the research was to explore the perceptions of women offenders concerning their needs, and the availability of services that could help them in meeting those needs, in their journeys towards desistance and resettlement. The research aimed to answer a number of questions:
  - What type of personal and socio-economic problems do women offenders experience both in prison and upon release?
  - What kind of rehabilitative support provision is available for women offenders both in prison and upon release?
  - How timely, useful and relevant do women offenders find this support both in preparation for release and on their return to the community?
  - What are the gaps in rehabilitative and resettlement support provision for women offenders?
  - How can rehabilitative and resettlement support be improved and further developed for women in prison and upon release to motivate them to stop offending?
- The methodology adopted for the research was qualitative in nature in order to gain rich data that would allow understanding, in respondents’ own words, of the issues that desistance and resettlement raise for them. We interviewed 15 women currently serving custodial sentences, who on release would return to live in Cornwall, as well as 14 women living in the community within Devon and Cornwall, post custody. We also interviewed a small number of staff working with women offenders (five).
- In order to address the aims of the research, the problems or worries that respondents had about their release were explored. We also asked about the support that they received whilst in custody, and the support that they would have liked to have received, to help them to deal with these worries/problems. This enabled the research team to identify gaps between the support that women would like, and the support that was available to them. Given that many women offenders have been victims of sexual and domestic violence, experiences of abuse and violence and the help they either did or did not

receive whilst in custody, were explored. Again this was undertaken in order to identify gaps in service provision. The interviews also explored the women's hopes for the future, levels of self-esteem and confidence in achieving desistance.

- Previous research has shown that women offenders experience high levels of personal and socio-economic disadvantage, which heightens their risk of re-offending and social exclusion. The problems that women offenders face are also inter-linked. Our findings aligned with this previous work with regard to the sorts of problems/worries that the research identified. Accommodation was a common and significant problem amongst the respondents; homes were at risk or even lost when the women entered custody. Whilst in custody, this created anxieties about becoming homeless or the need for hostel accommodation, which in turn, created a spiral into further problems such as substance misuse and further offending as a means of survival. Those with children experienced additional concerns about the lack of a 'family home' in which they could be reunited. The uncertainties surrounding the availability of stable accommodation and the avoidance of the previous chaos in their lives, led to some women being reluctant to leave custody, because of the worry about how they would manage in the community.
- Children and families were a further worry; from shielding young children in particular from the reality that their mother was serving a custodial sentence, to the breakdown of relationships with older children and their wider family were reported as concerns. Women with older children worried about the impact of their offending/imprisonment on their child's development in terms of being a good or bad role model. Although some expressed their desire to change their lives, it was clear that their reintegration back into the community was challenged by complex and inter-linked problems.
- Employment, training and education were also concerns. The women were unsure about their ability to find employment as ex-offenders and the stigma that this label carries. Lack of employment was also tied into worries about money/debt resolution, again indicating the inter-connectedness of problems that women offenders face. For some women, access to education was problematic because they could not access stable accommodation.
- Substance misuse was a further area of worry. For some respondents, custody had enabled them to access treatment services that they had been unable to receive in the community. However, uncertainties surrounding the availability of stable accommodation, finance and their ability to develop new social networks outside of previous substance misuse/criminogenic peer groups created anxiety about their release
- The women's experiences of the resettlement support received whilst in custody were also explored. For those in the community, many spoke of receiving limited help inside prison to prepare for their release and were not

aware of any resettlement plans being put in place<sup>1</sup>. Some felt neglected and angry about this, and those who did report receiving help described it as piecemeal and uncoordinated.

- The quality of the support received from resettlement staff upon release was commented upon. Expectations were that staff would work in an open and positive manner, and whilst some respondents were very pleased with their relationship with their worker, others were more negative. Those currently serving sentences in prison were asked about resettlement support prior to their release<sup>2</sup>. Most of those in prison felt that their relationships with prison officers and with other inmates were, in the main supportive<sup>3</sup>, and so in that sense was a source of assistance for future desistance/resettlement more widely. Family support was also seen as a key source of support, and if that continued upon their release, would also shore up efforts to move towards stability and a crime-free lifestyle.
- For the 'long stayers', who were not due to be released for another year or more, resettlement support was not currently being provided. Most of them were receiving help with practical issues such as mental health, drug and alcohol misuse and maintaining contact with their children, and were generally satisfied with the level of help provided.
- The 'shortly to be released' group of prisoners reported that no resettlement plans had been set in place to smooth their transition into the community. They felt as though they were 'being kept in the dark', that there was a 'lack of planning', and that there was 'piecemeal, fragmented support'.
- Perceptions of resettlement support were also explored with the five staff interviewed. The changes brought about by Transforming Rehabilitation were reported to have created some 'bedding in' difficulties as the new arrangements were put in place. Budget limitations also reduced the level of contact staff could have with women prior to their release. In the community, staff described accommodation, drugs and alcohol and health as major issues. The availability of spaces on programmes to deal with drug misuse issues, for example, was reported as a difficulty when seeking to refer women to the required support services. The multiple and complex nature of the problems

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<sup>1</sup> Please note, of those 14 women interviewed in the community, some had been released prior to the new 'Through the Gate' policies, developed under 'Transforming Rehabilitation'.

<sup>2</sup> Respondents in custody were all at different stages of sentence/resettlement processes. Half were not due for release for more than a year, and half were due for release in the next six months. We therefore categorised the sample of 15 respondents as 'long stayers' and 'shortly to be released'. For the 'long stayers' resettlement plans were not yet a consideration.

<sup>3</sup> As those women interviewed in custody were 'selected' by prison staff, it is possible that the sample was biased. A willingness to participate and communicate with the research team, as well as the assessed risk associated with interviewing some prisoners are all possible factors in the sample selection.

faced by women was also described; because problems tended to be a complex mix of inter-relating problems rather than discrete, women could potentially fall between the cracks of different services.

- As noted earlier, many women offenders have suffered the trauma of sexual and domestic violence and the findings from our sample confirmed this. Most of the women had experienced sexual and/or domestic violence, the latter at the hands of intimate partners and/parents. Some had also suffered sexual abuse as children. When we asked what help they had received, some reported that they had not sought help, either because they did not recognise themselves as victims, and in some cases 'self-blame'. We asked what help they had received in custody with such issues, and a significant number reported that they had not received any help. For some, support had been promised, but this did not then materialise. For those who did receive help, it was something of a mixed bag in terms of a range of different sources of assistance. In some cases, the support received tied in with the offence committed and their mental health. Although some respondents were positive about their experiences of a formal domestic violence programme, it was unclear whether there was a cohesive approach to the support available to all women. There also appeared to be a particular issue of access for those serving shorter sentences, with the time served being insufficient to arrange the required support. Of those who did not receive support for sexual and domestic violence in custody, the overwhelming view was that there should be such support on offer. In addition, given the complexity and sensitivity of the issues raised through support of this type, the importance of its continuation following release was also reported.
- Women in the community spoke more positively about the sexual and domestic violence support that they had received following their release. A range of services were cited and agencies and projects focusing upon women in particular were commended.
- Staff respondents confirmed that in their view, sexual and domestic violence was a common theme for women offenders, and a prime contributor to their offending. In terms of support, they identified the current funding cuts as limiting the ability to provide the required level of support. Reflecting this, the perceived budgetary issues were described as a major problem affecting their ability to support women offenders.
- Finally, the interviews explored levels of self-esteem and their hopes for the future to provide an indication of their potential to achieve legitimate and stable lifestyles. Overall, those in custody were, understandably, less positive about themselves and their hopes for the future than those in the community. In terms of good things, those in prison cited supportive partners, family and their children as the positives in life, with some saying that their time in prison had allowed them to rethink the things that matter. In terms of hopes for the future though, worries around debt, homelessness and what life would be like

on the outside, contributed to negative thoughts for those in custody. Again for those in custody, low self-esteem was integral to their thoughts about themselves in terms of their current imprisonment.

- Respondents in the community tended to be more positive about themselves, citing family, partners and children as ‘the good things in life’, as well as work and volunteering. Several women reported wanting to help other women going through imprisonment, and those who have experienced domestic violence.
- Most of the women were quite or very confident that they would not re-offend, either because their offence was not related to substance misuse/acquisitive crime, or the male partner who they saw as part of their offending was out of their lives. Those who were less confident about re-offending were those who were facing release without stable accommodation, with little idea about financial stability and were facing the prospect of mixing with their old social networks and isolation from family.

### **Our conclusions from the research are as follows:**

- None of the women who took part in this research had a clearly developed resettlement plan in place either before or after they were released from custody.
- Building positive relationships between all participants in the resettlement process is crucial to successfully resettling women back into the community upon release from prison.
- Women’s social support network is a fundamental component of successful resettlement.
- Women need practical help in order to settle back into the community successfully. Such help covers mental health, drug and alcohol misuse and family matters, as well as accommodation, finances, employment, education and training.
- Support needs to be provided holistically; this is not currently happening in Devon and Cornwall.
- Most of the women offenders had experienced sexual and domestic violence at some point in their lives, but therapeutic interventions and practical support either in prison or out of prison was not necessarily forthcoming.
- Low self-esteem is a particular issue for women offenders, with hopes for the future being tied to the resolution of practical issues relating to accommodation, employment/finances, drug and alcohol issues. Whilst women were confident that they would not re-offend, some saw the practical issues



they face back in the community as barriers to this.

**To summarise, the key lessons learnt are:**

- To enable a seamless transition from custody to the community, there needs to be better communication and links between the prison, the CRC and the NPS in Devon and Cornwall. Women prisoners and ex-offenders should be actively involved in this process.
- Positive relationships between all those involved in the resettlement process strengthen self-esteem and are essential to achieving successful re-integration in the community and desistance.
- Social support networks are an important component of successful resettlement. Women value and benefit from support that is free from the constraints of monitoring compliance in relation to their licence/ supervision conditions; ensuring adequate funding of schemes such as mentoring programmes could help to achieve successful resettlement and therefore desistance.
- Practical help which addresses mental health, substance use, finance and employment but most importantly, secure and stable accommodation should be a key part of the resettlement process.
- Increased co-operation, communication and partnership working between the prison, the CRC, the NPS and voluntary sector resettlement agencies is required to facilitate a strengthened holistic, strategic and operational resettlement vision for Devon and Cornwall.
- Women should be asked sensitively but routinely on entering custody about their experiences of sexual and domestic violence. Support should be made available immediately in order to allow women to work through their particular issues. The support should continue in the community, if this is required, and so should be part of a resettlement plan.
- It is important to ensure that a third sector agency that supports women who have experienced sexual and domestic violence is actively working in all prisons so that women get to know that agency and its workers and have a stable and continuous support system. The agency could then refer women to other providers, depending upon their needs. This would provide a more coherent pattern of service provision than appears to be in place currently.

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### 1. Background to the Research Study

#### 1.1. Introduction

This research was initiated by Cornwall VSF as part of the Cornwall Promoting Change project, funded by The Lankelly Chase Foundation. The project aimed to identify hidden aspects of the experience of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. Early engagement in the project had raised concerns regarding the experience of women offenders returning to Cornwall from Eastwood Park prison. Cornwall VSF decided to prioritise this area for further exploration and approached the OPCC for additional funding to support local research.

As a consequence Cornwall VSF commissioned the Women's Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (WRSAC) in partnership with a team of academics from the Criminology and Criminal Justice programme in the School of Law, Criminology and Government at the University of Plymouth to conduct the research. The involvement of the academic team at the University of Plymouth ensured the research would be supported by expertise in this field, and robustness and independence of the research findings.

#### 1.2. Aims of the Research Study

This research explored the perceptions of women offenders of the availability and quality of rehabilitative services to support them to stop offending and resettle into mainstream community life. Both women offenders in prison and upon release from custody participated. While the research focuses on the situation in Devon and Cornwall, it draws on wider academic and national research studies to analyse and interpret the findings. Specifically the research explored the following questions:

- What type of personal and socio-economic problems do women offenders experience both in prison and upon release?
- What kind of rehabilitative support provision is available for women offenders both in prison and upon release?
- How timely, useful and relevant do women offenders find this support both in preparation for release and on their return to the community?
- What are the gaps in rehabilitative and resettlement support provision for women offenders?
- How can rehabilitative and resettlement support be improved and further developed for women in prison and upon release to motivate them to stop offending?

### 2. Literature Review

Research has shown that women offenders have experienced high levels of personal and socio-economic disadvantage which heightens their risk of reoffending and social exclusion. Levitas et al. (2007) identified three indicators for measuring social disadvantage in the areas of 'resources', 'participation' and 'quality of life', and women offenders score highly on each of these indicators. The first indicator, 'resources', refers to income and the quality of family and other interpersonal support networks. Research shows that 33% of women prisoners lose their homes and often their possessions while in prison and that the majority have experienced severe conflicts in interpersonal relationships, with 46% reporting having suffered a history of domestic abuse (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). 'Participation' in education, training and employment is the second indicator. Here the research shows that women offenders have poor educational achievement, with 32% permanently excluded from school and just 8.5% of women leaving prison having a positive resettlement outcome on employment. 'Quality of life' was the final indicator and refers to emotional well-being and mental health issues. Again research shows that women in custody have serious needs in this area, with 78% exhibiting some level of psychological disturbance compared with a figure of 15% for the general female population. Drug and alcohol misuse is also a serious problem, with 52% surveyed in prison saying that they had used heroin, crack, or cocaine powder in the four weeks prior to custody (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). Overall, women offenders have been subject to complex, interrelated types of social disadvantage amounting to what Levitas et al. (2007: 100) categorise as 'deep exclusion'.

Desistance is the term used by criminologists to describe and explain the challenges that offenders face and the processes that they navigate as they make the decision to stop offending. Research suggests that desistance is a complex process, with some studies emphasising the 'subjective' aspects of this process and others the 'objective' or 'social' factors (McNeill, 2006). While 'subjective' dimensions refer to psychological or individual changes in offenders' developmental maturity, cognitive and reasoning skills and self identity, 'objective' factors include changes to offenders' social situation and social networks (McNeill and Weaver, 2010). Desistance research shows that women make the decision to stop offending when changes in their way of thinking are accompanied by improvements in their social situation (McNeill and Weaver, 2010). The core message of research on desistance is that if women are to be supported to stop offending a 'holistic' balance needs to be maintained between interventions which facilitate change in their individual way of thinking, that is their attitudes and beliefs, and concurrent change in their social situation, for example engagement with drug treatment programmes, inclusion in training schemes and finding secure employment.

Unfortunately periods of imprisonment tend to reinforce women's psycho-social and economic difficulties and further reduce their motivation to desist from

crime. Almost half (45%) of women leaving prison are reconvicted within one year (Ministry of Justice, 2014). The Corston Inquiry set out to improve rehabilitative support services for women offenders both inside the prison and upon their return to the community by recommending the development of more 'women friendly' provision (Annison, Brayford and Deering, 2015). However most of the recommendations of the Corston Report (2007) have been implemented in a somewhat piecemeal fashion (Player, 2013). This partly arises from cuts in public spending and partly from the disruptions caused by the introduction of the 'Transforming Rehabilitation' agenda in 2014. This set out to reform the rehabilitation of offenders in the community, in prison and upon release in order to reduce reoffending (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016). Probation Trusts were disbanded, split, semi-privatised and replaced by a National Probation Service (NPS) and 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs). The NPS was to manage high risk of serious harm offenders and the CRCs were to manage low to medium risk offenders. These changes have completely restructured the delivery of rehabilitative services to women offenders (Annison, Burke and Senior, 2014). The negative impact of these changes is reflected in two recent inspection reports which show that women prisoners are often inadequately prepared for release and that their resettlement needs are not effectively addressed in the community (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016).

The *2014 Offender Rehabilitation Act* set a minimum of 12 month's statutory supervision for all prisoners on release who were sentenced to prison and all female prisons were designated as resettlement prisons. 'Through the Gate' is a new strategic policy agenda which is a vital component of the above reform package and which aims to provide a seamless range of support services from custody to the community delivered and co-ordinated by CRCs to prepare prisoners for release and resettlement (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016). It recognises that resettlement must be delivered as an integrated holistic package if it is to succeed in motivating and supporting offenders to desist from crime. This approach begins with screening in prison, followed by the development of a coordinated resettlement plan to be completed within 5 days. Many of the above changes were still being introduced in 2015 and up to the production of this report.

### 3. Research Design and Methodology

#### 3.1. Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted to reflect the potentially sensitive nature of the research questions and a semi-structured interview schedule was developed for face-to-face interviews with women offenders (see Appendices One and Two) and staff (see Appendix Three). This approach also allowed the issues to be explored in-depth and provide valuable explanatory findings in an area where quantitative research has typically dominated. The interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of each respondent. To acknowledge the time contribution required to participate in the research, women in the community were given £10; it was not possible however to extend this to women in prison. The research team were all female; this was a deliberate act given the question topics and the potential for respondents to have experienced sexual and domestic violence.

#### 3.2. Sample

Our sample was comprised of 15 offenders serving sentences at Eastwood Park Prison, who would on release be returning to Cornwall, 14 offenders residing within Devon and Cornwall, and five staff working within Devon and Cornwall with women offenders. Four of the staff interviewed were working as third sector practitioners, with the fifth working as a probation officer.

The women offenders were aged between 23 and 67, however most were aged between 41 and 50 years (11), seven between 31 and 40, 5 between 51 and 60, two were in their twenties, and two over 60 years of age (62 and 67 respectively). Where ethnicity was stated, women most commonly identified themselves as White<sup>4</sup>.

Sentence length varied from a few months to ten years, with one woman sentenced to 'life'. At the time of interviews, the time served varied and some of those in prison were not yet near their release date. This meant that it was not always possible to explore release plans in any depth as their preparation had not yet commenced. The number of times in custody ranged from one to ten, with most (20) having been in prison on only one occasion. Offences ranged from murder, to crimes such as violence, conspiracy, arson, financial crime, theft, supplying drugs and child cruelty. As will be discussed later, most women had been a victim of sexual or domestic abuse as adults but in several cases when they were a child.

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<sup>4</sup> Please note, not all women provided demographic data therefore the figures may not total 29

### 3.3. Access

WRSAC facilitated access to respondents (offenders and staff) in the community; they made an initial contact with the respondents to explain the purpose of the research and their potential involvement in it before their contact details were shared with the research team. WRSAC therefore acted as a gatekeeper to the respondents. This approach was considered particularly appropriate for the offenders and allowed them to find out about the research in an environment in which they were familiar. However, this approach to respondent recruitment also meant that the research team were unable to determine the sample composition. The criteria for inclusion were therefore that they had been in prison and were now released and living in Devon or Cornwall. Although this sampling strategy was originally restricted to Cornwall, it was later broadened to include Devon to ensure a sufficient sample size was obtained.

The five workers interviewed were also selected by WRSAC; given their work, they collaborate with other public and third sector agencies who support women offenders.

Research approval was granted by NOMS and then access to women prisoners in Eastwood Park Prison was directly negotiated with its Governor. The Deputy Governor was assigned responsibility for inviting women to participate in an interview and 15 agreed, all of whom were intending to settle in Cornwall upon release. Interviews were conducted over a three day period at the prison.

It should be acknowledged that the requirement to resettle in Cornwall and willingness to participate limited other sample characteristics and particularly age, length of sentence and release date. Such sample limitations restricted the ability of the research team to explore resettlement plans in as much depth as planned, however these limitations are perhaps inevitable given the practicalities of sampling within a closed institution and time limited research.

In addition to the NOMS research approval, ethical approval was also granted by a University of Plymouth Ethics Committee. Reflecting the complex ethical and logistical issues of securing research access to prisons and offenders, the time taken to secure all the required approvals led to a delay in the commencement of the prison interviews.

### 3.4. Sensitivities and Ethical Considerations

Many of the women had been victims of abuse, an issue discussed in the interviews. In acknowledgement of the sensitive nature of this and the potential for the interviews to cause emotional distress, support from WRSAC was available to both women in the community and in prison if they felt they needed it. Women in the community were given WRSAC's contact details and those in prison were given a telephone number that they could call free of



charge. Such follow up support was essential to ensure that respondents were protected from harm and appropriately safeguarded.

Also as part of the commitment to the highest possible ethical standards, respondents were made aware that they did not have to participate if they did not want to and equally could choose to end the interview at any time or not to answer any particular questions if they did not want to. Indeed some respondents chose not to comment on their experience of abuse and others withdrew from the research process prior to interview.

### 3.5. Limitations

As with all applied or 'real world' research, it is important to recognise how the practicalities of the research have limited the ability to collect data in the way originally envisaged. As stated above, the sampling approach meant that the age/length of sentence/offence(s) committed and nearness to release date for those in prison were unknown prior to the interview and therefore some questions (e.g. release plans) could not be answered in great depth. For the women in the community, questions about levels of support whilst in custody, were also potentially difficult as some had been released some time ago. For the women in prison, recall of which agency(ies) had supported them was sometimes difficult, particularly in relation to specific support received at various intervals. Recollection of information is an issue for all research and particularly when there is a gap between the time of research and the event in question.

In addition, four of the five staff interviewed were employed by one agency. Therefore there is scope for future research to be conducted with a more diverse staff sample.

### 4. Research Findings

#### 4.1. Introduction

This section of the report presents the key findings emerging from the interviews with the women, both in the community and in prison. It begins with a discussion of key worries or problems experienced by these women and then considers the support needed or received to address them. The sub-sections which follow present the respondents' experiences of domestic violence and sexual abuse before exploring their self-esteem and hopes for the future. The experiences and perceptions of those workers who support women such as those interviewed are discussed later in this section.

#### 4.2. Worries / problems

Research conducted by the Social Exclusion Unit (2002) found that most prisoners experienced a constellation of inter-related issues and problems. These findings underpinned the seven pathways that have informed resettlement and rehabilitation interventions since then in England and Wales, both in prison and in the community (see Home Office 2004). These pathways relate to the following areas: accommodation; employment, training and education [ETE]; health; drugs and alcohol; children and families; finance, benefits and debt; attitudes, thinking and behaviour. Following the Corston Report (2007) two further pathways were added in relation to women affected by abuse and violence, and women involved in prostitution. Research and writing specifically relating to female offenders have confirmed that these are key issues for most women caught up in the criminal justice system (see, for instance, Gelsthorpe and Sharpe 2007; Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force 2009; Gelsthorpe and Wright 2015).

This section of the report presents the key findings in relation to these pathways and considers the perceptions of women offenders. It begins with a discussion of worries about release.

##### 4.2.1. Women in the Community: Looking Forward and Looking Back - Worries upon Release

The 14 women interviewed in the community had been released from prison over a wide period of time. Therefore, many of their experiences pre-dated the recent Transforming Rehabilitation developments, where all released prisoners are now discharged subject to 'through the gate' preparation and then a period of supervision. Nevertheless, their responses remain valuable and, in providing insight into the problems faced, resonate with Corston's observations about the vulnerabilities of many women offenders:

First, domestic circumstances and problems such as domestic violence, child-care issues, being a single-parent; second, personal circumstances such as mental illness, low self-esteem, eating disorders, substance misuse; and third, socio-economic factors such as poverty, isolation and unemployment. When women are experiencing a combination of factors from each of these three types of vulnerabilities, it is likely to lead to a crisis point that ultimately results in prison. It is these underlying issues that must be addressed by helping women develop resilience, life skills and emotional literacy.  
(Corston 2007: 2)

The women respondents now living in the community reported inter-related issues. While many of them had managed to move on with their lives, some had unresolved and on-going issues which will be explored further below, using the seven pathways as an analytical framework<sup>5</sup>.

**Accommodation:** While the Homelessness Act 2002 “extended ‘priority need’ categories to include people who are vulnerable as a result of leaving prison”, it is clear that definitions of ‘vulnerability’ and classifications as ‘intentionally homeless’ are contested, often resulting in last-minute arrangements for prisoners on release and prolonged periods before ex-offenders are considered for local authority housing (Cooper 2016: 4)<sup>6</sup>.

While some of the respondents in this study had returned to live with family members, many had experienced the breakdown of relationships with parents or partners prior to, or during imprisonment, leaving them without a planned address to return to. As one woman described:

“If it’s the woman, she will lose everything. She will lose her home. She will lose her children. She will lose her income. She will lose her reputation. You know, so you’re left with nothing and everything then is [a] set of steps that you continually have to fulfil in order to gain anything back.”  
(Respondent A2)

The uncertainty about accommodation was something that a number of the women respondents remembered as being of particular concern as they made the transition from prison to the community. For instance, one respondent recalled what happened as she left prison in November 2013:

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<sup>5</sup> Responses in connection with Pathway 8: Abuse and Violence; and Pathway 9: Women Involved in Prostitution, are considered later in this report.

<sup>6</sup> This conditionality was illustrated by Respondent A1 in this study who explained from her personal experience that “The Council are now refusing to offer anyone a flat with addiction issues. You’ve got to prove that you’ve been totally abstinent for a whole year”.

“Coming up to be released [and] I said to the governor ‘I don’t want to go’. He said ‘you’ve got to’. Because you get so institutionalised... But coming out, they open these doors, ‘there you are, go’! I had these few bags, and I thought, well, I don’t know the way, I don’t know the way to Bristol train station... God, I felt, I still remember it to this day, I felt sick and alone... I did get met, I got met by [name of person] at Truro train station. And she took me to a night shelter place, oh my God, in [town]. By that was like, living with, I can’t remember how many people there was, but we had to be out by nine in the morning and we couldn’t go back till five in the evening.”

(Respondent A3)

**Children and Families:** One of the main problems associated with homelessness for the women respondents was the loss of their children because of their offending and associated personal and social problems, or because alternative arrangements had to be made while their mothers were in prison. Many of the women decided that they did not want their children to come and visit them while they were incarcerated – as Respondent A8 commented:

“I never had any visits. I didn’t want my youngest... my youngest when I went in was four. And I had an eight year old, and when I watched... other people’s visits. And the children are brought in, they pat the kids down, they’ve got sniffer dogs and I didn’t want my children put through that. I didn’t want that... I lied to them and said I was on holiday, I was away in rehab.”

(Respondent A8)

The emotional trauma experienced by the children of women sent to prison is a key issue noted in the research literature in this area (see, for instance, Covington 2003; Sheehan and Flynn 2007; Prison Reform Trust 2012). The impact of separation on both the mother and child was illustrated by Respondent B1’s thoughts about her reactions since her release:

“Just trying to put everything back to normal. Just trying to, like, put everything back, making everything right again. Making sure that my son was back on track because obviously, like I say... it was my fault what happened but my son suffered and it wasn’t his fault and it’s a shame – and throughout the last ten years I’ve been trying to make it up to him... Because he went to school that morning, come home, and I wasn’t there. And it must have been devastating for him. It was him that suffered, I wish I could have took the pain for him... I’ve been doing everything in my power to make it right for him now.”

(Respondent B1)

While Respondent B1 had managed to retrieve her relationship with her son, for some of the women respondents this had not been possible<sup>7</sup> and with many of them reporting complex family situations and fractured relationships<sup>8</sup>.

**Employment, Training and Education:** Many of the women interviewed in the community for this study were affected by the need to reveal their criminal convictions when applying for employment, with some finding it impossible to move beyond training into permanent positions. For example, Respondent B3 spoke about her situation:

“I knew I needed to change my life and my criminal record is just, it seems like, I kind of like tried to sort my life out before I went into prison. And I spent nearly 20 months applying for jobs and I just got nowhere. I literally was applying for every single job and [a] really broad spectrum of jobs every single day, and then I was getting nowhere. And the Job Centre had done everything they could do with me, sent me on every kind of course or programme that there was available. And then I ended up getting really depressed and ended up, like back hanging round with the wrong crowd and I ended up back in prison. And then the worries start all over again...” (Respondent B3)

These issues were echoed by Respondent B4 who said:

“I think the worst – and it still is – going for jobs and having to put down that you’ve got a criminal record. Although I’m quite happy to talk about it, some people just see ‘criminal record’ and think ‘pass’.”  
(Respondent B4)

As these quotes highlight, and in line with the Corston Report (2007; Howard League for Penal Reform 2011), the women respondents were facing a complex array of problems often linked with their earlier lives and their offending. The above discussion has focused on three pathways: accommodation; children and families; and employment and training. However, these were usually related to problems connected with other pathways. Because of this, the women interviewed found their (re)integration back into the community in a way that holistically tackled their problems difficult (Annison, Brayford and Deering, 2016). Indeed, Respondent A1 stated that “no one talks to each other” when describing her experience of multi- agency support. Similarly, and in relation to finance, benefits and debt, Respondent A5 commented:

“I struggled for the first 4-5 weeks getting the money sorted out. I tell you, they didn’t know, the left hand didn’t know what the right hand was doing. They got all their records historically completely in a

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<sup>7</sup> Respondent S2 poignantly commented “Even now my youngest son doesn’t live with me and I grieve for that every day”.

<sup>8</sup> See also the inter-connections in this respect with domestic violence situations as reported in Section 4.5.1.

muddle... And that was extremely stressful because I didn't have a penny in those first months."  
(Respondent A5)

This highlights the complexity for women offenders trying to move towards desistance when living in the community (see Jordan 2012). Thus when considering the other pathways, the problems tended to be cumulative, leaving the women feeling that it was hard to make sustained progress forwards. For example, health problems were often on-going and impacted on the women's capacity to sort out a range of associated difficulties. As Respondent A6 described:

"I'm registered disabled... I had another operation while I was in prison... I spent all my time in prison in a wheelchair... I'm going for the third op now. After this one I'm not bothering anymore, it does so much damage every time they go in... They don't consider you or understand about anything, you're just another statistic that's been put through their doors really at the beginning. Everyone is quick enough to give up on you when you make mistakes."  
(Respondent A6)

Finally, substance misuse was often mentioned within the interviews, either as past problems or as on-going issues. For instance, Respondent A1 revealed that:

"I got into speed when I was 12 and heroin when I was 14. I don't really, it's just, I hung around people older than me in the children's home, foster care."  
(Respondent A1)

She was now stabilised on methadone and saw this as progress as it was keeping her "off the street drugs". Nevertheless, she was struggling to find stable accommodation and still appeared troubled by the emotional problems stemming from her past experiences. In this way her difficulties linked with the pathway focusing on attitudes, thinking and behaviour. However, for many of the women this too was problematic in terms of moving forwards as illustrated by Respondent A9:

"They make you think that if you get support, say you want to go and see a counsellor or something, I always thought that if I did that when I was inside, that proves that I was weak and therefore I wasn't going to be able to progress any further."  
(Respondent A9)

Therefore it is clear that many of the respondents wished to move towards a pro- social lifestyle (see, for instance, Rungay 2004) but they encountered a range of problems in trying to re-integrate into their communities. These findings support the conclusions drawn in a recent literature review on female desistance:

that, in order to promote desistance, it is critical to provide recently convicted females with a wide range of assistance related to housing, financial support, relationships, employment and drug use... Assistance should focus on (re)establishing bonds between female offenders and their relatives and enabling women to take care of their children. What is more, services aimed at tackling problems with drugs and finances should be opened up to females having a hard time dealing with these problems by themselves. Lastly, the influence of feelings of agency was repeatedly found to be significant and should therefore not be overlooked. In addition to providing practice assistance in several areas, a focus on establishing agency and inner motivations to stop offending needs to be included in a package to support females terminate offending. (Rodermond et al. 2016: 22)

### 4.2.2. Women in Custody: Worries about Release

In a speech made in 2012, Nick Hardwick, then HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, noted the improvements he considered had been made in relation to the treatment of women in prison since the 2007 Corston Report. However, he then observed that:

Despite those improvements, and despite so much dedicated work by prison staff and others – prisons – particularly as they are currently run, are simply the wrong place for so many of the distressed, damaged or disturbed women they hold.

(Hardwick 2012: 2)

Many of the women respondents who were interviewed in prison for this research did indeed match this characterisation, often outlining deep-seated and significant personal, health and social problems. It is against this background that the responses in this section should be viewed. As Jacobs commented:

Women in the criminal justice system have multiple problems. They are overwhelmingly poor and almost always substance abusers. They are often victims of abuse and violence. Many are depressed and suffer from mental illness... A great number are homeless or live in marginal housing. Typically, they are undereducated, unemployed and have minimal legitimate work histories. Nearly 80 percent are mothers, and most have two or more children.

(Jacobs 2001: 45)

The 15 women who were interviewed in this study displayed a range of personal situations and offending histories; there was not a general characterisation which fitted all of the respondents. For most of them, any concerns with their discharge plans were recounted within the context of their

wider circumstances. For these women, the criminal justice requirements of their licence or tagging arrangements were often complicated with disruptions in their family relationships, the need for drug or alcohol interventions, physical or mental health conditions which required treatment<sup>9</sup> as well as the more pressing practical issues of housing, benefits and employment.

While some had plans in place for their accommodation on release, this was a significant concern for others and several commented on how important stable housing was in relation to trying to address their other problems. For example, Respondent DP1 said:

“You know, if you know you’re going to be homeless, you’re going to start drinking. You just don’t care about your life anymore. But a safe place to go would be lovely, you know, I don’t want to go into these hostels where they’ve got all crack heads, alcoholics, because I just don’t want nothing to do with that. And that’s the only worry really and the debts all built up out there and I haven’t had nobody come to talk to me about that.”

(Respondent DP1)

For others, the stigma of their convictions (and sometimes associated media reports) weighed heavily on them and left them with concerns about the adverse impact on finding employment. In this respect Respondent CP4 mused:

“I’m going out on tag, I’m going to my sister’s address, but my main worry really is getting somewhere of my own and finding work... Employers, cause obviously, you know, if they ask for disclosure, you have to disclose your criminal record. And I do think that’s going to put me at a disadvantage of finding work.”

(Respondent CP4)

Some of the women respondents were aware that they would face conditions on their release due to the nature of their offences and requirements imposed by MAPPA<sup>10</sup> arrangements or because of restraining conditions connected with their partners or children. The extent of these issues was voiced by Respondent DP3:

Interviewer: “How would you say you feel about your life as things are at the moment?”

Respondent DP3: “My life, I feel, loss of direction. Just, I feel as if I just,

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<sup>9</sup> Visher and Bakken (2014: 778) suggest that “given that health conditions influence re-entry outcomes, and that the vast majority of women leaving prison have health issues that were never resolved or even addressed, an assessment of general health needs should be part of each individual’s re-entry planning process.”

<sup>10</sup> MAPPA stands for Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements – see <https://mappa.justice.gov.uk/connect.ti/MAPPA/groupHome>



there's no way out. Normally I can see the bigger picture, there's light at the end of that tunnel somehow. There normally is, you can find it. But this, I can't see how I'm going to get myself out of this situation. So that's a problem".

However, in contrast, for some like Respondent AP4, who was a first-time offender, there were worries about the practicalities of being released:

"It's scary not knowing, stupid things... I mean I obviously know how to get to [city] and obviously my partner knows where probation is, but I don't. And the thought of, if I'm late, you know. I don't even know what a tag looks like. I know it sounds silly... It's just little things like that, the not knowing. It makes it very scary".

(Respondent AP4)

Overall, most of the women respondents in prison were aware of the processes and contacts within the prison and outside in their local communities in terms of planning for their release. Nevertheless, there was sometimes uncertainty about the exact timing of when this would happen and a lack of co-ordination. For instance, Respondent DP4 commented:

"Because there was a guy who was coming round and me and my pad mate weren't even on this list for pre-release. There is a pre-release thing which they're doing, which is just like something they're trying out and we weren't even on the list. He didn't even know we existed. And I think that's really bad cause there could have been stuff I could have got help with, you know. So how can they help you if they don't even know you're here? Like we're going home like days apart from each other, you know, she goes the Monday, I go the Thursday and then they didn't even know we was going home."

(Respondent DP4)

The lack of 'joined-up' planning was also commented on by Respondent AP4 who said:

"Don't get me wrong, the officers are amazing. You ask them questions, if they can answer they will or they try you know. I haven't come across anyone that's been horrible or anything like that. They do try and help. But it's the outside in; they don't know what's going on outside either, the officers. So you know, they can only tell you so much. And I don't know, it's just the communications not there from the outside."

(Respondent AP4)

These comments illustrate some of the concerns expressed by Trebilcock and Dockley that

If services are to operate truly 'through the gate', the reconfiguration of the women's estate and the new services need to be properly communicated to prisoners, outside agencies and the courts.

(Trebilcock and Dockley 2015: 223)

The women's views on support issues are discussed further in Section 4.3.

### 4.3. Resettlement Support

Resettlement research (Bateman and Hazel, 2014) shows that women who have been in custody have higher levels of needs and vulnerabilities than their male counterparts. Five key principles have emerged from Bateman and Hazel's (2014) research on what constitutes effective resettlement support for women. First, there must be a 'seamless' transition of support from custody to the community, guided by a clearly developed resettlement plan in preparation for release. This should be set in place from the beginning of sentencing. Second, there must be 'positive', 'trusting' relationships between the women and resettlement workers if the women are to be motivated to engage with the resettlement process. Third, resettlement workers should coordinate and be part of a wider 'social network' of welfare services (e.g. those addressing mental health and alcohol and drug misuse concerns), family and friends who will provide support to the women as they transition back to the community. Fourth, 'practical help' is a crucial component of resettlement support and the single most important element of this is accommodation, because if this is not in place then engagement with other types of help is unlikely. Finally, resettlement support should deliver a full range of support services as an 'integrated', 'holistic', 'wraparound' package. This means that the various agencies offering resettlement support should work together as a coordinated partnership.

All of the above discussion of the five effective resettlement principles are informed by the research evidence in the desistance literature (McNeill, 2006; McNeill and Weaver, 2010; Maguire and Raynor, 2006).

The 'Through the Gate' initiative, as described in the literature review (see Section 2), is common to the resettlement concerns of both men and women, but as pointed out by Bateman and Hazel (2014: 7) it needs to be mediated through a 'gender- prism'. The Corston Inquiry (2007) recognised that women experienced multiple levels of personal and social disadvantage and that to address such problems required an integrated women-centred approach. The *2014 Offender Rehabilitation Act* attempted to meet the challenge posed by Corston by placing a statutory duty on the Ministry of Justice to ensure that the resettlement process met the public sector 'equality duty' through the provision of gender-friendly provision tailored to the needs of women.

This section will firstly explore the women's perceptions of the kind of support and resources they expected both in custody and upon release to resettle into

the community and desist from crime. It will then discuss the extent to which these expectations were met. Since the fieldwork for this research was completed two major inspections have taken place. The first provides 'A Thematic Inspection of the Provision and Quality of Services in the Community for Women Who Offend' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016) and the second 'An Inspection of Through the Gate Resettlement Services for Short-Term Prisoners' (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016). Both reports provide an invaluable assessment of the extent to which women's resettlement needs have been met and elaborate the problems in the way 'Through the Gate' provision and community services for women who offend have been rolled out nationally. This gives considerable insight into the negative experiences of resettlement narrated by the women respondents in this research.

As the length of time and number of times in custody varied across the women interviewed, they were subject to different types of supervision and licence conditions upon release. This was dependent upon the legislation in operation at the time of their imprisonment; around three quarters of the women were in custody or on release at the time in which the Transforming Rehabilitation measures came into effect (indeed, two had been released almost 10 years and one over 10 years previously). Due to the size of the sample, it is not possible to draw any conclusions about whether support is currently better or worse. Instead, the qualitative data informs an analysis of the quality of support available to the women more generally.

### 4.3.1. Women in the Community: Looking Back and Looking Forward - Support upon Release:

This section reflects the perspectives of the 14 women interviewed in the community. Their experiences of support mirror the findings of the recently published inspections (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016).

**Seamless transition of support:** The inspection of 'Through the Gate' was highly critical of both prisons and the CRCs for their failure to ensure a smooth and seamless transition from custody to the community (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016). Basic screenings completed by prison staff were of poor quality and the ensuing resettlement plans which were the responsibility of CRC staff did not address the core resettlement needs of prisoners. More importantly prisoners were not involved in their development and were often not informed of their content. Many prisoners were released without their basic resettlement needs being addressed and no resettlement plans in place. All in all not enough was being done to help prisoners prepare for release.

The majority of women in this sample spoke of receiving limited help inside prison to prepare for their release and were not aware of any resettlement plans being put in place. This included those, such as B1 and B4, who were released more than ten years ago and who commented:

“... basically, they opened the door, I got a lift to the train station, and that was it.”

(Respondent B1)

“... when I was released, it was a bit of a shock coming out... You’re left at the gate, and you think “sugar, what do I do now?””

(Respondent B4)

However, others who were released more recently also complained of receiving little or no help:

“There’s nothing there. And I was looking for help because I knew I was going to struggle... there’s no rehabilitation in prison, it’s just a clock watching exercise for two years.”

(Respondent A4)

“There isn’t no support... there’s nothing, they just literally kick you out.”

(Respondent A6)

Some felt neglected and angry about the lack of support inside. Respondent B1, for example, felt that outside in the community (prior to her sentence) she had been in receipt of domestic violence support. However, the support did not continue whilst she was in custody:

“... before I went to jail loads of people were helping me... but while I was away not one person went to see my son to see if he was OK... it really annoyed me.”

(Respondent B1)

Others, such as B2 and A9, were disappointed because the help promised did not materialise:

“They said “oh, we can do this, we can do that, we can do the other”. But when you’re being released and that, none of it is in place.”

(Respondent B2)

“... every time I’ve had a problem they’re kind of “alright, OK, we’ll deal with that”. And then they don’t so I just think why bother.”

(Respondent A9)

However, most of the women had few expectations about the support provision available. For some this was because they weren’t “in the right mental place” and “too out of it on drugs” (Respondent B2), “too dazed” about being inside prison and “completely broken” by mental health issues (Respondent A5) to seek out or benefit from help. Others felt that only the most extreme or vocal cases received help:

“No, you’re not given any support. The only way you’re given support is if you’re telling them you’re going to kill yourself. The people that get more help in prison are the naughty ones. The quiet ones, just slip by.”  
(Respondent A7)

Several were aware that cuts in public spending made it very difficult for the prison system to provide support. As Respondent B3 commented:

“The prison was so understaffed it was unreal, so they’re kind of like running on nothing. So obviously the females are not getting the right support they need because the officers are overworked and absolutely drained. Yeh, it’s crazy.”  
(Respondent B3)

Nevertheless, some women did feel that they had received a degree of support from prison staff, commenting that “you can talk to them if you had problems” (Respondent B4) and that they provide practical help with such problems as medication, benefits and dyslexia (Respondent A8). However, the available support was generally described as piecemeal and uncoordinated.

**Positive, trusting relationships:** Once released from custody respondents felt that the quality of the relationship with resettlement workers<sup>11</sup> was paramount. This is also highlighted in the desistance literature which shows that the early development of a trusting, consistent, positive relationship with key workers in the resettlement process is crucial in supporting offenders to stop offending (McNeill and Weaver, 2010). This message is reiterated in the inspection of community services for women who offend where respondents stressed that the key to successful resettlement is the building of positive relationships to strengthen the women’s self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation to stop offending (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016).

In this research, the women interviewees expected resettlement workers to be open, empathetic and trustworthy. The most important characteristics centred on ‘having someone to talk to’ and being able to ‘offload your troubles’. So Respondents A4 and B2 commented:

“I would like to know there was somebody out there who when I came out, if I was struggling, that I could speak to.”  
(Respondent A4)

“It was just nice to have somebody that wasn’t linked with it all to chat to and offload.”  
(Respondent B2)

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<sup>11</sup> This is a generic term for the probation officers (both employed by the CRC and the NPS) and the staff working for community agencies (such as WRSAC) engaged in providing resettlement support.

As found in the *Beyond Youth Custody* resettlement research (Bateman and Hazel, 2014), the majority of respondents placed high expectations on resettlement staff to be honest and non-judgemental by 'understanding where you are at', 'not giving up on you when you make mistakes', and 'being straight with you'. Life experience was also important, with many respondents commenting that it enabled staff to be able to relate to their own experiences rather than simply draw upon 'textbook' knowledge:

"... some of the workers have had issues... drug, alcohol issues if you know what I mean and it's nice to know they've been there and done that... it's nice to know you're not speaking to someone that's just talking from a text book."  
(Respondent B2)

**Support network:** Research in this area contends that the positive relationship with resettlement workers should form part of a wider social support network which may include not only 'official' resettlement workers but also family and friends (Bateman and Hazel, 2014). In the interviews women respondents were asked to share who they considered to be the most helpful in their social support network in facilitating them to resettle back into the community.

Resettlement workers received mixed reviews when it came to the extent to which they met respondents' expectations of a supportive relationship. Some saw probation officers<sup>12</sup> as authority figures who monitored their behaviour and ensured compliance with any licence conditions. As two respondents commented:

"I get on with my probation officer now, but it was very much like, right, these are the rules and these are the regulations, if you don't stick to them, you'll be back in... she was just waiting for you to trip up."  
(Respondent A4)

"... my probation officer was very tight and I was held on a very short lease."  
(Respondent A5)

Others placed probation officers in a more positive, less regulatory light and valued their caring nature:

"She was amazing... it hasn't been a chore to see her... She's worked so hard to help me change my life its unreal. I've never clicked with anyone from probation like X, she's just brilliant, she really does care. And, this is the first probation order that I've ever completed."  
(Respondent B3)

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<sup>12</sup> Respondents were often confused as to whether these came from the CRC or NPS.

However, there was also recognition that probation officers were overstretched and had limited resources to help. One respondent considered that the recent legislative changes had increased the pressure on the probation service:

“Now anyone that has got a sentence has to be on licence for 12 months. This has impacted hugely on probation because they’ve not got the manpower to sustain that... I don’t know what they do but they’re not equipped to do what it is anyway.”  
(Respondent A2)

The women respondents expressed very positive experiences with third sector resettlement agency workers such as WRSAC<sup>13</sup>, as the following comments illustrate:

“... she was lovely... I felt there was more people on my side and willing to help... she was brilliant. Really good... understanding of the situation... caring... really helpful... she used to come round here once a week to make sure I was alright.”  
(Respondent B2)

“The best support I’ve had since I have been out has been through X... She’s a lifeline... if it weren’t for X I’d be homeless. She’s done a lot for me... I only had a little support from the jail but I had a lot of support from X on release.”  
(Respondent A8)

As found in several research studies (Bateman and Hazel, 2014; McNeill and Weaver, 2010), families and neighbours were also an important part of support networks for some women. In the case of Respondent A7, it was her son’s threats to refuse access to her grandchildren should she return to drugs that was key:

“So if I turned up on drugs now... he’d shut the door on me and he would not let me have anything to do with them. So I think that is what stops me, the fact that my son is so strong and he wouldn’t allow me to continue seeing them or him.”  
(Respondent A7)

Many women felt that they were stigmatised or judged following their sentence and some were wary of interactions with new people as a result. As one respondent commented, this stigmatisation was perceived to follow them throughout the criminal justice system and beyond.

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<sup>13</sup> Caution must be used when considering the positive feedback as a bias may be operating

“...when you go to prison, you’re punished for that crime. You shouldn’t be punished for the rest of your life.”

(Respondent A7)

**Practical help:** Both the inspection of ‘Through the Gate’ (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016) and services for women in the community (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016) were highly critical of the poor quality and inadequacy of practical services to help women prisoners to resettle back into the community. This included finding a suitable place to live, managing debt and finances and preparing for employment and training, but by far the greatest criticisms were directed at the fact that ‘we did not find that enough was being done to address accommodation needs’ (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2015: 21). Also, the inspection of women’s services was particularly concerned that ‘there was inconsistency of approach to recognising and addressing the gender-specific needs of women who had offended’ (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016: 29).

Respondents in this research highly valued practical support, a finding which reiterates resettlement (Bateman and Hazel, 2014) and desistance (McNeill and Weaver, 2010) research conducted elsewhere. Whilst in custody, support for every day practical issues was important, as Respondent B1 reflected:

“... it might sound silly, but I didn’t even have underwear... nobody showed me where to go or what to get.”

(Respondent B1)

On release, general guidance about housing, further education, benefits and jobs was needed. As discussed in Section 4.2, accommodation was an issue that caused great concern to the women interviewed and it is therefore unsurprising that a need to find accommodation also emerged as a priority area. Stable accommodation was perceived as essential to the women’s successful resettlement, a point which was also made in the recent inspection reports outlined above (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016). As Respondent B3 reflected:

“I am quite lucky because my housing was secure... but my experience of other people I know is that their housing situation is really bad. Like people don’t even know where they’re going when they come out of prison... they’re literally homeless... it’s such a worry. It’s frightening to think that, the idea is you go to prison to be rehabilitated, but how can you be rehabilitated if you have no base to work from when you get out?”

(Respondent B3)

The type of accommodation was also important; desistance was described as being problematic in temporary housing alongside other offenders or those with substance misuse problems. Respondent A7’s probation officer offered her a place in a homeless shelter, which she felt offered little incentive to move



away from crime:

“... you get all excited you’re getting out, and you get out and you’re just left to rot in a room with criminals. People taking drugs in the next room and getting drunk...”

(Respondent A7)

Money and debt also emerged as two areas where support was needed. Trying to manage longstanding debt on return to the community created difficulty, not least in securing a house. As also described in Section 4.1.1, the women had to find a way to survive with little or no income. As Respondent A2 described:

“Why do they think people go back and commit crime? Because they’ve got no resources... what do they do? I had a couple of grand in the bank which allowed me to pay my rent when I first came out and the deposit on here... I sold all my jewellery. Just to make sure the rent was paid, some weeks I lived from hand to mouth. But you do it. Well I did it because I wanted to have a home for my children. I wanted to have a base and I was determined not to lose it.”

(Respondent A2)

The women interviewed also identified employment as important. The shoe repair, key cutting and engraving company Timpsons was given a high rating in this respect. The company has an established relationship with prisons and offers training opportunities for those in custody and employment opportunities on release. Respondent A7 commented:

“... for women the most important thing is getting them a job... that is the only thing that has saved me since being released... if it weren’t for working, I wouldn’t be able to afford the flat. If I couldn’t afford the flat, I couldn’t see my kids.”

(Respondent A7)

She also advocated that the government should encourage large companies to employ ex-prisoners.

**Holistic and integrated support:** Research and inspections of women services have shown the importance of holistic and integrated resettlement support (Bateman and Hazel, 2014; McNeill, 2006; McNeill and Weaver, 2010; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016) that is ‘Through the Gate’ (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016). Unfortunately both inspections (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016) found that this is not the case. Leadership and management at both the strategic and operational levels have been directionless and fragmented. Communication between prisons, CRCs and the NPS has been poor. Community voluntary sector organisations contracted to provide some resettlement services have not been effectively engaged in the planning and delivery of resettlement provision. The

lack of 'holistic', 'wraparound' and 'whole system' resettlement support has been attributed, in part, to the disruption and fragmentation of rehabilitation provision following the privatisation of probation. In addition, there is a lack of financial incentive for CRCs to provide sufficient resettlement services, particularly to women who represent only a fraction of the total prisoner population.

The type of support that was perceived to be most beneficial for resettlement was also discussed in the interviews. The women often felt that the support received was piecemeal and uncoordinated. As discussed in Section 4.2, the women experienced multiple inter-related issues and there was a need for a holistic response to them. The experiences of Respondent B1 highlight the need for such a response; although she had been allocated a place on a training course, she had nowhere to live and her family life was unstable. The anxieties created by these issues meant that she was unable to complete the course:

"I couldn't concentrate because I had so much going on. Like I was worried about my son. I was worried about my belongings, I was worried about what was going to happen the next day... it just got in the way of me trying to study and get into my work. I only stayed a few months; I wish I had done the whole course now... if I'd come home and I had my place, then I would have gone to college and got on with my life."

(Respondent B1)

Another common perception was that there was a lack of information or communication, limiting the ability of the women to make informed choices. Respondent B1's confusion about her housing choices is a typical example of this:

"...there was an empty flat right next door to my sister; I would have loved to have lived next door to my sister. But no one explained the rules to me, that I could choose, so I just went with it and they put me in X where I knew nobody... nothing was explained... I didn't know what was happening... I'm still kept in the dark about a lot of things."

(Respondent B1)

Related to this issue of poor communication, a lack of signposting or timely responses to concerns was reported by other women, particularly those on shorter sentences. For such women, there was a need for the required support to be set up quickly as Respondent B2 described:

"If you're on a short sentence I felt like I fell by the wayside... They didn't have enough time to do the things that I needed... I just think for people with short sentences, it could roll a bit quicker... so you actually know where you can go and where you can get help... more immediate rather than waiting and with better signposting."

(Respondent B2)

Another respondent was required to complete a thinking skills programme as part of her licence conditions. However, she did not receive any support to help her access this course, which created anxiety regarding the possibility of recall:

“No one ever sorted it out or chased it up. Say if I didn’t do it, then I could have got recalled for not doing what was on my licence conditions. They put it on my licence and didn’t even chase it up.”  
(Respondent A1)

Overall, the findings emerging from the interviews with women in the community support the conclusions made in the preceding section (see 4.2) as well as in recent inspection reports (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016). Women require a holistic and integrated package of support that systematically addresses each of the nine resettlement pathways and reflects the individual needs of women offenders.

### 4.3.2. Women in Custody: Resettlement Support Inside Custody

Originally it was intended that this section would report on the kind of support the 15 women interviewed inside prison expected to receive, or had received, to sort out their worries about release and resettlement. However, the women interviewed were at different stages of the resettlement process: half were not due for release for more than a year, and the other half were due for release in the next six months. These two ‘sub-groups’ of women, which have been categorised as the ‘long stayers’ and the ‘shortly to be released’, had quite different expectations towards and experiences of resettlement. For the ‘long stayers’, resettlement plans were not yet consideration. None had such a plan in place and none had any expectations that it should be, as it was an issue to be addressed in the distant future. For the ‘shortly to be released’, resettlement plans, or lack of them, was a significant issue as it was for the women in the community (see Section 4.3.1).

**Relationships:** For both sub-groups, relationships with prison staff and fellow inmates were seen as crucial to creating a supportive environment inside custody. This supports the findings of numerous desistance (McNeill, 2006; Maguire and Raynor, 2006; McNeill and Weaver, 2010) and resettlement research studies (Gray,2010; Bateman and Hazel,2010). Supportive relationships were expected to have the same qualities as outlined by the respondents in the community sample, such as ‘understands where you are at’, ‘sorts out practical things’, ‘doesn’t give up on you when you make mistakes’ and ‘are straight with you’. The importance of this latter characteristic is captured by Respondent DP4:

“... the majority of people have been lied to most of their life and that’s where the trust issue happens... being honest is better because you know where you stand.”  
(Respondent DP4)

Prison staff scored highly amongst respondents in displaying characteristics conducive to a supportive relationship. Again, as all of the respondents were selected by prison staff to participate in the interviews, it is possible that there is some bias in the responses. Many of the women commented that staff were “easy to talk to” and “listened to you” (Respondent DP3), “respectful and quite friendly” (Respondent CP2), “helpful” (Respondent DP1), “really caring” (Respondent AP1) and “non-judgemental” (Respondent DP5).

But other inmates were also seen by the respondents to make an important contribution to the building of a supportive environment. Indeed Respondent CP1 felt that she relied more on other prisoners than prison officers because:

“... the best part for me is other inmates... cause you talk to them about your worries and they kind of sit down with you and they’ll support you.”

(Respondent CP1)

One voice of dissent came from Respondent CP2 who felt that other inmates, unlike prison staff, were not to be trusted:

“... we’re all careful with who we’re friendly with...it’s almost like living in Eastenders... there’s a lot of stirring. You could say something and somebody will change it and swap it for their own advantage... because we’re all sort of close knit, it can cause a lot of problems... so very rarely I’ll chat to other prisoners but not about personal stuff.”

(Respondent CP2)

Beyond the prison walls, relationships with family and friends continued to be a key source of support. So Respondent DP5 commented:

“... when I got arrested I thought I’d lost everything... I thought I’d lost my family and then when I went into court to be remanded they was all there... But I still have regular contact with my parents, my siblings and my grandparents and stuff. That’s either a phone or letter contact and then if and when they can get a visit.”

(Respondent DP5)

For CP1 it was not just her family but also her best friend that provided support:

“My family never judged... which has always been a big thing for me because I’ve always been the black sheep of the family really, and I’ve felt like I’ve always been pushed aside. But they stood by me through thick and thin no matter what had happened... And again, like my best friend, if I needed someone to talk to, she was there...”

(Respondent CP1)

Therefore, it is clear that internal relationships with prison staff and other inmates as well as their immediate external links with family and friends are an important support to women in prison. In general, they were satisfied with these relationships which were expected to have the same qualities, i.e. trustworthy, non-judgemental, empathetic, etc. as identified by women interviewed in the community.

**Practical support:** As stated earlier, all of the ‘longstayers’ reported that they had no resettlement plan. However, the most important issue for this subgroup was the extent to which they were receiving practical help to sort out what they considered to be their most important immediate practical problems. This covered difficulties relating to mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, and maintaining contact with their children. Most of the respondents in this subgroup were generally satisfied with the kind of help they were receiving to address immediate problems, but they did not see this help as being in any way related to the resettlement process or life on the outside. Again, caution must be exercised here as these respondents were selected for interview by the prison and their views may not represent those of the wider prison population.

DP3, DP5 and CP2 all had serious mental health problems. They were participants in the Nexus project where they received specialised psychological support. All of the women described themselves as having personality disorders. DP3 said that she saw her mental health worker regularly and found the relationship very supportive as:

“The support would be there if I needed it. It provided a ‘sense of relief’... I thought that I’d really struggle in here and I haven’t. My mental health is much better... but then I’m taking medication at the same times like I was supposed to do on the outside.”

(Respondent DP3)

For DP5 the Nexus project has also been her biggest support network because they ‘don’t give up on you’:

“I think life’s a lot better. I think coming to prison has saved me... I used drink quite a lot to make me feel like a better person... yeh things are just getting better and I’m getting the support that I could have done with years ago.”

(Respondent DP5)

Likewise CP2 found the Nexus project ‘really helpful’, particularly the various therapeutic individual and group sessions that she participated in. She recognised that places in this type of project were limited for women in the prison system but felt that it at least made a start:

“...what’s good about it is it’s something new so they’re trying to help people... but what I finds bad is that maybe it’s a little bit too little, too late... I don’t know but at least we can start to help different people, especially women.”

(Respondent CP2)

Drugs and alcohol were another area of concern for the ‘longstayers’. A number of the women spoke of the support they received to address problems in these areas, particularly by participating in drug and alcohol misuse programmes run in the prison. Respondent AP1, for example, had been very ill before she came into prison because of her misuse of heroin. She describes herself as being “at death’s door before I came here”, but now is “... loads better. I’m in the gym every day, getting fit. Three square meals a day, roof over my head, sorted.” She recounted how the drug misuse programme that she participated in inside the prison had had a far reaching impact on her way of thinking:

“Addaction are all pretty good, and there’s always loads of meetings. With the DRC, the drug recovery community, they do like AA meetings and all that. And there’s always loads of them going on, and I was going to go to them when I get out. Cause with doing the DRC and that, it’s just changed my whole outlook on addiction.”

(Respondent AP1)

But again, as DP2 pointed out, places on such programmes are limited:

“I wasn’t made aware of it when I came in the first time. And the second time, it was only because I’d actually spoken to another girl that had done it, I then put forward for it... no one was told about it... So I think they must obviously keep it under wraps because there’s not that many spaces.”

(Respondent DP2)

The support provided by PACT to maintain links with children and negotiate with social services was also seen to be particularly helpful by many respondents, with Respondent DP2 describing the PACT workers as ‘wicked’:

“I was really worried about communicating with social services and they are that stop gap... they get us in touch with social services... they let us speak... it was really hard for me to get my point across to social services cause there was domestic abuse and violence.”

(Respondent DP2)

For the ‘longstayers’ then, practical help focused on their immediate problems inside prison relating to mental health, drug and alcohol misuse and family matters. In general, they expressed satisfaction with the way these problems were dealt with, although they were aware that the resources to address them

were very limited.

**Kept in the dark and disoriented:** The ‘shortly to be released’ subgroup were quite adamant that no resettlement plans had been set in place to smooth their transition back into the community. Their accounts of their imminent release into the community told a story of ‘being kept in the dark’, ‘lack of planning’ and ‘piecemeal, fragmented support’. This finding echoes those reported in Section 4.3.1 as well as in recent inspection reports (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016). Respondents AP2, CP1 and CP4’s account of the resettlement process evidences these criticisms. AP2 bitterly complained that one of the main reasons that she had been recalled was because of a lack of any planned preparation for her release:

“I’m pissed off, totally pissed off with it. How can you turn a vulnerable woman out of the gate with nothing? In Wales, they give you a B&B for a few weeks, let you get yourself started. Not in fucking Cornwall... and you end up going back in cause you’re not going to your appointments and shit like that. That’s what I’m back in for now, recall. Like most of the women in here.”

(Respondent AP2)

For Respondent CP4 the main issue was being “kept in the dark” with little or no help about accommodation, work and where to get help:

“It would have been nice to have some literature about your home area because although they do have some, it’s like Gloucester and Wales. Once you start coming down to our way, there’s very little information about the sort of organisations that you can go to.”

(Respondent CP4)

She argued that she had only seen her probation officer after sentencing and “once again to sign my papers to leave”. She felt that her probation officer<sup>14</sup> inside the prison had also not been very ‘proactive’ in sorting out her sentence plan:

“... mine was notoriously hard to get hold of... Greggs do a scheme here where you can go out and do four weeks training and then you have the chance of leaving with a job in your local area. But because my probation officer here didn’t complete the paperwork, I missed out on the chance of going to do that.”

(Respondent CP4)

The experience of Respondent CP1 illustrates the chaotic, piecemeal

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<sup>14</sup> The women refer to the prison officer inside who they see about sentence planning as their probation officer.

uncoordinated nature of the resettlement process for many women prisoners about to be released. She described how she did not see a probation officer the first time she was in custody. For her current period in custody, a resettlement plan was prepared although at the last minute after her release. Respondent CP1 felt that no one explained what to do with it or how to follow it up and she was recalled. As might be expected, she is now “a bit confused about everything” and feels that “at the moment it’s all hanging in limbo”. She felt that the probation officer (in the community) was not very supportive and that her main role was to watch over her:

“I don’t think she really helped. She was there to address my offending behaviour... I didn’t think she was very empathetic or caring, she was just very much ‘we have to do this’. She didn’t offer any support towards education or to get me back into employment...”  
(Respondent CP1)

Therefore, the findings from the ‘shortly to be released’ interviews show that there was dissatisfaction with the lack of resettlement arrangements and communication about the plans for their release. These women were not involved in the resettlement process as advocated in the ‘Through the Gate’ protocols (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016).

#### 4.4. The Staff Perspective: Resettlement Problems and Support

The interviews with staff explored their views and experiences of working with women both in custody and in the community. This section begins with a discussion of their views on the main problems women encounter as they settle into the community, before moving on to discuss the type of support staff try to offer and the constraints and frustrations they experience in this process.

All of the staff respondents reported that they adopted a holistic view of **women’s problems** based on the nine pathways as discussed in Sections 4.2, but they particularly highlighted three areas: accommodation; drugs, alcohol and health; and sexual abuse and violence. The latter problem is discussed in its own separate section in 4.5; this is both because of its significance in the women’s lives and also in response to a request from the funders to pay particular attention to this pathway.

**Accommodation:** As identified in the *Transforming Lives: Reducing Women’s Imprisonment* report “problems with the lack, inadequacy or unaffordability of housing were identified by many as significant contributing factors to offending and reoffending” (Prison Reform Trust and Soroptimist International 2014: 37). The staff respondents agreed that accommodation issues caused major problems in terms of resettlement for many of the women they were in contact with. Staff Respondent 4 described the extreme difficulties posed by homelessness for the women she was supervising and its links with the other personal and social issues they were experiencing:



“What we’re now seeing... people who come out into the community, they’re homeless, we try and get them stabilised in accommodation, their drug use is chaos, their alcohol use is chaos. They don’t want to change it, they’re not really interested in lifestyle changes. They lose their accommodation, they re-offend, they go back into custody, the revolving door continues.”

(Staff Respondent 4)

**Drugs, Alcohol and Mental Health:** As indicated earlier, and consistent with research conducted elsewhere (see Clinks 2015), many of the women who were being supervised on licence had inter-connected and often longstanding substance misuse and health problems. Staff Respondent 1 spoke about the extent of the problems with regards to drugs:

“Everything, right across the board. You know, it could be they’re addicted to Valium or it could be heroin, you know, they’re on the legal highs that are supposedly legal and their characters are completely out of character, when they take these things.”

(Staff Respondent 1)

Staff Respondent 5 also highlighted women’s substance misuse issues, making it clear that “we won’t see them when they’re under the influence... we will cancel the session and we’ll rearrange”. However, mental health issues were described by this respondent as being more difficult to manage: although they were able to cope with a wide range of psychiatric conditions that were experienced by many of the women, she was concerned about women who had more extreme psychotic episodes. For instance, she cited the case of one woman with such problems:

“Although she was great, no aggressiveness from her, we had all this stuff and I thought that’s not fair to her, that’s not going to work. So I think it’s those ones for me, make it very, very difficult you know to do any sort of intervention.”

(Staff Respondent 5)

These concerns about the mental health conditions of some women, often combined with other health or substance misuse problems, have been the subject of considerable research across the health, social care and criminal justice systems. In this respect, a recent systematic review and meta-analysis of such interventions concluded that:

Enthusiastic practitioners working with women offenders need additional research to capitalise on recent research gains. More evidence has emerged, particularly over the last three years but not enough to be sure that we are doing the right things in the best way... Momentum must be maintained by policy-makers, researchers and

research funders, commissioners and service providers.  
(Bartlett et al. 2015: 155)

The complexities and inter-relatedness of the issues presented by many of the women were outlined by Staff Respondent 5. While emphasising her commitment to the work, she expressed the scale of the situation that often faced her and the constraints imposed by the amount of time she was able to allocate for intervention given the funding cuts imposed on the agency she worked for:

“I’ve had women come to me that present with one need but actually that’s had a huge impact and when you unpick it there’s loads of other needs going on. And I worry about those women missing the criteria, you know, not meeting that criteria and slipping through the net, and just having a phone call<sup>15</sup>.”  
(Staff Respondent 5)

For Staff Respondent 4, who was working with a caseload of such women<sup>16</sup>, the range of health and inter-related problems involved liaison with a multitude of other organisations and agencies:

“It’s endless, because of the complexities of the cases I work with: numerous mental health departments, home treatment, [acute hospital for people suffering from mental health problems], forensic services have been involved in the female cases, [specialist unit] and community-based mental health teams. So, across the board in the mental health departments. GP liaison – I spoke to a GP surgery yesterday about the concerns about an eating disorder potential diagnosis on a case that looks like it’s kind of sat under the radar for a very long time.”  
(Staff Respondent 4)

This quote illustrates how this staff respondent was working to facilitate an individual multi-agency approach for each woman and suggests that the need for links with other services is almost limitless. As Sheehan, McIvor and Trotter (2011: 361) have stated, the wider social and penal policies are likely to “impact adversely on women and impair their ability to successfully address their problems and rebuild their lives.”

With their commitment to a holistic approach to the women’s problems, staff spoke of a number of ways in which they tried to offer **support**, but as the

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<sup>15</sup> Staff Respondent 5 is referring here to the BRAG system, with the lowest categorisation being dealt with via a call centre. Under the BRAG (blue, red, amber, green) model now being operationalised in this Community Rehabilitation Company area since the implementation of Transforming Rehabilitation low risk offenders would come under the “remote case management system” (Staff Respondent 4).

<sup>16</sup> At the time of the interview this staff respondent had a caseload of between 40 and 45.

following discussion shows their interventions were beset with many constraints.

**Seamless transition of support:** All of the staff respondents were keen to ensure that resettlement was a 'seamless transition' from prison to the community. Workers from voluntary sector resettlement agencies and probation officers tried to work collaboratively together to prepare prisoners for release, and in following them up in the community afterwards. This included, where possible, meeting the women in prison and then, at the very least, meeting them as they were being released from custody. More recently, the Transforming Rehabilitation changes had resulted in funding cuts leading to reduced working hours. This meant that staff from voluntary sector agencies could no longer get involved at such an early stage in the process. Instead they liaised with the relevant probation officers and would then write or email<sup>17</sup> the women ahead of their release.

"The probation officers go up there and they have asked me sometimes if I would go up with them to introduce myself. But funds won't allow it... they've just cut all the hours cause they want a better service for less money... you can't take a day out to go to prison with a probation officer..."

(Staff Respondent 1)

Beyond the budget cuts, which impacted on staff working in the community as much as those working in prison, several of the respondents talked about how the privatisation of the probation service and the resulting fragmentation into the NPS and CRCs had made a 'seamless transition' back into the community more difficult. Some felt that the role of the NPS and CRCs in the resettlement process had become blurred and unclear. When asked who referred women to her, one staff respondent described:

"I get confused to be honest, there's the offender managers then there's the National Probation Service. It used to be mainly offender managers that we were getting the referrals from but now we're getting referrals from NPS as well... I don't think the NPS or the OMs know what they're doing to be honest. I think it's confusing for them as well... they were one unit and now they've been split into two units... it's all a bit mish mashy."

(Staff Respondent 2)

However, some new initiatives have been developed to get around such funding constraints in an attempt to provide a more viable, seamless support service. One such initiative is a mentoring project which will train former female offenders to become mentors who can then support other women to resettle

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<sup>17</sup> Staff respondent 1 commented that "I can email them [but] they can't email back".

upon release from prison.

In terms of the support provided in the community, several staff respondents were working on the Open service provided by WRSAC and thus had eight sessions with each of the women who were referred to them (WRSAC 2016; Working Links 2016). This contact was on a one-to-one basis, usually starting with a three-way meeting between the probation officer, the independent women's practitioner from WRSAC, and the woman on licence from prison<sup>18</sup>. Allocation to the appropriate WRSAC worker was made according to geographical location<sup>19</sup>. At this point the WRSAC staff members would receive information from the risk assessment on the woman (conducted by probation / prison staff) and use this information to guide them about the appropriate location to meet with the women in future.

**Positive, trusting relationships:** In general, the staff have one to one relationships with the women once released from custody. Meetings tend to be in the women's home or in a neutral setting somewhere in the community. There is a 'Women's Hub' in Plymouth where it is possible for meetings to take place, but transport problems could often make it difficult for the women to get to them:

"...most of them don't drive... we could probably give them a travel warrant but whether you'd be successful in getting them if they've got their drugs and drinking habits? It could just be wasting your time... these women need help... and it would be a further punishment for them to have to get somewhere that was going to take them three hours... Whereas, we can get to them hopefully in an hour."

(Staff Respondent 1)

Workers also stressed the importance of the same relationship attributes as expressed by the women themselves, which is 'being a good listener', 'empathetic' and non-judgemental'. These qualities were seen to have a very favourable effect:

"to give women empowerment, to help them find their voice, to make them realise that they can be nurtured and they can love themselves. Cause most of these women have very low self-esteem."

(Staff Respondent 1)

So a vital feature of the relationship between the women and the workers was to empower the women to engage more confidently in the resettlement process so that they could take responsibility to begin to address and deal with their own needs and problems. However, the staff also saw themselves as

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<sup>18</sup> They also work with women on community sentences but this research is focusing specifically on women who have experienced prison sentences.

<sup>19</sup> Staff respondents 1 and 2 commented that their 'patches' in Cornwall were divided up geographically so that one of them dealt with women from Truro upwards, and the other from Truro downwards.

having other roles, such as being an advocate for the women:

“A big thing is they just appreciate that someone is willing to stand up and fight with them. Because quite a lot of times, especially if they’ve been through abuse which a lot of them have, they’re burnt out and there isn’t anybody who’s willing to stand up for them.”

(Staff Respondent 2)

It was also accepted that while probation officers tried to support women with resettlement worries, they also had to monitor and supervise the conditions that had been laid down for the women’s release. So one staff respondent commented:

“Offender managers tend to be a bit more limited than what we are... we can support them in different ways... we get quite involved in supporting them and being their advocate or just being at their side... I think it’s the way we work... we don’t come across to the women as being intimidating or an authoritarian, they learn to relate to us as another woman.”

(Staff Respondent 2)

**Social support network and practical help:** The staff spoke of how they tried to provide ‘holistic’ support packages around the nine pathways which addressed the women’s practical problems based on their individual needs as discussed in the previous section. One worker elaborated this as follows:

“We do a lot of practical things. Yeh, lots and lots of stuff... I’ve taken them to medical assessments, and when the money has come in we’ve had plans put in place in order for them to get the aids that they need to improve their quality of life. For others, with drugs, I’ve worked with one where we identified a high risk day of using when her money was paid into her account. So I would meet her outside her ATM machine in the morning and we would go and we would pay her council tax, we paid her TV licence, gas, electric, take her for a shop... As much as we can, we give them tools that they need to keep going...”

(Staff Respondent 5)

However, often resources were not available to sort out these problems due to lack of funding. Drug and alcohol misuse was highlighted by workers as a particularly ‘prolific problem’ (Staff Respondent 2). There were specialist programmes to address such problems but most had long waiting lists. Consequently, workers spoke of how they did their best to work with the women until places became available on appropriate treatment programmes.

“They’re so overrun that it’s not always easy to kind of get your woman in there... It’s difficult because [local drugs and alcohol agency], they’re kind of the specialists in that field. We can do some work with them

about, you know, alcohol and drugs and whatever to the minimum of our knowledge, because obviously that's not our training. But we obviously try our best to hold them until they can get an [local drugs and alcohol agency] worker."

(Staff Respondent 2)

Several of the staff respondents also pointed out that women's needs were different from men and that it was important that women's support packages were 'women-centred' and run by women. However, there was a lot of uncertainty about whether a dedicated service for women who offend would remain in the South West, with one staff respondent commenting:

"...since the split my experience has been that the drive to support women in a different way has come from the ground up, not from the top down... nobody has come to me and said there will be a dedicated women's post... so I don't know whether that's a lack of communication of the intentions of the service, or whether that's a lack of commitment."

(Staff Respondent 4)

As mentioned earlier and as found in other resettlement research (Bateman and Hazel, 2014) and the 'Through the Gate' inspection (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016) housing was a 'massive issue' (Respondent 1) for the women in this research. Workers were often forced to accommodate women in totally unsuitable ways, for example:

"... Housing are very good, but they can't create a house if it's not there... also if a woman has burnt all her bridges that's when it becomes very difficult. You know it comes to the point where I've got a tent in my boot, if a woman needs it. But they can't live like that forever!"

(Staff Respondent 1)

Nevertheless, Staff Respondent 4 spoke positively about a recent development where a local hostel had opened up a 'Women at Risk Network' room. She spent time there in her CRC role, and a drug and alcohol worker from a local agency was also involved. This is a local initiative driven forward by the manager of the hostel, without any dedicated funding. Staff Respondent 4 explained how this resource operated to address women's homelessness issues:

"There's no rent, and it's basically two beds, two mattresses on the floor... a dedicated women's space that is normally a meeting room during the day... it's a safe space for people to use, of an evening. They're allowed to use the facilities and the building during the day, so it's not as though they're kicked out... it's a window of opportunity for them to start working with agencies."

(Staff Respondent 4)

This project had only limited funding, but it is an example of an initiative started up by workers to address women's practical accommodation difficulties despite severe resource constraints.

**Holistic support packages:** All of the staff were aware of the importance of providing holistic and comprehensive support packages, with Staff Respondent 2 describing it as being a 'core ethos' to recognise that women's personal and social problems were often interconnected. Another staff respondent commented:

"It all interlinks, there's nothing you can do [in] isolation because something else falls down... Unless we get help from all angles, she fails."

(Staff Respondent 1)

While it was clear that the staff respondents were committed to adopting a holistic approach towards their work with women, many felt that partnership arrangements between the NPS, the CRCs and voluntary sector organisations were not always joined up. This was blamed on a lack of strategic and operational direction following the privatisation of the probation services and its split into the NPS and the CRCs.

However, one felt that the lack of clear working links between the NPS, CRC and voluntary sector organisations was not just about the changes brought about by the privatisation of resettlement services, but also reflected different cultural expectations about their respective roles:

"I just don't think there's a joined up approach to things at the moment... [this is because] I'm not really clear about the role that [the voluntary sector] is playing and where their boundaries are... the voluntary sector is all about befriending whereas the probation officer unfortunately has to try and balance that befriending alongside compliance. And it's quite a hard line to deal with."

(Staff Respondent 4)

Nevertheless, there were examples where, despite the difficulties, workers had struggled to create inspirational, holistic support packages dedicated to women's needs. The women's hub in Plymouth was an example of this. This is an attempt to provide a 'one-stop-shop' to addressing women's need as a whole. The hub provides the physical space for vulnerable women to have direct access to a range of specialist support services (e.g. those relating to mental health and drugs) over a series of sessions. However, once again funding remains a big constraint, as one respondent commented:

"... the resourcing at X isn't great. There's a fight for rooms... if this project is going to develop further, if we are going to be looking at the

potential for a women's hub... then there needs to be a lot of investment in that process."

(Staff Respondent 4)

Overall, despite the commitment and dedication of staff to create a quality package of practical support to women on release from custody, it was obvious that a lack of funding was a constant constraint. The magnitude of the problem is summed up by Staff Respondents 1 and 2:

"I see everywhere cutting back... Zero hour contracts in the NHS... probation laying people off, left right and centre... It's soul destroying when you're trying to concentrate on these women and you're thinking "have I got a job tomorrow"."

(Staff Respondent 1)

"The lack of availability of services, everything just feels like it's all floating and nobody really seems to be grounded about what's going on... It leaves you feeling really, really frustrated. The way things are going, I think it's going to get worse."

(Staff Respondent 2)

### 4.5. Violence and Sexual Abuse

In this section of the report, the experiences of violence and sexual abuse amongst both those women interviewed in prison and in the community are discussed. Please note, direct quotes from the interviews are presented in this section, some of which provide detailed accounts of abuse.

#### 4.5.1. Experiences of Violence and Sexual Abuse

Almost all of the women interviewed reported that they had been a victim of sexual/domestic violence. For many of the women this was physical violence inflicted by a partner/ex-partner. For others, the violence aligned to the most recent Home Office definition developed in March 2013 (House of Commons 2016), in that it included psychological violence in the form of coercion and control (Lockton and Ward 1997). Several women told us about sexual violence committed against them either by boyfriends when they were younger or by partners/husbands in longer term relationships. A few women disclosed that they had been victims of domestic violence at the hands of parents/step-parents.

As well as being victims, some women had committed acts of violence against their violent partner, and in some instances had received a custodial sentence. These relationships were examples of women who had 'just snapped' as a result of their experiences.



Some women described the physical domestic violence that they had experienced; for example, the husband of one respondent had a serious alcohol problem and would attack her whilst drunk. He would then express remorse the following day:

“...oh, sorry my love, I’ll never do it again. He wakes up after he’s had his drink... he used to pull me hair and stuff like that. He regrets it now... cause he ain’t well now.”

(Respondent DP1)

Respondent DP2 reported mental, financial and sexual abuse. Her husband had encouraged her to drink to hide the fact that he was having an affair. The mutual drinking led to them fighting each other, particularly after she had discovered the affair: “I used to be covered in bruises and stuff, so I mean, the injuries were quite bad.”

Her children had been removed and for the immediate future, they were not all allowed to live together because of what the children had witnessed (see Holt et al 2008 for a discussion of the impact of such exposure).

Other respondents described experiencing the full range of sexual and physical violence, as well as being a victim of coercion and control. Respondent A4 had been married to a man for 27 years who physically beat her and wouldn’t allow her to have children. His level of control was such that she had five terminations, including one at 20 weeks. She said:

“You know, he ruined my life, there was no question about that. And I don’t think, I would be where I am or where I was, had it not been for him.”

(Respondent A4)

On one occasion he beat her “black and blue” because she had made him sandwiches with mouldy bread, he did this and then made her eat them. This respondent stole money from her employer to keep her husband happy.

Respondent A3’s ex-husband had also been very controlling, to such an extent that she felt compelled to clean compulsively. She became mentally ill and was hospitalised. In the end she stabbed him because she ‘snapped’.

Another respondent suffered sexual and physical abuse, and control and coercion at the hands of her partner and described how “he used to drown me in the bath and smother me in bed” (Respondent A2). He was sexually abusive and she was pregnant 13 times. Examples of his controlling behaviour included a refusal to allow her to learn to drive, have a bank account, or choose what she wore each day. Whilst she has served time, her ex-husband has worked to turn her children against her and so in a sense the abuse goes on. Given his controlling behaviour, this respondent described how she had no friends and

didn't know how to function when he left.

Another respondent told us that she was raped by her boyfriend at 12 years of age and later experienced domestic abuse with her husband. She met her husband at 14, he was 19 at the time. He was very controlling and abused her emotionally:

“Like I wasn't allowed to go out, I wasn't allowed to wear what I wanted because I looked like a slag or I couldn't go out with my sister because her friends were this or that.”

(Respondent DP5)

Further examples of sexual violence and childhood abuse were reported by Respondent AP2. She experienced abuse from her mother who started “selling her” when she was six. She became a prostitute and did this for 18 years, during which time she was gang raped. She described her boyfriend as a “bit of a bully”, who she ended up stabbing in the leg. She also has a history of drink and drug (heroin) abuse.

### 4.5.2. What Help Did Women Receive?

A significant portion of the sample said that they had not received any help for issues relating to sexual/domestic violence, whether in the community or in prison. Some of the women said that they did not seek it, with one saying at the time of the interview that she would now wish to find support, and would do this via probation. A further respondent told us that she had been the victim of childhood abuse at the hands of her stepfather, and her mother had forbidden her to tell anyone, hence she had never sought any support. Another respondent told us that the court had recommended that support be offered, however nothing had been forthcoming.

A strong reason for not seeking help was around issues of self-blame, or not realising that they had been a victim of, in particular, sexual assault. For one respondent, she only realised that she had been a victim when her solicitor pointed it out:

“...he used to come and do all the pen pushing the solicitor work when I was on remand. And he said (person's name) that's rape. And I'm thinking yeh, I suppose, whatever.”

(Respondent C1)

Although many of the women stated that they had not received any help, some had received support whilst in prison. The support provided however appeared to something of a ‘mixed bag’ in that it was provided by a range of agencies. For example, a domestic violence course was available:

“I actually done a domestic violence course in here as well, which was wicked which made me realise it wasn’t all my fault.”  
(Respondent DP2)

The respondent told us that the course was run by probation, and that it was a six week course, one day per week. She felt this should be offered to all women, as domestic violence is so prevalent.

Other respondents spoke of receiving support through the Nexus Project whilst in custody. As described in Section 4.3.2, the Nexus Project was available to those women with serious mental health problems to enable them to receive specialised psychological support. As two respondents described:

“Nexus do a lot of the support work based around it cause through our therapy we talk about our histories, like sexual abuse and stuff like that. Yes it wasn’t until I come in here and were doing a list of negatives and positives of my relationship when I broke down and my negative list just went on and on.”  
(Respondent DP5)

“...I’m embracing Nexus, it’s very difficult sometimes, your moods up and down. Try to look at things positively to try and find a positive out of a negative, all those sort of things I’m trying to train myself to do.”  
(Respondent CP2)

Other respondents talked of the Forgiveness Project; for Respondent CP5, it was hoped that the course would enable her to resolve issues relating to the childhood neglect that she had been subjected to by her mother:

“My mum was a very, very bad alcoholic. Hopefully through the Forgiveness Project which starts in August... I actually think maybe it’s the right time I’ve maybe learned to deal with some of those things and like I say, banish it all and get rid of it...”  
(Respondent CP5)

Some respondents mentioned receiving more informal support from Prison Officers and other inmates. The older women’s group, The Rubies, was also mentioned as a source of support<sup>20</sup>.

A range of sources of help were also reported in the community, albeit again this was a ‘mixed bag’ with little in terms of strong patterns of support from one agency. One respondent spoke of support from social services, the NSPCC and WRSAC. She spoke extremely highly of WRSAC:

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<sup>20</sup> See Annison, J. and Hageman, A. (2015) for further discussion of this older women’s group.

“What I found helpful. Everything. Everything. Everything they did. I just felt they cared genuinely whereas (name of agency) is just, a load of rubbish. I done a 10 week programme with them (WRSAC), and they did more for me in 10 weeks than (name of agency) done for me in 20 years.”

(Respondent B1)

Similarly, another respondent described WRSAC as “absolutely brilliant.” Other support received in the community included the SUSIE project, the Well Woman Project and the Freedom Project. For one respondent in particular, the support provided by the Well Woman Project was highly valued. A worker had accompanied her to a meeting with social services and spoke up for her as her child was being taken into care:

“She said, can I have a word... You’re all bullying her, she’s in a corner... I was like, oh gosh, someone on my side. You know, like a miracle.”

(Respondent A6)

Of those who said that they didn’t receive any support for sexual/domestic violence issues, overwhelmingly, women thought that such help should be available to them in custody:

“Yes I do... definitely. I think a huge percentage of females are in prison directly or indirectly connected to a male partner or a male in some way.”

(Respondent C1)

“I’m not a stupid person but if you’ve had proper counselling, little flags come up in your head and you think woah, hang on, that’s not happening again.”

(Respondent A7)

The length of sentence also appeared to shape access to support. For example, although Respondent B2 stated that she had not wanted to seek help, her perception had been that her sentence wasn’t long enough for her to access any. However, she did think that such support should be available:

“Because then it’ll get people to open up ... they can talk about it and try and get some resolve around it you know. And not be fed up with it.”

(Respondent B2)

Others emphasised the importance of the continued support from prison into the community:

“So I think to have support in here you know at least so you can address some of the issues to start with and then be able to have some kind of group to go to where you can continue it on the outside would be really helpful.”

(Respondent CP1)

### 4.5.3. Staff Perceptions

**Prevalence of Sexual/Domestic Violence:** Each of the five staff interviewed also described the commonality of sexual/domestic violence amongst women offenders and perceived this to be a prime contributor to their offending:

“I can say categorically that 99.9% of the time, there’s something gone on in that woman’s life that’s created the chaos that’s resulted.”

(Staff Respondent 1)

“I’d say 98% of the women have experienced either child or sexual abuse or domestic abuse.”

(Staff Respondent 2)

Staff reflected that women may not recognise it as abuse and that if they have been vulnerable as children, this vulnerability will continue into their adult lives. For example, Staff Respondent 1 discussed the different types of sexual violence/domestic violence and how some women don’t recognise that they are being pimped out by partners and used as prostitutes:

“They don’t get it, if they’re getting money, they think themselves a prostitute. If they’re getting drink or drugs, they don’t count that. So then I make them aware that actually any gain that they’re doing for sexual favours, is actually prostitution.”

(Staff Respondent 1)

**Support in the Community:** A strong theme identified by the workers was the intervention of WRSAC, which may be a reflection of WRSAC’s role in the recruitment of each staff respondent. WRSAC was the agency workers commonly referred to when describing the support available for those women who have experienced the violence/abuse discussed in the preceding sections. However, issues were raised about the ability of agencies to offer support, particularly given the funding cuts that are being experienced across the public and third sectors, and introduction of local commissioning within a market environment (Simmonds 2016).

“Yeh, I see everywhere cutting back. Zero hours contracts in the NHS and yeh, I think every job... And you know this place, the problem with working in WRSAC, is because we’re a third sector charity, we train up

women to be IDVAs<sup>21</sup>... we lose it, it's like losing your baby. And now this service is now doing almost the same, you know, we've built this up, and then it's the highest bidder wins it."

(Staff Respondent 1)

The challenges facing ex-offenders in accessing the services following release from prison were also mentioned:

"I might ring agency X and say you're setting this woman up to fail, you're asking her to come and see you in St. Austell, she lives in Lostwithiel. She's got no money, she can't get to you. It's also she's got to see probation, drugs/alcohol agency, WRSAC worker – too many people for them to cope with getting to... if they don't turn up then they're in danger of being breached and going back inside. WRSAC try to persuade services to go to the women."

(Staff Respondent 1)

Other workers commented on the under-funding of third sector agencies, and in particular WRSAC's position:

"They can only give eight sessions, used to be able to apply to probation to do five more, but now as things have changed their only option is to signpost to other agencies... but other agencies are often maxed out, or don't quite fit the niche that that woman [needs]. Because we specialise in the sexual abuse stuff, and a lot of other agencies don't. So they don't always understand the dynamics of it."

(Staff Respondent 2)

Another worker spoke of the lack of continuity of support; she had worked with agencies to facilitate provision in a local homeless agency but "...they came in temporarily and then quickly disappeared." (Staff Respondent 4)

Finally Staff Respondent 5 spoke of women who were victims of domestic abuse, where the male perpetrator was on a programme. The support for victims was limited to four sessions and the workers were not allowed to attend MARAC<sup>22</sup> or child protection meetings with the victim:

"I just think you know we're not being able to support them in the ways that they would perhaps want us to. And women have said that 'please come along because you know I feel braver to say what I need to say if I've got somebody in my corner'. And you know that's really important."

(Staff Respondent 5)

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<sup>21</sup> Independent Domestic Violence Advisers.

<sup>22</sup> A MARAC, Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference, discusses the risk, safety and support needs of those experiencing high risk domestic violence and abuse.

At the time of the research interviews, none of the staff respondents were actively providing support relating to violence and sexual abuse inside the prison. Discussion of general support in the prison appears in Section 4.3.

### 4.6. Self-Esteem and Attitudes Towards the Future

To explore self-esteem and attitudes towards the future, the interviews explored respondents' perceptions of the good and bad things in their lives, their hopes for the future and how confident they were that they would not commit further crimes. Responses varied depending on relationships with family and partners. Some described how their families had 'stood by them':

"The things that keep me breathing is my kids and my parents."  
(Respondent DP5)

"... I've got my kids. I've got a nice partner, one that don't take the piss do you know what I mean? Yeh, it's nice to feel loved, properly loved as opposed to be used and not loved."  
(Respondent B2)

For some of those women in prison, their time in custody was described as being a good thing as it had enabled them to access the support they needed. For example, qualifications, drugs and mental health support, and more generally the provision of a stable time for 'getting their heads straight' were all described. As Respondent DP4 explained, prison had enabled them to receive a methadone prescription:

"Funnily enough coming into prison [is a good thing] cause I've managed to get on a script. I know it sounds a bit like stupid, I am happy that I come into jail cause I managed to sort out my script."  
(Respondent DP4)

Although, these women perceived their custodial sentence to be a positive thing, the Corston Report was unequivocal in stating that women should not be sent to prison, for amongst other things, to access treatment (Corston 2007).

Supportive family and partners were also cited as good things in the lives of those in the community. For example, Respondent B4 described how she had her granddaughter to "keep me going". Work, both paid and voluntary, were also valued by this group of respondents. One woman described her volunteering activity as:

"...that's like my second family as well, and I can rely on them for support as well, and so can the family, my children and all that."  
(Respondent B4)

Respondents in the community also identified their ability to value themselves and take more control of their lives as a good thing, even if at times they felt as

though they were faltering. The following quote shows how the self-esteem of one respondent wavered but reflecting upon the housing support she was receiving, she realised that she was strong enough to re-build her life outside of prison:

“I had a major crash a couple of weeks ago, I thought, that’s it, I’d go back. I can’t stand this anymore, I’ll go back to jail. No, it’s alright. And they’re helping me to trust again. And then, and that is really good in my life.”

(Respondent A5)

In terms of the bad things in life, those in prison talked about prison as ‘a bad thing’, particularly where this had led to feeling isolated from family and friends. One offender, whose parents were looking after her children, felt a sense of guilt over the potential strain that this was causing them:

“my children live with my mum and dad, I feel terrible for them being like 70 odd and having to relive like pretty much having me and my brother.”

(Respondent DP2)

Others felt a loss of direction and low self-esteem in terms of who they were:

“At the moment, we’re battling... my psychologist, everybody’s trying, get me to see myself as other people see me. I cannot see that. I don’t like myself, I can’t see any good in me anymore.”

(Respondent CP2)

Offenders worried about getting into debt and about what life on the outside will be like for them, especially the potential for further homelessness and the impact that has on lifestyle:

“What life? I ain’t got one. It’s what I want... but I need a chance you know. I need a chance you know. I need a roof over my head. I don’t like the person that I am out there. Dog eat dog ain’t it.”

(Respondent AP2)

The women in the community were generally less negative when asked about the bad things in their lives, however, where issues were described, family problems were a main theme. Some of the women spoke of their children blaming them for their offending and the impact upon their lives:

“... they’ve got issues at the moment. But they blame me for it... I can’t bear that at the moment, and it depresses me.”

(Respondent A5)



Others talked of the stigma associated with being in jail and known as an offender, particularly where they return to the place where they are known:

In talking about their hopes for the future a range of themes emerged for women both in prison and in the community. These were around getting stable accommodation, employment, staying clean of drugs/alcohol, rebuilding relationships with children and family and just being 'settled'. In other words, women offenders wanted to live the same sort of lives that the non-offending population live. Some spoke with passion about making their children proud of them:

“And I’d like to leave something behind me, for my family, you know. They’ve got something to be proud of with their mum as well you know, as well as some of the tough times.”  
(Respondent A5)

The desire of women offenders to help others was a very strong theme. Many of the respondents had been motivated by their own experiences to try and help others and, in doing so, help them to avoid offending:

“... I want to be able to help other girls in prison and I’m just hitting a brick wall at the minute because I’m on licence. But when I’m not.”  
(Respondent A4)

“I am an intelligent person, I want people to kind of see that I am an intelligent person, and I want to go and put something back into society... I worked as an insider (in prison) where you kind of supported people who were coming into prison... so that for me was a kind of a light bulb moment, why don’t I go and do something about that...”  
(Respondent CP1)

For some, becoming an advocate for women who were experiencing difficulties had become their aim in life:

“To do some sort of work that helps give people a voice – particularly those experiencing domestic abuse, benefits problems etc.”  
(Respondent A2)

Finally, the respondents’ confidence about not re-offending was also explored. Overall women felt very confident that they would not re-offend. For many, this reflected that their offence had been their first offence and was related to very specific domestic circumstances, rather than being a more conventional crime. The domestic abuse that they themselves had suffered, often fed into the crimes they were now convicted of. As Respondent DP2 described “I’d never been in trouble before, it’s just something that turned my world upside down.” In recognising the circumstances that had led to her offence, she worried that a reconciliation with her husband could lead to a further offence. Others who

were less confident cited the need to stay away from old friends/old lifestyle habits:

“There’s always that chance, but no, I’m quite confident. I’m not in the same head space, I’m not around the same people, I’m not around the same issues...”

(Respondent B2)

Others worried that without stable accommodation, it would be difficult for them to avoid their previous pattern of behaviour. As Respondent AP2 described, and reiterating the key findings in Section 4.2 and 4.3, desistance was dependent upon a holistic approach to the resettlement of women:

“Very hard when you’re going back on the streets. Yeh. Very hard. You need a drink just to keep warm in winter... if I’m out on the streets, running riot ...” (Respondent AP2)

Again the findings of Rodermond et al (2016: 22; see section 4.2.1. for further discussion) are relevant here.

### **5. Conclusions: Key Findings and Lessons to be Learnt**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

In this final section of the report, the key findings emerging from the research with women offenders are summarised and the key lessons to be learnt on how to strengthen and improve resettlement support discussed.

#### **5.2. Resettlement Worries and Problems**

The qualitative data from the interviews with the women in this research reveals a complex set of situations, evidenced by multiple layers of personal and social disadvantage in all of the seven pathways that inform resettlement and rehabilitation policy in prison and in the community (Home Office, 2004). Accommodation was a significant problem for the women; for those in custody, anxieties about homelessness upon release were commonly reported. In turn, the absence of stable, secure accommodation led to worries about employment, education and finance. For those with children, there was an absence of a family home in which they could be reunited. Wider concerns related to children and families included a drive to protect young children in particular from discovering that their mother was in prison. Others reported that their relationships with family members had broken down and therefore they had lost a potential support network.

Substance misuse was a further area of worry. For some respondents, custody had enabled them to access treatment services that they had been unable to receive in the community. However, uncertainties surrounding the availability of stable accommodation, finance and their ability to develop new social networks outside of previous substance misuse/criminogenic peer groups created anxiety about their release.

While it was clear that some constructive interventions were taking place within the prison, and that staff (from agencies inside and outside the prison) and the prisoners themselves were endeavouring to plan for their release, for many of the women there were significant on-going concerns and issues. A key lesson here then is that women face complex and inter-related challenges and difficulties in moving towards desistance and resettlement. The following pathways in particular require careful consideration: accommodation, finance and debt management, relationships with children and families; ETE (employment, training and education); health problems and substance misuse.

#### **5.3. Vulnerability and Victimisation: Experiences of Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse**

The Corston Report (Corston 2007) identified two further pathways that inform resettlement and rehabilitation interventions, both in prison and in the community; these being the impact of abuse and violence, and prostitution. The

research, although based upon a small sample of women offenders, revealed that most of the respondents had experienced abuse, victimisation and trauma, all of which are particularly evident in women offenders' lives (Ministry of Justice 2008; Bateman and Hazel, 2014). In asking about their experiences, respondents gave candid and at times disturbing accounts of violence within personal relationships, which contributed either directly or indirectly to their offending.

When we asked about the support that they had received, it seems that those in custody felt less able to access services than those in the community. However, in the sample overall, a significant number felt that they had not received help with issues relating to the traumas contained in these two additional pathways. This may be partly an issue of the respondents' recollection of events, but also the nature of the support that is on offer from the agencies they are likely to come into contact with. Such agencies may have the more visible and potentially pressing practical issues relating to desistance and resettlement in mind, such as accommodation, substance misuse and financial matters. Support for issues relating to domestic and sexual violence may therefore be part of that package generally. Women did talk very positively about some of the help accessed, whether this was through a bespoke women's organisation or women's project, or other agencies. One women's organisation in particular was contracted to work with offenders in the community towards desistance and resettlement<sup>23</sup>, and respondents spoke very highly of the support provided.

As with support for the more visible and pressing practical needs that lead to desistance and resettlement, the issue of funding was again identified as part of the problem for accessibility of support for domestic and sexual violence. It has to be said also, that some respondents' needs were very complex, due to their life experiences and the crimes committed. Fortunately for several respondents, they were able to access psychological support whilst in custody. A number of respondents, particularly those in custody, thought that support for domestic and sexual violence should be provided as a matter of course in prison, and should continue when offenders then move into the community.

The commonality of abuse and violence amongst women offenders indicates a need for women to be asked sensitively and routinely about their experiences on entry to custody. Support should be made available immediately in order to allow women to work through their particular issues. The support should continue into the community, if required, and form part of their resettlement plans.

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<sup>23</sup> The agency in mind is WRSAC, a dedicated women's support agency that provides a service for those who have been victims of rape and sexual assault, but which the women in the community from this sample would largely access as a result of their offending.

### 5.4. Life beyond Custody: Self-Esteem and Hopes for the Future

Self-esteem and hopes for the future were largely linked to issues discussed earlier around women's fears concerning accommodation, substance misuse, employment, debt and the repair of relationships with family and friends (particularly their children). Respondents, both in custody and in the community, talked about the stigma they may face, particularly in returning to a community where they are known. However, when they spoke of achieving qualifications in custody, and work experience opportunities with sympathetic employers during their time in prison, levels of self-esteem were raised considerably.

Those in custody were more likely to suffer from low self-esteem and to fear the future; for them, 'their future' was still to come, that is upon release. Some respondents feared homelessness on their release from custody, and the likelihood of returning to prostitution and alcohol misuse as a means of survival and coping. Those in the community tended to be in more settled accommodation so for them, fears around unemployment and debt were more prominent.

The strong message from most of the women was the desire to live a settled 'normal' life, doing the things that ordinary people do. However, they recognised the barriers that they may face in trying to achieve this.

A key lesson learnt here then is that it is important to ensure that a third sector agency that supports women who have experienced sexual and domestic violence is actively working in all prisons. This will enable women to get to know that agency and its workers, and therefore access a stable and continuous support system. Depending upon their needs, this agency could then refer women to other providers. This would provide a more coherent pattern of service provision than that which appears to be in place currently.

### 5.5. Resettlement Support

The research sought to explore, from the point of view of 29 women who were in custody or had been in custody (and also five workers involved in their resettlement), the kind of support the women received, either in custody or after release, to sort out their resettlement problems and the value of this support.

**Fragmented transitions:** None of the women who took part in this research had a clearly developed resettlement plan in place either before or after they were released from custody. The transition from custody to the community was not a 'seamless' process but a confusing and chaotic experience. They were not actively involved in preparing for release or in identifying and addressing their core resettlement needs. This finding replicates that found in the inspection '*Through the Gate*' which severely criticised CRCs and prisons for failing to

facilitate a seamless transition from custody to the community (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016).

The key lesson to be learnt from this finding is that better communication and links must be fostered between the prison, the CRC and the NPS in Devon and Cornwall to ensure that the transition from custody to the community is a seamless process and that women prisoners are actively involved in identifying and addressing their resettlement needs.

**The quality of relationships:** This research confirms the findings from desistance and resettlement studies (Bateman and Hazel, 2014; McNeill and Weaver, 2010) and the findings of the two recent inspections (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016) that an empathetic, trusting and non-judgemental relationship between women who offend and resettlement workers is fundamental to effective resettlement and in motivating desistance.

Therefore it is clear that building positive relationships between all participants in the resettlement process is crucial to successfully resettling women back into the community upon release from prison. As found in the desistance and resettlement literature such relationships are the key to strengthening women's self-esteem, self-confidence and resolve to stop offending.

**Social support network:** The social support network of the women in this research comprised a range of people. Voluntary sector resettlement workers such as those from WRSAC were considered by the women to be the most helpful in supporting them to resettle back into the community. This is because they were easy to talk to, eager to listen and non-judgemental, and also because they offered practical help and guidance. The women's relationship with probation officers was more ambiguous, reflecting the complexities of the role which involves elements of both support and regulation. For the women interviewed in prison, prison officers also received positive appraisal as being people who were helpful and easy to talk to. Finally, for some, family, friends and even neighbours were part of this social support network.

The key lesson to be learnt from this finding is that the women's social support network is a fundamental component of successful resettlement. It would seem that the kind of independent support provided by voluntary sector workers, such as those from WRSAC, free from the constraints of monitoring compliance is highly valued by the women who participated in the research. However, in the staff interviews, voluntary sector workers spoke about how funding constraints had forced reductions in their working hours and the amount of time they could spend supporting women on release from custody. It would seem that expanding, rather than limiting, funding in this area could have a significant impact on motivating and supporting women who offend to resettle successfully into the community and desist from crime. Allocating increased funding to the newly developing mentoring programmes discussed in the

interviews with voluntary sector workers would seem to be a positive step forward in this area.

**Practical help:** The women in the community stressed the need for practical help, particularly in finding accommodation, managing debt and finances and sorting out employment and training. The 'longstayer' women interviewed in prison praised the type of programmes available in prison to address immediate practical problems relating to mental health, drug and alcohol misuse and family matters. The need for practical help was also highlighted in the staff interviews. However, both staff and women respondents were aware that funding constraints had severely limited the amount and quality of resources to provide such help. Finding suitable accommodation was raised by all respondents as the core practical support need, because if this was not in place then other forms of support were unlikely to succeed.

Therefore, a key lesson is that investment in the provision of practical help will have significant benefits in supporting women to resettle back into the community upon release. This applies to support programmes which address mental health and substance misuse issues as well as those concerned with managing finances and sorting out employment and training. However, it is clear that the overriding priority must be to provide secure and safe accommodation for women on release from custody. Respondents in staff interviews mentioned a number of new initiatives in this area in Plymouth, such as the temporary bed spaces offered by a hostel, which have been made available despite severe funding constraints. Such initiatives are obviously commendable, but more long-term solutions and larger scale investment is needed to resolve the accommodation needs of women leaving custody.

**Holistic support packages:** The interviews with both women and staff make it quite clear that resettlement in Devon and Cornwall is not being provided as a 'holistic', 'integrated' package. There appears to be no strategic or operational vision of how resettlement provision can be delivered as a 'wraparound service' or by a 'whole system approach'. While there are individual attempts to provide comprehensive packages of support, the overall impression is that resettlement provision tends to be directionless, piecemeal and fragmented. There appears to be limited communication and partnership working between the prison, the CRC and the NPS, as was also found nationwide in the two recent inspections cited earlier (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2016). As in the Clinks (2016) research, community voluntary sector organisations are not being effectively engaged in the planning and development of resettlement provision – a failing that is reinforced by uncertainty about funding and sustainability.

The key lesson to be learnt from this finding is that the strategic and operational resettlement vision for Devon and Cornwall needs to be strengthened by better communication, cooperation and partnership working between the prison, the CRC and the NPS. Voluntary sector resettlement

agencies must be included in the resettlement process as equal partners, and given greater security over future funding.

The inspection of community services for women who offend (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016) supports the Women's Centres model with its 'one-stop-shop' approach to providing direct access to specialist services as a way of addressing women's needs holistically. In the staff interviews, respondents praised the women's hub in Plymouth as offering an exemplary way of pressing forward with this model. Unfortunately, this is another initiative that suffers from lack of financial support. Careful consideration must be given to whether investing in the Women's Centres model, as exemplified by the women's hub in Plymouth, would be the best way of moving forward and strengthening holistic resettlement support in Devon and Cornwall. On a positive note, the Ministry of Justice announced on 9 November that it would be providing £800,000 to support local areas to develop a joined-up, multi-agency approach to improve support for female offenders and other women with complex needs (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/development-of-a-whole-system-approach-to-female-offenders>).

### 5.6. Final Summary

The limitations of the respondent sample have been highlighted throughout this report; the practicalities and availability of women offenders in Devon and Cornwall meant that sentence length and time of release all varied, which in some cases restricted the ability to explore resettlement plans in the depth originally envisaged. In addition, the number of staff respondents interviewed was low and the sample of women in custody was selected by prison officers (and therefore potentially biased). Although these issues mean that caution should be used when generalising the reported findings, this research has nevertheless provided valuable and in-depth information on the experiences of women offenders in Devon and Cornwall. In doing so, it has advanced understanding of resettlement and support. Given the Ministry of Justice's recent funding announcement, the key lessons emerging from this research are a timely and welcome contribution to the evidence base. Learning from these lessons will help to achieve the support provision that women offenders need and in turn, the reduction of re-offending.

To summarise, the key lessons learnt are:

- To ensure that women receive the required support, they should be asked sensitively but routinely on entering custody about their experiences of sexual and domestic violence. The support should continue beyond their release and into the community.
- It is important to ensure that a third sector agency that supports women who have experienced sexual and domestic violence is actively working in all prisons so that women are able to access a stable and continuous support system.



- To enable a seamless transition from custody to the community, there needs to be better communication and links between the prison, the CRC and the NPS in Devon and Cornwall. Women prisoners and ex-offenders should be actively involved in this process.
- Positive relationships between all those involved in the resettlement process strengthen self-esteem and are essential to achieving successful re-integration in the community and desistance.
- Social support networks are an important component of successful resettlement. Women value and benefit from support that is free from the constraints of monitoring compliance in relation to their licence/ supervision conditions; ensuring adequate funding of schemes such as mentoring programmes could help to achieve successful resettlement and therefore desistance.
- Practical help which addresses mental health, substance use, finance and employment but most importantly, secure and stable accommodation should be a key part of the resettlement process.
- Increased co-operation, communication and partnership working between the prison, the CRC, the NPS and voluntary sector resettlement agencies is required to facilitate a strengthened strategic and operational resettlement vision for Devon and Cornwall.

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## Appendix One: Women Offenders in the Community Interview Schedule

### 1. About the You

- a. How old are you now?
- b. How would you describe your ethnicity?
- c. How many times have you been in custody?

### 2. Inside Custody

#### a. Worries about release while in custody:

- When inside, some people worry about what will happen when they get back outside into the community. Tell me about the main problems/difficulties that worried you when you were inside?
- Was there anything else that you worried about before release? Tell me about it.

#### b. Support while in custody:

- Did you get any help or support to sort out these worries while you were in custody?
- If not, would you have liked any help /support? What kind of help would you have liked?
- If yes, tell me about the kind of help or support that you received. How helpful / useful was this help? In what ways were the help / support useful? Can you elaborate?
- In general how much support did you get to sort out problems / difficulties while you were in custody?

I had all the support that I needed/I had a lot of support, but could have used more/ I only had a little support/ I had no support

- What was 'best' about the support that you got while in custody?
- What was 'worst' about the support that you got while in custody?
- How could this support be improved?

### 3. Transition from custody to the community

- When were you released from custody the last time?

- Did you make a pre-release plan before you left custody?
- How were you prepared for release?
- Are you supervised in the community now you have left custody?

### 4. Returning to the Community

#### a. Problems / difficulties in the community after release:

- Tell me about the hardest problems / difficulties that you had to deal with after you were released from custody the last time?
- Was there something else that was hard for you to deal with after your release? Tell me about it.

#### b. Support after returning to the community upon release:

- Did you get any help or support to sort out these problems / difficulties upon release from custody after you returned to the community?
- If not, would you have like any help or support?
- If yes, tell me about the kind of help or support that you received. How helpful / useful was this help? In what ways? Can you elaborate?
- In general how much support did you get to sort out your problems / difficulties upon release?

I had all the support that I needed/I had a lot of support, but could have used more/ I only had a little support/ I had no support

- What was 'best' about the support that you got upon release?
- What was 'worst' about the support that you got upon release?
- How could the help / support be improved?
- Were there any really important difficulties that you had after release that you did not get enough help to sort out?
- If yes, tell me about them.

### 5. Support network

- Among the different people you have met since release from custody and returning to the community, who would you say has / have been the most helpful? (this refers to the type of person/people, not their names)
- Can you tell me why you have found this person / these people helpful?
- Who has/have been the least helpful?
- Why is that?

(If the person referred to is a worker on a resettlement project or the probation service, then ask)

- How important is it for you that staff members or workers at a resettlement project for women or in the probation service (on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is not important at all and 10 is very important) do the following<sup>24</sup>:
  - Understand where you are at
  - Can help you sort out practical things
  - Doesn't give up on you when you make mistakes
  - Are female
  - Are similar in age to you
  - Are the same ethnicity as you
  - Are properly qualified
  - Are straight with you
  - Anything else you think is important?

### 6. Violence and sexual abuse

- I would like to ask you about something that you may find quite sensitive. But it is important for me to ask so that the right kind of help and support can be made available to women in this area.
- If you feel uncomfortable, then you don't have to answer and we can move to the last set of questions.
- Have you ever been physically, emotionally or sexually abused? Has anyone ever been violent towards you? Tell me about the experience.
- Did you receive any help or support to deal with this experience?

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<sup>24</sup> This checklist was adapted from the 'Participant survey-young women and girls' accessed at the *Beyond Custody* website: <http://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/beyond-youth-custody-launches-two-national-surveys-inform-research-resettlement-young-women-girls/>



- If not, would you have liked any help or support and what would have been useful?
- If yes, tell me about the help / support that you received? How useful was it?
- Was this matter raised while you were in custody? Did you get any support?
- If it wasn't, would you have liked it to have been raised? Should it be a routine inquiry?

### **7. Attitudes towards the future / self-esteem / self identity/agency**

- How would you say you feel about your life as things are at the moment? Can you elaborate?
- What do you hope for in the future? Can you elaborate? What would help you to realise your hopes?
- How confident are you of staying away from crime now that you have been released from custody? What would help you to do this?
- What do you see as being the 'good' things in your life at the moment?
- What do you see as being the 'bad' things?

## Appendix Two: Women Offenders in Prison Interview Schedule

### 1. About you

- a. How old are you now?
- b. How would you describe your ethnicity?
- c. Is this your first time in prison?
- c. How many times have you been in custody?

### 2. Current Experience Inside Custody

#### a. Worries about release while in custody:

- When inside, some people worry about what will happen when they get back outside into the community. Tell me about the main problems/difficulties that have worried you while you were inside?
- Is there anything else that worries you about being released? Tell me about it.

#### b. Support while in custody:

- Have you received any help or support to sort out these worries while you have been in custody?
- If not, would you have liked any help /support? What kind of help would you have liked?
- If yes, tell me about the kind of help or support that you have received. How helpful / useful has it been? In what ways was it useful? Can you elaborate?
- In general how much support have you had to sort out problems / difficulties while you have been in custody?

I have had all the support that I need/ I have had a lot of support, but could have used more/ I only have had a little support/ I have had no support

- What is 'best' about the support that you have received while in custody?
- What is 'worst' about the support that you have received while in custody?
- How can this support be improved?

### 3. Transition from custody to the community

- Have you made a pre-release plan for when you leave custody?
- Tell me about it.
- How have you been prepared for release?
- Will you be supervised in the community when you leave custody?
- Tell me about it

#### 4. Returning to the Community the Last Time

(If the woman has been in custody more than once, ask them about their previous experience of resettlement. If not move onto section 5.)

##### a. Problems / difficulties in the community after release:

- Tell me about the hardest problems / difficulties that you had to deal with after you were released from custody the last time?
- Was there something else that was hard for you to deal with after your release? Tell me about it.

##### b. Support after returning to the community upon release:

- Did you get any help or support to sort out these problems / difficulties upon release from custody after you returned to the community?
- If not, would you have like any help or support?
- If yes, tell me about the kind of help or support that you received. How helpful / useful was this help? In what ways? Can you elaborate?
- In general how much support did you get to sort out your problems / difficulties upon release?

I have had all the support that I need/ I have had a lot of support, but could have used more/ I only have had a little support/ I have had no support

- What was 'best' about the support that you got upon release?
- What was 'worst' about the support that you got upon release?
- How could the help / support be improved?
- Were there any really important difficulties that you had after release that

you did not get enough help to sort out?

- If yes, tell me about them.

### 5. Support network

- Among the different people you have met in prison (or if you have been inside before when you were released last time and returned to the community), who would you say has / have been the most helpful? (this refers to the type of person/people, not their names)
- Can you tell me why you found this person / these people helpful?
- Who has/have been the least helpful?
- Why is that?

(If the person referred to is a worker in the prison or on a resettlement project or in the probation service, then ask)

- How important is it for you that staff or workers in the prison or at a resettlement project or in the probation service (on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is not important at all and 10 is very important) do the following<sup>25</sup>:
  - Understand where you are at
  - Can help you sort out practical things
  - Doesn't give up on you when you make mistakes
  - Are female
  - Are similar in age to you
  - Are the same ethnicity as you
  - Are properly qualified
  - Are straight with you
  - Anything else you think is important?

### 6. Violence and sexual abuse

- I would like to ask you about something that you may find quite sensitive. But it is important for me to ask so that the right kind of help and support can be made available to women in this area.
- If you feel uncomfortable, then you don't have to answer and we can move to the last set of questions.

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<sup>25</sup> This checklist was adapted from the 'Participant survey-young women and girls' accessed at the *Beyond Custody* website: <http://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/beyond-youth-custody-launches-two-national-surveys-inform-research-resettlement-young-women-girls/>)

- Have you ever been physically, emotionally or sexually abused? Has anyone ever been violent towards you? Tell me about the experience.
- Did you receive any help or support to deal with this experience?
- If not, would you have liked any help or support and what would have been useful?
- If yes, tell me about the help / support that you received? How useful was it?
- Has this matter been raised while you have been in custody? Did you get any support?
- If it wasn't, would you have liked it to be raised? Should it be a routine inquiry?

### **7. Attitudes towards the future / self-esteem / self identity/agency**

- How would you say you feel about your life as things are at the moment? Can you elaborate?
- What do you hope for in the future? Can you elaborate? What would help you to realise your hopes?
- How confident are you of staying away from crime after you have been released from custody? What would help you to do this?
- What do you see as being the 'good' things in your life at the moment?
- What do you see as being the 'bad' things?

## Appendix Three: Staff Interview Schedule

### 1. About you

- a. What agency do you work for?
- b. How long have you worked for them?
- c. What is your role?
- d. What qualifications do you have which are relevant to your role?

### 2. Transition from custody to the community

- How have the women that you work with been prepared for release before they leave custody?
- Do they have a pre-release plan before leaving custody?
- Tell me about it.

### 3. Returning to the Community

#### a. Problems / difficulties in the community after release:

- Tell me about the hardest problems / difficulties that the women you work with have to deal with after being released from custody?
- Was there anything else? Tell me about it (them).

#### b. Support after returning to the community upon release:

- What kind of help or support can you offer these women to sort out their problems / difficulties upon release from custody?
- What kind of difficulties/ problems do you have in providing help/support?
- What is 'best' about the support that you provide to women upon release?
- What is 'worst' about the support that you provide to women upon release?
- Overall how satisfied are you with the support/help you provide to women upon release from custody?
- How could the help / support you offer be improved?
- How important is it for staff members or workers at a resettlement project or in the probation service (on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is not important at all and 10 is

very important) to do the following for the women that they work with<sup>26</sup>:

- Understand where they are at
- Can help them sort out practical things
- Doesn't give up on them when they make mistakes
- Are female
- Are similar in age to them
- Are the same ethnicity as them
- Are properly qualified
- Are straight with them
- Anything else you think is important?

#### **4. Violence and sexual abuse**

- How common is it for the women you are working with on release from custody to have been physically, emotionally or sexually abused? Tell me about their experiences.
- Have they received any help or support to deal with these experiences?
- Can you offer them any help /support? How useful was it?
- What kinds of help/ support do they need? What are the difficulties in you providing this help?

#### **5. Transforming Rehabilitation, Neo-liberalism and Austerity**

- How have recent government policies impacted on your role and the work of your agency with woman resettling into the community after release from custody?

Eg. changes in the aftermath of 'Transforming Rehabilitation' agenda; privatisation of resettlement; public spending cuts; links with CRCs; etc

- What do you see as the positive and negative features of these changes?

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<sup>26</sup> This checklist was adapted from the 'Participant survey-young women and girls' accessed at the *Beyond Custody* website: <http://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/beyond-youth-custody-launches-two-national-surveys-inform-research-resettlement-young-women-girls/>)