

*"Women need
women who
support them"*

London Women's Diversion Service

The impact of community support on diverting
women from the criminal justice system

Acknowledgements

Thank you to our Advance team, and particularly Hayley, Summer, Amy and Leonie, for their contributions to this report and to all the women who engaged in our surveys and those who provided additional insights into their journeys, sharing their experiences.



Advance

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About Advance and our partners

[Advance](#), a national charity founded in 1998, empowers women and girls to lead safe, violence-free and equal lives, so that they can actively engage and flourish in society. Advance, led by and for women, supports those experiencing domestic abuse to be safe and lead the lives they choose, and those in contact with the criminal justice or at risk of offending to break the cycle. In 2020, Advance reached out to more than 6,000 women and girls directly.

Advance's whole system approach is aligned with our values of collaboration and innovation, partnering with other statutory and non-statutory providers, to develop and deliver specialist community-based services in a Coordinated Community Response. It focuses on systemic change to meet women's needs and improve access to services across the whole system, enabling consistency and continuity of support throughout their journey. Advance pioneered best-practice models such as the role of the independent Domestic Violence Advocate and its Minerva Model for those in contact with the criminal justice system. Through its women's centres and advocates, Advance delivers holistic, trauma-informed, specialist support and advocacy and group interventions.

The London Women's Diversion Service was developed and delivered, since 2019, in partnership with three specialist organisations providing support to women in the criminal justice system:

Hibiscus Initiatives

[Hibiscus Initiatives](#) is the UK's leading organisation working with Black, minoritised and migrant women and families at the intersection of the immigration and criminal justice systems. We work across prisons, community and international resettlement; with anti-trafficking work spanning across all these areas. Our work over 35 years has afforded us unrivalled understanding of the intersecting and compounding disadvantages, challenges, and vulnerabilities experienced by our clients. Our intervention model is women-centred, trauma-informed and holistic, recognising that our clients' disadvantage and exclusion is compounded by their gender, race, and nationality. Our Women's Centre in Holloway Road provides specialist support and advocacy services, as well as group activities encompassing practical support, wellbeing and empowerment and agency.

PECAN

[Pecan's](#) Southwark and Lewisham Women's Hubs are committed to working with women to build fairer futures by promoting the safety, dignity and strength of women affected by the criminal justice system and multiple disadvantages. Pecan's women's centres provide gender-specific and trauma-informed support and advocacy from two safe spaces, a holistic programme of activities and courses aimed at building skills, confidence and community, and a Diversion programme supporting women at the point of arrest. Opened in 2017, the centres build on a strong track record of delivering specialist services for women in the criminal justice system.

Women in Prison

[Women in Prison](#) (WIP) is a national charity which provides independent, holistic, gender-specialist support to women facing multiple disadvantages, including women involved in (or at risk of being involved in) the criminal justice system. Its work in prisons, the community and 'through the gate', supporting women leaving prison. WIP run three Women's Centres and hubs for services, including diversion schemes for women at an early stage of involvement in the criminal justice system. Its combined services provide women with support and advocacy, relating to domestic and sexual abuse, mental health, substance misuse, debt, education, training, employment, and parenting.

Introduction

Facts about women in prison

More women are sentenced to prison time for first-time offences than men. They are also more likely to be arrested for low-harm offences. These inequalities are exacerbated by the fact that women who commit offences are more likely than men to be victims of crimes themselves, suggesting harsher treatment of women by the criminal justice system ⁽¹⁾. In 2020

- there was a total of **5,011** prison sentences given to **women** ⁽²⁾, **72%** of which were for non-violent crimes ⁽³⁾. This is compared to 54,564 prison sentences given to **men**, just **18%** of which were for non-violent crimes.
- women made up only **4%** of the prison population ⁽⁴⁾, with **70%** of those sentences for less than 12 months ⁽⁵⁾, and in 2020 it was twice as high as it was in 1993 ⁽⁶⁾.
- **23%** of women were sent to prison on a first offence compared to **14%** of men ⁽⁷⁾.
- In 2020 Black women were twice as likely to be arrested as white women ⁽⁸⁾ with **7%** of women in prison being Black and Black British ethnicity, compared to 3.3% of the population ⁽⁹⁾ and **9.4%** identified as foreign national ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Community responses, such as out of court disposals (OOCDS) can offer a more appropriate response to women's minor offending. However, the proportion of women dealt with by OOCDS is low and has decreased by **74%** over 10 years ⁽¹¹⁾.

Women in contact with the criminal justice system report multiple needs and trauma at a higher rate than men, and specifically

- **71%** of women report mental health needs ⁽¹²⁾ compared to **47%** of men
- **46%** report problematic substance misuse ⁽¹³⁾ on entry to prison compared to **27%** of men
- **28%** report problematic alcohol use on entry to prison ⁽¹⁴⁾ compared to **17%** of men
- **53%** women report experiences of childhood abuse ⁽¹⁵⁾ compared to **27%** of men
- **60%** of women who offend report experiencing domestic abuse, however this figure is believed to be a lot higher ⁽¹⁶⁾.

The adverse and long-term effects of custodial sentences disproportionately effect women and only builds trauma upon trauma. The Ministry of Justice reported self-harm incidents were at **3,207** per 1,000 among female prisoners (**9.3** incidents per each woman self-harming) compared to **661** incidents per 1,000 among male prisoners (**4.4** incidents per man self-harming) ⁽¹⁷⁾.

The impact of women going to prison disproportionately affects families and children, as they are more likely to be the prime care-giver. An estimated **17,000** children are also affected by maternal imprisonment ⁽¹⁸⁾. The number is higher when looking at all 'children affected by the profound stigma felt by those whose mothers have been involved in the criminal justice system' ⁽¹⁹⁾.

National and London Government policy

The **Ministry of Justice's Female Offender Strategy (July 2018)** recognised that often a women's interaction with the criminal justice system is linked with trauma and as noted in the strategy 'In some cases, their offending could have been prevented by addressing their vulnerabilities at an earlier stage' ⁽²⁰⁾. The Strategy set out the Government's commitment to a new programme of work for women driven by earlier intervention and an emphasis on community-based solutions. The

strategy also outlined the Government's belief that Whole System Approaches (WSA) offering holistic support are key to delivering better outcomes.

The **Mayor of London's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC)** and the Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, Sophie Linden, set out a new vision for transforming how the criminal justice system works with women who have committed offences in London. [London's Blueprint for a Whole System Approach to Women in Contact with the Criminal Justice System](#) (July 2019) aims to tackle the root causes of offending, prevent reoffending and provide women with the support they need after leaving prison. The Blueprint aims to connect women with mental health services, ensure appropriate safeguarding measures are in place, help women build supportive relationships and support a smooth transition into safe accommodation when leaving prison. The Blueprint proposes a coordinated approach between the police, prisons, local authorities and rehabilitation organisations to meet the needs of women in prison ⁽²¹⁾.

The **National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) Charging and Out of Court Disposals National Strategy 2017-2021** outlined its vision to achieve criminal justice outcome decisions that are fair and proportionate to the criminality involved, consistent and simplified for the public and practitioners, and designed to reduce further offending. The strategic objectives include the use of out of court disposals (OOCs) with conditions attached to them which seek to address underlying offending behaviour through rehabilitative conditions.

The economic impact

Advance estimates that the cost of **providing holistic community support at our Women's Centres is £2,126 per woman on average**, and this varies depending on her need. The UK Women's Budget Group estimated that a place in prison costs the £52,121 of public funds ⁽²²⁾.

It is estimated that £1.7bn is spent on issues linked to women's offending, whilst in the long term **£2.84 is saved for every £1 spent on women's centres**, according to the UK Women's Budget Group report (2021) ⁽²³⁾. The report highlights that, across England and Wales, a 10% reduction in women's imprisonment could save £9.5–14.7million annually.

An initial review of 15 women's services specialist providers has revealed **a £10m gap in core funding for Women's Centres** for the year from March 2021. ⁽²⁴⁾

The impact of COVID 19

The pandemic has highlighted gender disparities within the criminal justice system both in prisons and in the community. COVID-19 has added a further health dimension to prison life, with self-harm rates highest amongst women and at its highest level since records began ⁽²⁵⁾. Women involved in offending are also more likely to have underlying health issues ⁽²⁶⁾ than wider society, with **79%** women supported by Advance reporting mental health issues, **61%** of women report problematic substance use and **55%** report domestic abuse.

Women released from prison, whether on early release or at the end of their prison sentence, faced additional barriers during the pandemic ⁽²⁷⁾. In one prison, **42%** of women had been released homeless or to emergency accommodation, according to the 2020 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons review ⁽²⁸⁾.



Key Findings and Recommendations

This report summarises the findings and learnings to date by Advance and its delivery partners, based on our analysis of the data, case records and women's lived experiences shared with us between November 2019 and August 2021 by the 175 women referred to us, as part of the London Women's Diversion Service. In preparing this report, we have examined our work with the women at point of arrest and considered what works well and what is the impact on the women's lives. We have considered what we and other agencies could do differently to improve outcomes for women and break the cycle of reoffending. An independent evaluation of the Service is expected to be completed at the end of the service.

Key Findings

- **Diversion services will not reach all the women needing support by limiting eligibility** to only those with Conditional Cautions. Only **3%** women arrested were offered the Women's Diversion Service in the two London BCUs, impacted by the low numbers of conditional cautions and the need for systemic change to the practice of offering most women a community-based response and out of court disposals.
- **High levels of need were reported despite low level offending.** Of the 160 women supported who were arrested for low level offences – 41% being first-time offenders– and eligible for conditional cautions, **62%** reported four or more needs of the nine pathways to offending; **67%** reported mental health needs and **65%** experienced domestic abuse and gender-based violence; **30%** reported having all three needs around mental health, domestic abuse and problematic substance use.
- **Women require longer support because of higher than anticipated level of need**, with **63%** of women receiving above the three months support that was anticipated by the model, and **20%** receiving between 6 to 12 months of support.
- **Women require on average four additional support activities each**, such as advocating with social care, housing and mental health practitioners, as well as specialist groups and activities in women centres around employability, parenting and children, and well-being.
- **All women reported improvement in all areas of need after receiving support and sustainable impact after exiting the service.** Of the women surveyed while receiving support, **89%** reported improved mental health and well-being, **100%** feeling safer from domestic abuse and **93%** reported a reduced likelihood of reoffending due to the support. Furthermore, of the women surveyed over three months **after** exiting the service, **100%** of women stated they were less likely to reoffend, **100%** felt the support received had a positive impact on their children and **74%** are either in employment or in education.
- **Only 7% of the women referred with conditional cautions were re-arrested after engaging** with the service for two or more appointments, with **9.8%** re-arrested prior to attending any or only one appointment; re-arrest rates were not available nationally. It is noted that the national re-offending rate for women of **23.4%**.

Recommendations

- **Commission and implement Women's Diversion Service programmes nationally and end the postcode lottery**, working together with local Women's Centres and specialist women's organisations to deliver early intervention, increase OOCs and improve justice outcomes for women and their children.
- **Widen the criteria for access to the Women's Diversion Service to all women** in contact with the criminal justice system at point of arrest regardless of the police action and outcome (such as no further action, released under Investigation or charged) to provide all women the community support they need, reduce the use of custodial sentences and reduce re-arrests and re-offending.
- **Commissioners need to provide sufficient funding for specialist keyworkers** and groups/activities to support higher levels of need despite low level offending, as well as hardship funds to tackle emergency needs such as homelessness, food and digital exclusion, improving engagement and longer-term outcomes.
- **Improve availability of and access to mental health support**, including counselling, and pathways to mental health services in the community, including for those deemed as 'dual diagnosis' which often excludes them from support altogether.
- **The Home Office, Ministry of Justice and Department of Health and Social Care should develop a joined-up strategy and policies** for women in contact with the criminal justice system, including strategic policy and commissioning women's leads to develop and deliver specific responses and programmes to address the needs of women identified in the [Female Offender Strategy](#) (MoJ 2018), [VAWG Strategy](#) (Home Office 2021) and [Women's Health Strategy Consultation](#) (DHSC 2021)
- **Strategic leadership and commitment are required by Police and Crime Commissioners and by Police Chiefs at both national and local level**, prioritising Women's Diversion Services and gender-specific specialist responses to women in the criminal justice system, as women continue to be marginalised due to the small numbers being arrested in comparison to men, despite the 2007 Corston Report recommendations.
- **Development and embedding of holistic, trauma-informed and women-specific responses is required by local-authorities and regional statutory partners**, specifically Mental Health community services, Courts and Magistrates, Housing and Social Care teams, that meet the needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system.

"I had believed that I my life was over, but then you came along and now I have new hope. I had been fighting with services for so long and then you come and in 3 months you have changed my life for the better. Thank you"

-Woman supported by the service

London Diversion Service

Development of London's response

London's Women Diversion Service was launched in September 2019 led by [Advance](#) and in partnership with Women in Prison, Hibiscus Initiatives and Pecan, across four London boroughs. The Service aims to work with women who have committed lower-level offences in London at point of arrest and is funded by MOPAC, delivering on [London's Blueprint for Women in the Criminal Justice System](#). The London Diversion Service was based on a successful delivery of the 2015/16 Diversion pilot developed by Advance and delivered within Westminster and the Diversion pilot developed by Women in Prison in 2017 delivered within Lambeth.

"We know that women serving prison sentences need specific support to turn their lives around. Women in prison are likely to be victims as well as offenders and their experiences and needs have been overlooked for far too long."

"...The Blueprint for Women means we can ensure that women in London's prison system are able to access support across a range of areas and services. Working together we can tackle the root causes of their problems and drive down reoffending, cut crime and make our communities safer."

Sophie Linden, London's Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime

The Diversion service aims to divert women over 18 years old away from the criminal justice system by giving police the option to offer a conditional caution as an alternative to prosecution and into dedicated support services tailored to women's needs. The service was later extended to include women voluntarily self-referring, although it has yet to be extended to offences that have no enforcement element, such as community resolutions and no further action.

Since the service launch, over 40 training sessions were delivered by Advance across the two London Borough Command Units (BCUs) of the Metropolitan Police to over 80 Evidence Review Officers, 400 custody officers and recently to British Transport Police officers.

Data for women supported

In the 22 months between November 2019, when Advance received their first referral, and August 2021, the Service received a total of **175** referrals: 142 through the Conditional Caution (CC) pathway and 33 through voluntary referrals (VR).

	5 MONTHS TO MARCH 20	12 MONTHS TO MARCH 21	5 MONTHS TO AUGUST 21	TOTAL REFERRALS	TOTAL ENGAGED	TOTAL CC MET
CC	32	80	30	142	131	127
VR	5	20	8	33	29	
TOTAL	37	100	38	175	160	127

The police report a **356%** increase in the use of Conditional Cautions (CC) for women in 2020/21 following the launch of the London Women's Diversion Service, compared to 2019.

“The feedback on the service has been pre-dominantly positive with ERO’s (Evidence Review Officers) making a positive determination to refer knowing and trusting that the female is going into a bespoke scheme”

- Inspector Testimony, The Metropolitan Police

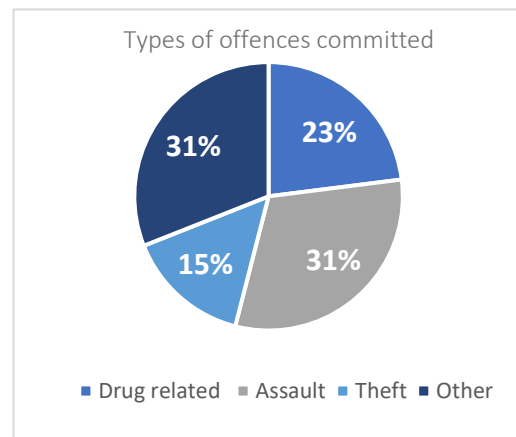
Of the 175 women referred through to the Diversion service, **91%** have engaged with the service, with only 9% being closed due to non-engagement or disengaging after their first appointment. Of the 131 women with conditional cautions that engaged, **97%** have met the requirements of the caution.

“I was at a very low point when I was referred. When the police officer told me about Diversion, I actually started crying because I felt so relieved that they recognised I needed help”

-Woman supported by the Service

Since our first referral in November 2019, there were **38 types of offences committed** by the 142 women referred with conditional cautions, with the most common being theft from shop (under £200), possession of cocaine (personal use) and common assault.

The use of assault/common assault can vary and, following reviews with the police and the women referred to us, we identified that **70%** of the 44 women given a conditional caution for assault have a **history of experiencing domestic abuse**.



Zarah’s story

Zarah was referred to the Diversion service for possession of cocaine. She told her Diversion keyworker about her experience of severe domestic abuse and the loss of custody of her child, followed by being told she was no longer able to children within the space of a few months. Due to fleeing domestic abuse and losing custody of her child, she was deemed to be ‘intentionally homeless’ by the local authority and was street homeless. She was introduced to drugs while living on the streets and she started using to stay awake at night and to reduce the risk of her being attacked. She quickly became addicted to the drug and struggled to get the support she needed.

Zarah completed her conditional caution successfully and continued to be supported for six months by the Diversion Service, before being offered further support by Advance.

The Service Model

Our approach is led by and for women, offering holistic and trauma-informed support to meet their needs, reflecting the core principles of Advance's [Minerva Approach](#) and our partners' services.

On referral, each woman is supported by a dedicated specialist Diversion Keyworker, with expertise in building the trusted relationship which is at the heart of the service. The Diversion Keyworker offers emotional and practical support and advocacy to the woman throughout her engagement with the service.

In the initial stages, the woman and her Keyworker work together to assess her individual needs and priorities, as well as risks, using a strengths-based approach, and agree a personal support plan to address these, with realistic, measurable targets (Appendix 1). With this strong, trusting, and professional relationship in place, the women are supported to express her priorities and preferences and have agency in our process. Advance's empowering approach contributes to her journey to divert her away from the criminal justice system.

Support is offered for up to six months, based on the level of need and risk, with the option of an onward referral to our other services, such as Advance's Minerva service for those assessed as high level of need, as detailed below in 'Women's Support Needs'. The Keyworker and the woman review priorities and progress regularly, ensuring the support is adapted to her current needs.

Support aims to address the needs considered as links to offending behaviour including mental health, domestic abuse, children, families, support networks, domestic abuse, problematic substance use, accommodation, finance and debt, education and employment.

The support plan includes an individualised programme of activities, including one-to-one support by the Keyworker, group sessions/workshops in Advance's and its partners' women's centres, referrals to and advocacy with other specialist services where this is needed.

Through her eyes: Bria's story





Bronte's story

Bronte lived with her husband and two young children. Due to her immigration status Bronte was unable to work so they were relying on her husband's zero-hour contract job to survive. When Covid-19 caused a national lockdown, this resulted in Bronte's husband being let go from his employment. Bronte's bills started going unpaid, resulting in the gas and electric being cut off and her experience of domestic abuse perpetrated by her husband was exacerbated.

Bronte was at a loss, the lockdown meant she was unable to return to France to gain employment, however she was unable to gain employment in the UK.

Bronte became very concerned with how she was going to provide shelter, food and warmth for her family causing her anxiety. She went to a local shop to purchase a blanket for her baby however when she tried to pay her card was declined due to insufficient funds.

Panicking about keeping her baby warm, Bronte left the shop without paying; this resulted in her arrest and was given a conditional caution for 'theft from shop'.

She was referred to the Advance Diversion service. At the assessment the keyworker was able to explain the support Advance were able to provide. Bronte expressed great gratitude throughout the process as she felt like she was no longer alone.

Advance referred her to Children's social service, who helped her find suitable accommodation, and Advance also applied for grants to support the family through the pandemic. Food vouchers were supplied to the family as well as advocating with the utility companies to reduce the arrears. Within a few months Bronte's trust in her keyworker grew and she disclosed the high levels of abuse she had been enduring for many years from her husband. The keyworker supported the client through the process, explained the options available to her and ensured her journey was at the speed she required.

Bronte was able to gain a bank account and applied for her own benefits, worked with her social worker around keeping the children safe and developed an understanding of her legal rights through the services the keyworker referred her to. **Once Bronte felt ready, she fled the relationship with the children to a refuge.**

Bronte completed her Conditional Caution and remained with the service for 6 months, she was then transferred to our long-term WrapAround support service.

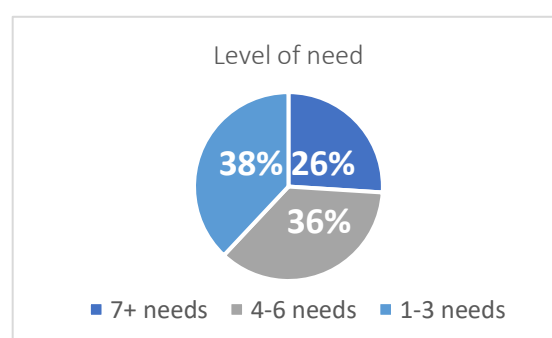
Findings, Learnings and Recommendations

This report summarises the findings and learnings to date by Advance and its partners, based on our analysis of the data, case records and women's lived experiences shared with us between November 2019 and August 2021 by the 175 women referred to us, as part of the London Women's Diversion Service. In preparing this report, we have examined our work with the women at point of arrest and considered what works well and what is the impact on the women's lives. We have considered what we and other agencies could do differently to improve outcomes for women and break the cycle of reoffending. An independent evaluation of the Service is expected to be completed at the end of the service.

Women's support needs

The Diversion service was designed as a tiered support response based on a woman's level of need (appendix 1). It was expected that most women diverted at point of arrest with a conditional caution for low level offences, would have one to three needs ('standard') identified of the nine pathways to offending, with a smaller number of women with four to six needs ('medium') or higher.

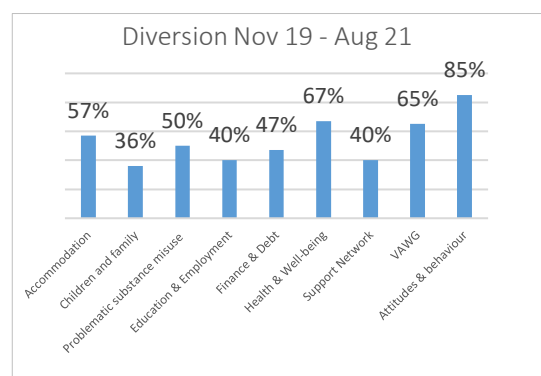
The 160 women supported by the service have presented high levels of need, with **62%** of women having four or more needs (Table: Level of need) and requiring significant levels of support. This is despite **41%** of the women reporting being first-time offenders.



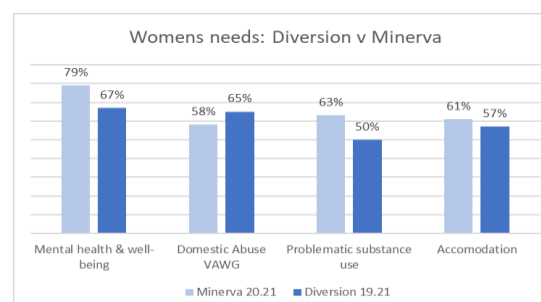
Regardless of outcome from arrest, more than **50%** identify a need in the following areas at point of referral (Table: Diversion Nov 19 – Aug 21):

- Mental Health and Wellbeing (67%)
- Domestic Abuse and VAWG (65%)
- Problematic substance use (50%)
- Accommodation (57%)

Of the 131 women engaged by the service with conditional cautions, **30%** reported to have **all three needs** around mental health and wellbeing, problematic substance use and experiencing domestic abuse.



This closely reflects levels of need reported by the 762 women with custodial or community orders on probation (Table: Women's needs Diversion v Minerva) supported in 2020.21 by our long-term wraparound service of up to 18 months, compared to the six months of support offered within the Diversion Service.



This supports the need for **early intervention at point of arrest** and a **whole system approach** in London, indeed nationally, for all women in contact with the criminal justice system.

Through our analysis of wider data from September 2019 to August 2020, the London Women's Diversion Service was offered to **3%** of those women being arrested (2043 arrests between September 2019 and August 2020) in the boroughs where the service was offered.

Recommendations:

The London Metropolitan Police, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and nationally where appropriate to:

- Widen the criteria for access to the Women's Diversion Service to most women in contact with the criminal justice system, including those with community resolutions, no further action, released under Investigation and charged, to provide women the community support they need, reduce the use of custodial sentences and improve justice outcomes, reducing re-offending.
- Widen the geographic reach of the service to all women across London, to ensure consistency of service across all thirty two London boroughs (extending from the current two BCUs to all twelve BCUs)
- Train all Police officers and Evidence Review officers on Women's Diversion services, Out of Court Disposals' options and on referring women to community support services at point of arrest, aiming to increase OOCs.
- Improve access to the service by co-locating Diversion keyworkers at all BCUs, including within Custody suites, to improve joined-up working with the Police and access to support for women when they need it.

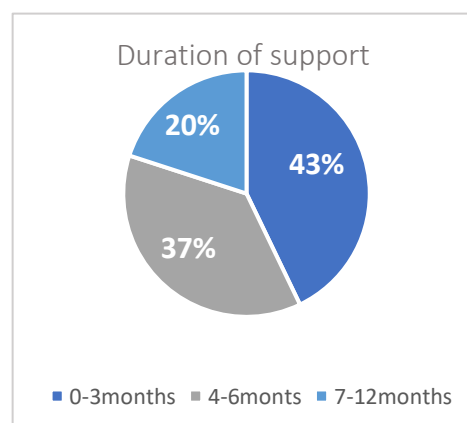
Police and Crime Commissioners in England and nationally to:

- Commission and implement Women's Diversion Service programmes, working together with local Women's Centres and specialist women's organisations to deliver early intervention, increase OOCs and improve justice outcomes for women and their children.

Duration and level of support provided

The service was designed with the expectation that most women would report between one to three needs and require on average three months support (appendix 1) with a maximum of six months support, understanding that level of need varies. Of the 36 women open to support in August 2021 (Table: Duration of support), **63%** of women have received over three months support, with **20%** of women more than the six months support which was the anticipated maximum duration planned.

Women have required longer than anticipated periods of support from the Diversion Service, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Women have requested the extension of support, with some having disclosed additional needs as



the relationship and level of trust has developed with her Keyworker and the service.

In response to women's needs, Keyworkers offer a range of support options in addition to the one-to-one practical and emotional support they provide, with each woman receiving an average of **four** additional support activities (337 activities for 137 women). These include:

- referring on and advocating on her behalf with specialist services in her local area, both with statutory agencies such as adult and children safeguarding, social care, housing and other specialists such as domestic abuse, substance recovery and mental health charities, and
- offering women-only, trauma-informed groups and activities delivered at our women's centres and those of our partners, such as activities for education and employment support, for parents with children in their care or those with children not currently in their care, for mental health and wellbeing.

"My keyworker gave me support with everything. She advocated with (Children's) Social Services, with my recovery worker and I was finally referred to mental health services. She helped me find all the services I needed and attended the appointments with me so I didn't feel so anxious. I feel very lucky having someone by my side as I wouldn't have known where to start"

- Woman supported by the service

Recommendations:

Police and Crime Commissioners and women's service providers to:

- Ensure there is sufficient capacity to provide support of six months on average per women, with maximum cases of 60 per Diversion Keyworker per year (and up to 30 at any time), and additional specific groups/workshops, as most women referred are expected to have medium and high levels of need.
- Provide additional funding for hardship funds for essentials such as emergency accommodation, food, hygiene and mobile phones to access support, improve engagement with services and address poverty and digital exclusion.

Health Services and the Department of Health and Social Care to:

- Provide funding and commission mental health support, including counselling, for women in contact with the criminal justice system, both at point of arrest and those in the community, working closely with specialist women's services and women centres.
- Improve pathways for women in contact with the criminal justice system to mental health services in the community, improving diagnosis and support, and particularly for those deemed as 'dual diagnosis' of problematic substance use and mental health which often excludes them from support altogether.

Outcomes and Impact

Outcomes reported at the end of support

Women supported through the Diversion scheme in the year ending March 2021, experienced improvements in all rehabilitative needs. Of those women that have been successfully closed to the service, all the women reported they improved in all their areas of need.

Specifically:

- ✓ **100%** of the women reported feeling safer from domestic violence & abuse
- ✓ **89%** reported improvement in mental health & well-being
- ✓ **88%** reported improvement in problematic substance use
- ✓ **100%** reported improvement in accommodation
- ✓ **95%** reported feeling supported to make alternative, positive choices
- ✓ **93%** reported a reduced likelihood of reoffending due to support received

"I really appreciate your support as I can really feel that you care and in a short time you have helped me to get my life right, and I have been with other agencies and they have not helped in the last 2 years"

- Woman supported by the Service

Impact of the service 3+ months after end of support

In August 2021, we completed a survey with a random selection of 12 women who had been supported through the Diversion service and had been closed for at least 3 months, with many for longer, to assess the sustainable impact of the Service after support has ended.

The results of the survey demonstrate the **positive impact of the Diversion service on women's lives was long-lasting**, months after their support has ended:

- ✓ **100%** of women stated they are less likely to reoffend due to the support received
- ✓ **100%** feel their confidence and self-esteem has improved since the support received
- ✓ **100%** feel more confident to engage with services in their community
- ✓ **100%** feel the support received had a positive impact on their children

To address **Education, Training and Employability (ETE)**, women are offered one to one support and access to specialist workshops at our Women's Centres, providing her with the tools and skills she needs to attend courses and training, or to apply for jobs or voluntary experience. Of the women surveyed with this need, **66%** are now in employment and **8%** in education, with 17% considering voluntary roles to gain work experience.

Of the women who reported being at risk due to **domestic abuse**, **100%** said they felt safer due to the support offered to them from Diversion. Women told us they felt *'listened to and supported'* and *'felt supported to make decisions'*.



Darlia's story

Darlia was an artist who moved to England from Spain when she was very young. She had a history of 'Drunk and Disorderly' offences in both the UK and Spain and cited the toxicity of the industry and a history of Domestic abuse as the underlying cause, which had led to poor mental health and as a way of coping, she turned to drink.

In 2019, Darlia was charged and **sent to prison for 'Drunk and Disorderly'** and served 10 weeks.

Darlia had a difficult relationship with her family as they were very strict and, on her imprisonment, refused to communicate with her. Her imprisonment also resulted in loss of employment and accommodation.

During her time in prison, she was seen by a mental health nurse on two occasions and was on a waiting list to join a substance misuse support group. She was also about to start an education course. However, due to the short prison sentence, she was unable to begin the substance misuse support group or complete her education course.

On release, she was unemployed, homeless and without support networks. She had to wait 6 weeks to receive her benefits which left her with only the £47.50 release grant.

She did not engage with any support services and was arrested for 'Drunk & disorderly' 4 months later. **This time she was offered a conditional caution** which required her to attend a minimum of 2 appointments with an Advance Diversion service keyworker.

During her first appointment, Darlia and her keyworker worked together to identify multiple areas of need including domestic abuse, problematic substance use, mental health in addition to finance and benefits, education, and employment.

Darlia was given emotional support to reduce her drinking through regular email and phone call check ins. She was also referred onto a substance misuse service and Domestic Abuse specialist counselling and an online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) course.

She was supported to set up a Universal Credit claim, which led to regular payments. She was given support to access Education and training.

Darlia was supported through Diversion for 6 months and completed her conditional caution, and then was transferred to long-term support for an additional 18 months with Minerva.

With support in setting up Universal Credit, she was able to find accommodation. She actively engaged with the substance misuse service and began to take control of her alcohol consumption, she attended counselling regularly and engaged with her GP regarding her PTSD, depression and anxiety. She continued to engage with her Minerva Keyworker and attend other support groups.

She is now in part time employment while she is studying and is beginning to have contact with her family.

When women were asked ‘**what would have been different if they were not offered a Women’s Diversion service**’, they told us:

“I would have been arrested a lot more and got myself in more trouble”

“I would have struggled to go to uni and find a job”

“I would have asked my doctor but I don’t feel I would have got the same level of support”

“I wouldn’t have been able to manage without the support I was given”

“I wouldn’t have had any support and would have been very anxious”

“I would have continued to be lost”

100% of the women surveyed agreed that a **women-only Diversion service was very beneficial** and felt that it not only benefitted them but would benefit many more women and girls in the future.

“Women need women who support them”

Woman supported by the service

Re-arrest 3+ months after end of support

Of the 175 women referred to the service, 142 were given a conditional caution (CC) requiring them to engage with the London Women’s Diversion service for at least two appointments for support and 131 (92%) engaged with the service (as per Data section above).

Of the women given a conditional caution between November 2019 and 24 August 2021, 24 women with a CC have been re-arrested (based on police data); at this stage the data of the outcome of the arrest (whether charged or no further action) was not available. When analysing re-arrest rates in relation to engagement with the service,

- **9.8%** (14) of women referred for CC **were re-arrested before engaging** with the service and completing the conditions, having attended no or only one appointment at re-arrest, and
- **7%** (10) of women referred for CC **were rearrested after engaging** after completing two appointments (met the conditions) and while still being support or after support ended.

It is noted that the **national average re-offending rate for women was 23.4%** (House of Lords, July 2019) ⁽²⁹⁾. Reoffending is defined as someone who has received a criminal justice sanction (such as a conviction or a caution) and then goes on to commit another offence within a set time.

Timing of re-arrest	No of Women re-arrested	% women referred with CC
Re-arrest prior to any appointments with Diversion service	8	5.6%
Re-arrest after only one appointment with service	6	4.2%
Re-arrest post completing two appointments, while being supported	4	2.8%
Re-arrest after support ended/closed	6	4.2%
Total women re-arrested	24	16.9%
Total women with CC referred to Service	142	100%

The Whole System response

Advance's commitment to a Coordinated Community Response through collaboration is aligned with its partners' approach and with London's Blueprint for Women which aims to bring together statutory and voluntary stakeholders in a Whole System Approach to improve justice outcomes for women.

At the centre of the London Women's Diversion Service approach is working closely with the Metropolitan Police, supported by MOPAC, to ensure that women at point of arrest are diverted to the Service through OOCs and CCs, ensuring they are offered community support by the service.

Following mobilisation, although the number of referrals was affected by lower levels of arrests due to the pandemic, it was still high compared to similar services across England:

Women's Diversion Services	No. of Referrals in Year 1
London (4 Boroughs)	102
South Wales	97
Surrey	63
Humberside	44

Key learnings for effective service delivery include:

- ✓ **Regular training and continuous awareness-raising for police officers**, evidence review officers, magistrates and other voluntary service-providers is required to improve understanding of women's needs and trauma-informed approaches, therefore improving access to referrals and to vital community support.
 - Initial training for all police officers and evidence review officers was completed prior to the launch of the service; this is required on a six-monthly basis as new officers join the BCU
 - a Women's Diversion newsletter is produced by Advance bi-monthly for all Met staff at the two BCUs to share women's stories and updates on the service's success
- ✓ **Building strong relationships with the police officers through co-locations** is essential to the success of the service.
 - Diversion keyworkers allocate time to call all custody suites through the day to discuss potential referrals and improve awareness of the service.
 - Keyworkers are Police Vetted and granted access to the custody suites (limited through Covid restrictions) at least twice a week, improving joined up working with the police and speaking to the women directly while in custody
- ✓ **Strategic leadership by the Police and Commissioners, and regular progress meetings** to embed continuous improvements is key to maximising the effectiveness of the service.
 - Advance (service lead), the Metropolitan Police and MOPAC meet bi-weekly to update on the progress of the service and monthly for strategic reviews and development
 - Advance and its delivery partners hold regular operational meetings at least quarterly to share learnings and best-practice with each other
 - Advance report trends and themes identified to all stakeholders, with recommendations and solutions to tackle the barriers and challenges of accessing the service by women

Recommendations

- The Home Office, Ministry of Justice and Department of Health and Social Care should develop a joined-up strategy and policy to women in contact with the criminal justice

system, including dedicated leads to develop and deliver specific responses and programmes to address the needs of women identified in the [Female Offender Strategy](#) (MoJ 2018), [VAWG Strategy](#) (Home Office 2021) and [Women's Health Strategy Consultation](#) (DHSC 2021)

- Strategic leadership and commitment are required by Police and Crime Commissioners and by Police Chiefs, prioritising Women's Diversion Services and gender-specific specialist responses to women in the criminal justice system, as women continue to be marginalised due to the small numbers in comparison to men offending, despite the 2007 Corston Report.
- Development and embedding of holistic, trauma-informed and women-specific responses is required by local-authority/regional statutory partners, specifically Mental Health community services, Courts and Magistrates, Housing and Social Care teams, that meet the needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system.

Appendix 1: The London Women's Diversion Service model of support

TIER	SUPPORT *	DESCRIPTION OF SUPPORT
Tier 1 Standard level need	2-3 structured 1-1 Diversion worker sessions Up to 1 month's support to maximise engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assessment review with the woman to agree and prioritise needs and formulate her Support Plan - Motivational interviewing to engage the woman in the actions arising from the Support Plan - Support one-to-one and advocate on her behalf across the needs arising from the Support Plan - Safety planning for women affected by domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG - For foreign national women, specialist immigration advice and support provided
Tier 2 Medium level need	3-5 structured 1-1 Diversion worker sessions Up to 3 months' support to maximise engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signposting and onward referrals, as appropriate - Exit interview including measure of goal achievement and further signposting if required <p>Added value services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to established infrastructure across 4 centres providing safe, women's only spaces that encourage motivation and engagement
Tier 3 High level need	3-5 structured 1-1 Diversion worker sessions Up to 3 months' support to maximise engagement Ad-hoc follow on telephone contact for up to 6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to organisations' existing programmes and diversionary activities held at the women's centres, e.g., Film Club and arts & crafts groups, as appropriate - Access to existing groups across 9 rehabilitative pathways delivered by specialists - After care offered through attendance at women centre activities - Optional onward self-referral into the Advance's Minerva WrapAround and South London Women's Alliance (Women in Prison) programmes for up to 18 months' support for women with multiple disadvantages and needs

* The support anticipated at the design stage did not reflect the actual level of needs identified during the delivery phase by the London Women's Diversion service in the 22 months to August 2021. Current levels of support far exceed this as detailed in the findings of this report.

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