



nef Report Briefing

Women's Community Services: A Wise Commission

Women's community services can significantly improve the well-being of vulnerable women, and in doing so help them achieve long-term changes in their lives. These changes can reduce demands on state services including police, courts and offender management, prisons and social services, primary and emergency healthcare, and housing.

This report provides evidence of the demonstrable impact women's community services have on well-being and explores the knock-on impacts on statutory services. Its findings are the outcome of a year-long research collaboration using the Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodology, between **nef** consulting and five women's community services, funded by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the Corston Independent Funders Coalition (CIFC) through the Women's Diversionary Fund (WDF).

This report aims to support local commissioners and decision-makers in meeting the needs of vulnerable women efficiently and effectively, in a time of austerity and reducing budgets.

A need for a different approach

Women offenders represent a minority in the criminal justice system – only 23% of those sentenced in court are women. But their needs are very distinct from male offenders. In fact, their needs make them more similar to the broader population of women who have experienced abuse and trauma. Women in this situation

require a distinctive and sensitive approach, and there is a shortage of evidence about effective approaches for women offenders.

Women's community services have been viewed as a key part of a solution. In her 2007 watershed review Baroness Corston stated that *"they are pioneers of a woman-centred approach, have found the right way to treat women and that their work must be extended and built on as a real alternative to prison."* In response to the Corston Review statutory and grant funding has been provided for some women's community services. However, in this time of shrinking budgets, the long-term future of these services cannot be seen as secure. Women's community services will be under increasing pressure to broaden their reach and explore alternative funding opportunities.

Demonstrable change

Delivering practical support in a way which is targeted at improving key dimensions of women's well-being, women's community services can facilitate long-term outcomes that will reduce demand for a range of state services. There is a

strong case for commissioners from criminal justice, health, and children's services to look at commissioning these services.

The services facilitate change across four aspects of well-being:

- **Meaning and purpose** – Feeling that what you do in life is valuable, worthwhile, and valued by others.
- **Supportive relationships** – The extent and quality of interactions in close relationships with family, friends, and others who provide support.
- **Optimism** – Feeling optimistic about your future.
- **Autonomy** – Feeling free to do what you want and having the time to do it.

This research identified that over a three-month period, **44% of women demonstrated a measureable improvement** in well-being. The greatest increase in well-being was in the area of autonomy.

Each of these aspects of well-being is an important determinant of long-term outcomes. For example, supportive relationships with non-criminal peers, optimism about the future, and a belief that you are free to stop offending are important components of desistance. Optimism and autonomy are important resources for challenging addiction.

Among the five women's community services in this research, the SROI analyses found that their services **returned a social value of between £3.40 and £6.70 for every £1 invested.**

Conclusions

1. **Women's community services are strong at facilitating the change that women need:** to be emotionally and psychosocially-supported.
2. **Women's community services are a cost-effective alternative to custody:** at a cost of less than 5% the cost of a prison place per woman (£2,800 for community services compared to £49,000 per prison place), alternatives to custody provide a strong

economic argument for investment and value for money.

Recommendations for national policymakers

1. **Make public strategic priorities for women in the criminal justice system.**
2. **Protect existing National Offender Management Service (NOMs) funding for women's community services.**
3. **Conduct a national strategic needs assessment of vulnerable women.**

Recommendations for local commissioners

1. **Understand local needs and innovate to meet them:** work in partnership to innovate as pressure mounts to meet a wider need with the same level of resources.
2. **Institute a joint commissioning framework and dialogue for vulnerable women:** cut across local commissioning silos to provide a seamless and effective service for women with complex and multiple needs.
3. **Ensure that payment by results (PBR) mechanisms protect and enhance provision for women in the criminal justice system:** introduce meaningful measurement, safeguards for small providers and explore expanding to outcomes other than reduced reoffending.

View the full report at:

<http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/Womens-Community-Services>



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