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## Women's Voices – London

Report of the User Voice London Women's Council

***“I wanted my input to be put forward to help others.”***

**Transforming Lives**  
Reducing Women's Imprisonment

### **About the Prison Reform Trust**

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective prison system. We have a longstanding interest in improving criminal justice outcomes for women and our Transforming Lives programme to reduce the unnecessary imprisonment of women in the UK is supported by the National Lottery Community Fund.

### **Transforming Lives**

About 12,000 women are sent to prison in the UK every year, twice as many as 20 years ago, many on remand or to serve short sentences for non-violent offences, often for a first offence. Thousands of children are separated from their mothers by imprisonment every year. Yet most of the solutions to women's offending lie in the community. PRT works with national and local organisations to promote a more effective approach. The Transforming Lives programme has been informed and strengthened by the insights and advocacy of over 150 women with lived experience of the criminal justice system. For more information see:

[www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Women](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Women)

### **About User Voice**

User Voice was founded in 2009 to create a model of service user engagement that is fair for all involved. The organisation's principal aim is to foster dialogue between service providers and service users that is mutually beneficial, aiding rehabilitation and recovery and resulting in better and more cost-effective services. User Voice builds the structures that enable productive collaboration between service users and service providers. It is able to do this because its work is led and delivered by ex-offenders, enabling it to gain the trust of people within the criminal justice system. For more information go to: [www.uservice.org](http://www.uservice.org)

### **Credits and acknowledgements**

This report has been compiled from the ten meetings of the User Voice London Women's Council held in London between June 2016 and October 2018, which were organised and facilitated by User Voice in consultation with PRT. We are also grateful to Anawim and Black Country Women's Aid for their help in providing case studies for our reports and supporting women's advocacy at meetings and events to raise awareness about women's experiences of the criminal justice system amongst practitioners and decision makers.

Above all, we would like to thank and pay tribute to the women whose courage and generosity has enabled practitioners and policy makers to benefit from their personal experiences and insights for the benefit of future generations of women and girls.

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## Introduction

### User Voice London Women’s Council

PRT commissioned User Voice in 2016 to convene panels of women with recent experience of the criminal justice system in Birmingham and London, both to inform our national advocacy and to support PRT’s local work in high custody areas. These groups have been at the heart of our engagement with women. London and Birmingham Women’s Council members also helped to inform the planning of our Women’s Summit on 30 April 2019, with some members participating in the event’s steering group and contributing as speakers on the day.

The London Women’s Council met ten times in the community between June 2016 and October 2018. The meetings were organised thematically and jointly facilitated by PRT and User Voice, with scope allowed for the women to raise and expand on themes that mattered to them. Between four and nine women took part in each meeting, with some participating in more than one. All had recent experience of the criminal justice system. See Methodology for further details of how the research was conducted.

### About this report

This report provides a thematic account of the insights provided by the User Voice London Women’s Council at these ten meetings. It is intended to help inform the work of criminal justice, health and social care agencies, policy makers and commissioners in London in their work to improve responses to women in contact with the criminal justice system or at risk of such contact. We have simultaneously published a report of the insights of the User Voice Birmingham Women’s Council.

Our summary report ‘Women’s Voices’, published in April 2019, gives an overview of the Transforming Lives programme and our work with women with lived experience of the criminal justice system. All the Women’s Voices reports can be downloaded at:

[www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/women/womensvoices](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/women/womensvoices)

# Women's experience of the criminal justice system

## 1. Overview of experiences of the criminal justice system

Several participants described how alien the criminal justice system was to them, and how difficult it was to navigate the unknown under the ensuing emotional stress, and the subsequent feelings of fear.

*"It was very foreign environment for me so I found it really difficult."*

### Police custody

Most of the women spoke negatively about the experience of being in police custody. Some felt a lack of compassion from police officers concerning children being at home or needing to be picked up from school. Some felt female officers were more understanding, allowing women to make arrangements for childcare prior to interview. Others simply blamed the women for the impact of their arrest on their children:

*"[I was] saying to the arresting officer that my daughter is in nursery and he turned around and said, 'Well you shouldn't have got nicked then.'"*

Another woman was concerned about being released in time to collect her daughter from school, but was refused a phone call to make arrangements:

*"I had to make a phone call to make sure that she was picked up by they weren't interested, even though I said I need to arrange for my daughter to be collected from school, all she said was, 'We will let you out in time'".*

One woman explained that she started menstruating while in custody and was offered no sanitary products; her request to have a wash was refused. She was also only given one cup of water during her stay at the police station.

*"I was arrested; they took me to the police cell and kept me in there for nearly 24 hours. I came on my period. They refused to let me wash or anything like that and I was literally covered in blood, and they hadn't offered me any sanitary towels."*

Some women felt there was a lack of support with problematic substance use when in police custody, simply being told to "sleep it off".

The women discussed the emotional distress caused by being on police bail for a considerable amount of time. One woman explained how this affected her family life such as having to prepare her children for the fact that she might be sent to prison. However in this case being on bail for a long time was helpful, as it allowed her to get clean and get her housing and childcare arrangements in order before she was sentenced.

### Experiences of court and pre-sentence reports

The women spoke about how important they felt pre-sentence reports had been in determining the sentence they were given. They noted that a pre-sentence report can be used to identify what support is required and available.

Most women reported negative experiences in court. Some felt their lawyers did not have enough money or time to represent them effectively.

*"He [barrister] was trying to fob me off as quickly as possible."*

One woman explained how her experience of court had a negative impact on her emotional well-being and mental health. The trial took place in a different area from where she lives, meaning she had a lack of family support. She was tried together with her male accomplices and was not offered a separate hearing. As such, the woman felt that the judge had offered no consideration to her being female and was handed an identical sentence to her male counterparts. She felt that the judge ignored the recommendations outlined in her pre-sentence report.

There was a general consensus between most of the women that once you have been to prison, judges were reluctant to give you a community sentence or explore any alternatives to custody.

*"The thing is once you have been to prison once, then that's all you get is custodial"*

A few of the women discussed their experiences as a result of being sentenced to custody and the impact this had their personal relationships, housing, employment and finances.

*"I lost everything, I lost my home, I lost communication with my family, I lost my partner. I have no more rent arrears now, I paid £10 each week to get myself out of rent arrears, I lost my job, I lost everything"*

*"Every time I been to prison I have got clean by myself , every time I have come out I have lost. My kids got adopted and I came out of prison the next day. Every time I come out of prison I am homeless, I have been homeless for 8 years."*

## **Prison**

Some women discussed their experience of serving a custodial sentence and the impact it had on them and their families. One woman commented that women often do not make complaints due to fear of loss of family visits, which would further affect their families.

*"... a lot of girls hold back, because ... it works better for them with family visits or the job they are doing, so they don't want to jeopardise that. A lot of people can't speak out because as soon as you put that complaint in – you've put yourself on the ship out...they don't like hearing complaints."*

Women talked about being held a long way from their family. One woman asked numerous times to be transferred to a prison closer to home but felt she was ignored. Therefore, she didn't receive visits due to the costs of travelling.

*"I even said I would move two prisons closer ... or I would have moved one prison closer to cut my family's journey time up."*

Women found a lack of information for new prisoners about life in prison, support, resettlement and their rights, with a lack of catalogues in prison libraries listing useful services.

A few of the women talked about a lack of support available for problematic substance use, specifically around detoxing. One woman spoke about the shame of having to administer medication in a cupboard because there was just no support available.

*“The detoxing that goes on in prisons is absolutely disgusting. I used to have to have ... injections as I have blood clots in my lungs and I was told to go into the cleaning cupboard to do my injections where all the dirty mops are stored, there is just no support.”*

All the women discussed positive experiences either through a particular service or through a particular member of staff while in prison. One woman described her positive experience at one prison.

*“Staff treat you with absolute respect; you get out of your cell as it is a working prison; they give you £10 to go into the canteen so you can get a big pack of tobacco, it comes out £1 per week out of your wages. You always have wages because you have to work; if you don't work then you get shipped out because they don't have down the block there. So it just works, the way that prison runs just works. My offender manager I seen every week without a doubt, she knew everything about me, my recovery, my using, whatever stuff has gone on they have sign posted me stuff.”*

One woman felt she needed more support than she was offered.

*“While I was in the prison system, I did everything in my power to address my issues and to take responsibility for my crime, 'cause it wasn't nice, what I did. And ... they did a bereavement counselling type of thing, and I did the first one but I felt I needed more, 'cause what I didn't want to do is go out that gate and go straight back into, revert back to type. And I was refused. I was told, 'You don't need that, you're doing alright.’”*

### **Resettlement and post-release supervision**

The women spoke of a range of experiences with probation workers after their release. Some reported positive relationships with their probation worker, which included being able to have a say in what they wanted to achieve and receiving effective support.

*“My probation officer is wonderful, she really is, she did a lot for me. I started off very rocky with Probation...I ended up taking an overdose, ended up fighting with everybody...now I feel like I've gone from strength to strength. I work in conjunction with my Probation officer.”*

One woman spoke about difficulties arising from being transferred from one area to another, which had a negative impact on her relationship with probation and led to a lack of consistency.

One woman shared a positive experience of Through-the-Gate probation services.

*“They [Through-the-Gate Service] were the ones helping me, she supported me, she offered me a lot of support and that, and put a lot of things in place for me, because without her I think I would have been lost. I probably would have come out, I would have had all that time, 21 months to fix myself up, and I probably would have come out to nothing.”*

However several women spoke about their experiences of receiving no support upon being released from prison. The women explained this lack of support in relation to housing, benefits, job centre appointments etc resulted in an increased risk of reoffending to survive.

*“The criminal justice system did nothing to help me”*

### **Women specific services and peer support**

Several women felt that working with peer mentors who had been through a shared experience would have been helpful in providing them with support, especially when first in prison, and as

an encouragement to change. They also felt it was important to make sure women were aware of services and support that they could access.

## **2. Domestic abuse as a driver to women's offending**

### **Experience of domestic violence**

Several women disclosed personal experience of being with a partner who perpetrated violence towards them.

*"I was in A&E a couple of times for a couple of operations with my head split open, a black eye, and a broken nose."*

*"We had a massive row. I had a split head, a split lip, grabbed by the throat, beaten up when I was pregnant."*

A number of women discussed how they experienced psychological and emotional abuse which for some resulted in being estranged from family and friends.

*"He started to abuse me verbally and alienate me from my friends and family."*

*"She used to have an axe under the bed and was like, 'If you get out of bed, I'm gonna f\*\*\*\*\*g axe you.'"*

The women spoke about the impact that domestic abuse, including verbal abuse, had on their self-esteem, confidence and self-worth. Several of the women identified that the abuse first started on an emotional level, which left them feeling worthless.

*"Put down my music, telling me that I'm shit, I'm worthless and all these sort of things... Getting money out of me, coming to my accommodation and getting me kicked out by throwing all my things."*

*"He'd make me feel like s\*\*t, I'd feel inferior and I'd have no self-worth...and it didn't take long for it to become physical."*

*"The mental side of it can affect you more than the physical side of it. It makes you feel low self-esteem, and if you've got low self-esteem, you're more likely to hit the bottle or start reaching for drugs."*

When discussing the effect of domestic abuse, several of the women spoke about how they perceived emotional abuse to be more severe and damaging in comparison to physical abuse.

*"The mental side of it was worse than the actual abuse, 'cause at least you know what's coming with the actual abuse."*

### **Normality of abusive relationships**

Some women identified that there is a cycle of being in abusive relationships, with some explaining these relationships felt both normal and stable.

*"I think every relationship I've been in has been abusive."*

*"I'd probably get into another relationship with someone else and it escalates again to the same stuff, so yeah."*

*"... I ended up in a relationship that went downhill, especially when my mum passed away."*

*“As mad as it sounds, it was quite a stable part of my life. Even though it was a really violent relationship... It had become normal.”*

### **Links between domestic abuse and offending**

A number of women described how being involved in a violent relationship had a negative impact on their behaviour.

*“I ended up later in life in an abusive relationship where someone was hitting me and taking my money; trying to get me to go out and dance to get money for him... I ended up fighting back at the end of it and I think that made a violent streak emerge in my character because since then, I've had a lot of incidences involving men and violent altercations.”*

Some women felt that their history of domestic abuse was not taken into consideration when in contact with the police.

*“I ended up in prison on remand because of a link to domestic violence and using alcohol. My dad used to beat my mum. It was punishment.”*

*“I believe my crime is linked by all the domestic abuse I've been through; I'm violent towards men. That's not looked at like that. It's just looked at as a violent offence. “*

### **Coercive behaviour**

Some women said they felt forced into offending by their partner because they feared physical repercussions if they did not do as they were told.

*“He'd make me do things just so that I could get drugs and then it was me running around pregnant trying to get money.”*

*“We did start offending and it was daily, you know, shoplifting or some kind of deal with someone to get more drugs or... and then it just got really out of hand you know... and then the mental and the physical abuse just carried on around the using and the offending.”*

The women spoke about how difficult it was to escape this violent and abusive lifestyle. Several women stated that the only way they could be free was by being sentenced to a custodial sentence. Yet, the freedom came at a price as they also lost their children.

*“The only way I got out of the relationship was by going to prison; my boy going into my mum's care and then coming out and leaving it all behind kind of thing.”*

One woman explained how the police had been called in relation to an incident in which she was seriously injured in an assault in front of her children, and that she was arrested because a warrant was out for her arrest. Her partner was not arrested despite the fact that she had visible injuries.

*“I got nicked. I had blood all over my face, beaten up in front of two children and I got nicked 'cause I had a warrant out.”*

Another woman explained that she called the police out many times to help her when her partner was physically abusive towards her, but the police did not help her.

*“I think the police had so much of every night coming to our house, that I think they did try and help me once in the sense they just wanted to get me away from him. 'Cause they kept saying that I kept going f\*\*\*\*\*g back, but it wasn't like that. Every time I went somewhere he'd be following me; everywhere I went. I had the kids, he tried to run me over, run me into a bridge;*



*stabbed me up. Loads of stuff went on and the police knew about it all and they never done nothing."*

This kind of experience was common amongst several women:

*"When I was with my first partner; the one I was having the violent relationship with, the police turned up a few times and ... their domestic violence team was like, 'We're not dealing with it.' They just knocked on the door and said, 'Are you two OK then?' I went that we were arguing and fighting. It was just left like, 'Oh ok then, as long as you two are both alive sort of thing.' They've got nothing to say or do. There was no support there."*

*"When I had [child's name], she was born in the police station toilets. I kind of did commit a crime. I kicked the crack dealer's f\*\*\*\*\*g door off because he tried to rob me. [Child's name] was one day old; I've just left the hospital and gone back, got nicked, went into the police station to psychologists and said that they could not put this woman in jail, she's an absolute mess... but yeah, I was sent to Holloway; I was in Holloway and I don't remember nothing... Not even two days after giving birth."*

*"Basically, we both committed a crime...I went on the domestic violence thing... and I was only looking at it as a chance to get away from him. So, what happened was I went to sentencing without him. He got six months, I got four years..."*

## **Support**

It was evident from these women's experiences that they had been offered or received very little support in relation to domestic violence.

*"I've been slipping through the net my whole life you know what I mean? When is someone gonna actually, 'Here's a bit of help, here's a bit of support, here's to stop you going round being your same self you've been doing since you were fifteen,' and I'm thirty five."*

*"I gave birth to a baby at a police station and left her there. Still dealing with that stuff today now."*

*"I used to walk around the streets, covered in blood, two children in my arms... You know I understand it's about the kids, but even to this day, we never got no support or help and I was still in the same circle really... I'm just not taking drugs now that's the only difference."*

*"Just got no support from anyone, I had to do it on my own, I am still sitting here with the scars that I haven't even mended."*

*"There needs to be a domestic violence worker with the woman, with the court system, with the prison. There must be a link. So, if you're getting picked up for a crime, is it related to domestic violence? It's down to the victim and the person. If you're not gonna tell them that you're in an abusive relationship, then that's my fault. But if I might say to you, 'Do you know what? Yes I am. I'm in an abusive relationship.' Then that worker can then work with... wherever you're going."*

Some women were not positive about community interventions.

*“When I was in an abusive relationship, because the police kept getting called and social services were involved, they sent me to the Freedom program. So, I did it. I didn’t find it very useful.”*

*“It [The Freedom Programme] works for so many women, it really does and I’ve seen it work for women, but once you’re directed with this, you’re either already in the relationship or you’re out of the relationship. It doesn’t stop you going into another relationship like it.”*

*“I’ve just been to prison with a load of birds that want to smash my head in, I’m not gonna go to somewhere else and put myself out there with a load of women. Women don’t do women at all. In our world, women don’t do women. It’s as simple as that.”*

### **Suggestions for improved support**

The women’s suggestions included the following:

- Probation to ensure that prisons are aware of the woman’s personal circumstances, particularly if domestic violence is involved.
- Domestic violence support workers based and visible in the courts offering support to women.
- Advice and support offered by women who have been through similar experiences of domestic violence.
- More peer workers with similar experiences of prison who can support the women upon release to ensure they make it to appointments.
- Ensure that medications such as methadone prescriptions are arranged prior to release and community appointments made before the woman is released.
- Women’s Aid services to be developed in prison where the women can talk about their experiences. Other female prisoners who have had experience of domestic abuse to be peer workers and talk with the other women, specifically new prisoners.

### **3. Impact on mothers and children of involvement in the criminal justice system**

#### **Impact of arrest**

Several women spoke about their experiences of arrest and the impact this had on their children at the time. One woman explained how she felt that her children were not taken into consideration.

*“I have children that have got various issues, I’ve got an autistic son, and I’ve got two with Asperger’s, a son who is deaf and dyslexic. My children were all there, it was half 7 in the morning, they knocked on the door, and said, “Were you expecting me?” And I was like, “No, can you just wait for whatever it is, I’ve got to get the children to school.” So in they came. It was my daughter’s first day at a new school and they’ve got a lot of additional needs. So it was stressful. They came in, told me to get dressed. Never been involved with the police before so I didn’t know what to do. Got the children to line up and say their names, on camera. And then they arrested me and put me in the back of the car.”*

*“The worst thing was that they had awareness, or an understanding of the disabilities that the children have and they still raided the house like that.”*

One woman expressed her concerns for her children's long term wellbeing after they witnessed her arrest.

*"They were very stable. But they're not stable now. They won't answer the door. If they see a police car they go into a panic attack. The woman opposite had her Christmas lights on over Christmas and they were blue, and every time we see blue flashing lights through the window at home my kids will be having panic attacks. The oldest ones are adults now but they can't answer the phone, they've got a fear of authority, they'd never go to the police"*

### **Impact of court on children**

One woman stated that she been advised by her lawyer to plead guilty to a lesser offence as this was in her best interest and would mean that she would see her children sooner. The woman had no understanding of the court process or her rights and did what her solicitor advised.

*"I got 5 years 'cause I pled guilty to a lesser crime. It was in my best interest. I was told at the end of the day that it depends on how much you wanna see your children by my lawyer, the one I got from the police station...I took his advice 'cause as I said the process had gone too far. I never knew my rights I'd never been to prison before; I'd never been arrested before."*

Another woman was advised to plead guilty in order to keep her children out of court. She had lost her husband and had struggled to cope afterwards and as a result of her emotional trauma had suffered a breakdown.

*"My lawyer interestingly told me that if you plead not guilty because of the medical evidence that it was a breakdown then I'd probably get away with it and wouldn't be found guilty. But your daughter and your 9-year-old would need to go to court, probably to the Crown Court. If you want to keep your children out of court, then plead guilty. My children, they'd lost their father then they'd lost me, I couldn't take them through court. So I pleaded guilty. And I was lucky, I could have got a custodial sentence but I had good lawyers."*

### **Sentencing impact on children**

Several women explained how the court and sentencing process had affected their children. One woman stated that she was sentenced to a maximum sentence despite two reports being completed on her children.

*"He was given 2 reports that had been done on my children previously; one on my daughter, she was self-harming, not attending school, under CAMHS, suicidal, and I was her full time carer. He looked at them and said, "Oh yes, very troubled," and sentenced me to 4 years. He didn't take it into account that I was a single parent of 8 children."*

Another woman in the group expressed her anger regarding her experience at court and how it had impacted her children. When she was released from custody, she felt pressured into giving permission for her children to be taken into care by being told that she would be taken to court to have her children removed from her care if she did not give them up voluntarily

*"Made me angry because I could have explained to a 7 year old, 'Go with this lady, she's going to look after you, it'll be fine and Mummy will see you again.' But I was in 72 hours in custody and they charged me with child neglect and child abandonment."*

For one woman the effect of her being sentenced was less traumatic on her children as she was aware that she would receive a custodial sentence. This allowed her to prepare her

children, make arrangements for their care and say goodbye. All of which she felt were beneficial in helping them cope when was in prison.

*"I knew I was going to jail, I had that time. I was going to jail without a doubt but I had time to make arrangements and say goodbye. My children knew, the older ones knew what was going on."*

This experience was not shared by others, who spoke about not being prepared for not returning home after sentencing.

*"A friend just had to go and grab the kids for me and look after them that night. And my daughter came straight back from uni. Drove all the way back from Bristol."*

*"My son found out as one of the mothers at his school had put it all over Facebook. He was doing his GCSEs. It was just awful. I didn't even get the chance to say 'I'm really sorry guys.' It was just appalling. The press were everywhere."*

### **Sentencing whilst pregnant**

When discussing pregnancy and sentencing, one woman spoke about her history of substance misuse and domestic violence. After committing an offence while on a Drug Rehabilitation Requirement, and while 3 months' pregnant, she was sentenced to custody.

Another woman stated that she had served a custodial sentence whilst pregnant and that she received no ante-natal support during her time in prison.

*"I had no support going into the prison with my pregnancy. I don't even think I saw a health visitor."*

### **Completing a community sentence when pregnant**

Several women spoke about issues they experienced when serving a community sentence while pregnant.

*"I was released on tag, released to my parents where my other 2 children live 'cause I have no housing, with an abusive partner who came to live with us as well... Then I'm living there pregnant then giving birth to a baby. It was just chaos, mental."*

*"I had problems with the baby having to go to the hospital, I nearly got breached. Tag kept going off. But you tell them, but it still goes off and it still gets reported. Having to get permissions, it's just extra stress you don't need when you're pregnant and having problems."*

### **Impact of maternal imprisonment on children**

One woman spoke about the shame she felt when her children found out the true extent of the crime that was committed and having to deal with that shame.

*"Even now I'm still dealing with stuff. Like my youngest daughter, who I was pregnant with in prison, she actually mentioned the other day, how old is she now, she's 7, and she said, 'I was in your belly when you went to prison Mummy.' I was like, 'How does she know that?' But it's her older sister who's told her. She remembers coming to the prison to visit me, 'cause it was difficult for my Mum and Dad with the children to see me. It was a difficult time."*

Several women spoke about how their children were aware of their mum being in prison but never spoke openly about it. One woman added that her older children did not talk about it as they were afraid causing more emotional harm to their mum and buried their own feelings about it.

In addition to having to cope with the shame of imprisonment, several women spoke about their experiences in coping with the emotional trauma inflicted upon their children due to them being in prison. The most common effect the women described was anxiety. One woman talked about how her son is unable to sleep alone because he is unable to cope with being separated from his mum.

*“My daughter was self-harming, the middle child just wanted to get back to me. The little one, he’s nearly 4; he’s having loads of problems now. He won’t toilet train, he has terrible separation anxiety, and he sleeps with me.”*

One woman highlighted the impact short sentences have on mothers and their children.

*“I said I had a child but the actual offence wasn’t too bad, and they said if I did go to prison then it would only be for about 4 weeks, but it’s the short petty sentences that make the difference because if I had gone to prison for 4 weeks then I would have lost everything, including my child, which would just have been too much.”*

### **Family visits**

Women spoke more positively about their children visiting them whilst in prison. For a few of them, the prison where they served their sentence was proactive when it came to organising family days. On some occasions, children were allowed to come into the prison unaccompanied.

*“They had family days every 2 months. Bronzefield had one every month on a Saturday morning where the kids used to come in on their own without an adult.”*

Several of the women spoke about the difficulty in successfully arranging a family visit due to availability.

*“Send, they have one every 2 months where they come in with an adult but there’s a waiting list so you don’t always get them.”*

### **Children in care**

When discussing the impact of imprisonment on children, several women spoke about their experiences of having social services remove their children and place them in care.

*“She was actually taken from the hospital; I didn’t get the chance to go home with her. The process had gone so far down the road. I was unmanageable. I didn’t know what my rights were. I just went along with it.”*

*“I didn’t even have the opportunity to go through any rehabilitation programmes to improve my worth. I was just seen as a crackhead. And therefore neglect, and all the stuff that goes with drug and alcohol, like domestic violence, so she left my care.”*

*“The child that was taken from me, that was adopted. She actually died in 2007... I’d gone into prison in 2011, part of my sentencing plan was to do RAPT and part of that process was to do ‘cleaning house’. So I reach out and say I have a child out there and I don’t know where. I had letterbox contact which I never used because I was too chaotic, my pain relief is drugs. I actually found out she had died, it’s hard to process.”*

## **Being reunited with children**

When discussing the support available for women to be reunited with their children, one woman in the group spoke positively about an organisation who offered help. However the increasing numbers of women and children needing help resulted in a shortage of funding.

*“What Reunite do is house you, reunite you with your children, then move you on to a more stable environment. Unfortunately though, in my case, and I’m not alone in this, there are at least another 2 more Reunite clients who are going through exactly the same process. And I can’t pinpoint what it is, but I do know they haven’t got no more funding.”*

*“I have a support worker from Reunite and she’s a lovely woman but unfortunately we do sort of clash. I don’t know what to say about it, she’s just not on my wavelength. She’s more for my son.”*

The stress of having nowhere to live with your children was echoed by several women in. It was perceived that social services were unrealistic in their expectations and did not consider personal circumstances.

*“There’s nothing more worrying than, ‘Where am I going to live, how am I going to get my kids?’ If you don’t have certain things in place, social services will put unrealistic expectations on you that you can’t meet, because of the predicament that you’re in. And that is unfair, it’s like they give you something with one hand but they’re taking back more.”*

## **4. Mental health and learning disability**

### **Police awareness of mental health**

Some women were asked whether they had any mental health needs when they were processed at the police station, but one woman didn’t feel comfortable to disclose as she didn’t want to prolong her time there.

*“When I first got arrested and I got asked if I had any mental health issues and I said no, I was asked if I wanted to speak to anyone and I said no. I just wanted to get in and get out.”*

One of the women had discussed her mental health needs with a doctor at the police station, however she felt her needs weren’t taken seriously and were joked about, as she had overheard the doctor and police officer discussing her.

*“Police were aware of my Asperger’s, because I spoke to the doctor about it and I think he was joking with the policeman about it.”*

One of the women had been arrested multiple times and never sought help, however looking back she felt it would have been beneficial for someone else to make that decision and for her to be referred to support for her mental health.

*“Sometimes you are just angry and sometimes it is something more and you want them to ask if you are alright, or for them to say, ‘We are sending you to see someone,’ because you don’t want to ask but you really want them to just send you anyway.”*

Another woman talked about how the police had tried to refer her to mental health support. However, despite a formal mental health diagnosis, following a further arrest the support was not offered to her.

*“When I was arrested before they were constantly trying to throw it at me, ‘Do you want to see a psychiatrist?’ But then when I knew I had it, I did want to see the psychiatrist, I did want to see the nurse, I did want help but it wasn’t offered to me.”*

Similar experiences were echoed by other women, with two stating that they had been offered no support or help for their mental health whilst being held in police custody.

*“I was offered no support, no help or anything like that.”*

*“No nothing like that. It was only then that I knew I had it but I started wanting the help for it but I found it wasn’t there.”*

One woman who had multiple encounters with the police, was helped by a police officer who was aware of her difficult circumstances.

*“Police officer said, ‘I know what you have been through,’ and she said, ‘I’m going to get you to see a psychiatrist when you are in.’ I said, ‘I’m not interested,’ but I did see a nurse and I spoke with her.”*

### **Accessing medication while in police custody**

A number of women explained their difficulties in accessing prescribed medication while in the police station. One woman, who was arrested in her home, asked if she could bring her medication with her, but this was refused.

*“My medication, they wouldn’t let me take it. I take my medication every night at 10pm, helps me sleep. Told them but they just weren’t interested.”*

Another woman had her inhaler in her possession and was able to access it in police custody. She was seen by a doctor where she provided her mental health history and her prescribed medication, but no arrangements were made to bring in her medication either from a family member or collected from a pharmacy.

*“I saw a doctor and explained my mental health needs, how I was feeling and the medication that I am on. I was lucky to get two puffs of my inhaler.”*

A woman who had been arrested multiple times had learned from previous experience to bring her medication in with her. Despite this being allowed, she never received her medication in police custody.

*“I had known from then ... to bring my medication in with me, so I made the police officers wait, got my meds, took them in. I was told I couldn’t take them which wasn’t great because anybody who is on medication knows that you need it.”*

### **Uncertainty of police bail**

A few of the women spoke about the mental toil of being on police bail for a considerable amount of time, without knowing what was going on with proceedings.

*“That’s the hardest time, just not knowing, when I know what I am dealing with then I get on with it but when I don’t know then I find it hard and I do believe that it made my mental health worse.”*

*“It’s the fact that they leave you on bail for 6 months and you’re thinking, ‘Do I get my nut down, or do I focus and then in 6 months end up in prison and lose everything that I have been working for?’”*

One woman described how she was placed on police bail without having been arrested, while the police carried out their investigations. She felt they gave no consideration to how this would affect her mental health.

*“The CPS took 8 or 9 months to decide whether they were going to press charges or not. Which, also during that time was when I was transient – children were out of my care so really not good to help with anxiety and depression.”*

### **Consideration of mental health needs in court**

A number of women felt that their mental health needs were not taken into consideration by the courts:

*“When I was in court, I have Asperger’s as well as other mental health issues, and none of it was taken into consideration; they just really didn’t care, or about my physical needs as well.”*

*“Throughout the whole court process, my mental health was never mentioned. Even when I was in court, my solicitor said, ‘We are going to keep it under wraps as we don’t want them knowing that you have mental health issues.’ I said, ‘Surely that might help because of what I have been arrested for?’ But he said, ‘No, it shows that you are unstable,’ and they actually hid the fact that I had mental health issues.”*

One woman attempted to take her own life during her court case, as she was struggling to cope with everything. She had already been suffering from suicidal ideation before her arrests,. She suffered from chronic pain. While recovering in hospital after her suicide attempt, the mental health team informed her that there was no evidence that she was suffering from mental ill health, advised her to continue with her current prescription and offered no follow-up.

*“In the hospital at least they sent in some psychiatric people to come in and assess me and I was assessed, and I was told I didn’t have any mental health problems, so I was left there back to my Diazepam.”*

Another woman’s suicide attempt had been disclosed during her court case, but it was deemed not a ‘serious attempt’ as she discharged the same day.

*“I know that even when mine was brought up in court, they said... the exact words were, ‘It couldn’t have been a serious attempt.’”*

One woman felt the court had failed to understand her mental illness and therefore perceived her to be an unremorseful and a ‘cold’ person due to the lack of understanding of her condition.

The women all agreed that there was little support available during the court process.

*“I wasn’t allowed to have any friends or family there to support me because the court room wasn’t big enough, so I had to do it all on my own, which was really stressful for me.”*

### **Emotional impact of community supervision**

Some women spoke about being placed on probation as part of their sentencing. One woman felt that for her, this contributed to her increased emotional distress. One woman was referred, but was never contacted by probation, which gave the woman anxiety. The anticipation for an appointment coupled with her perception of people’s opinion of her, had a detrimental effect on her already deteriorating mental health.



*“During the period of sentencing, I was referred to a probation officer but that’s when my stress levels and everything got too high.”*

*“Really it should have been probation that helped with my diagnosis and stuff, as they would have been able to signpost me instead of me doing it all on my own.”*

*“I was given probation only and even to this day, I haven’t heard anything from them. At the beginning it was quite bad, because obviously, I suffer from anxiety and depression and sitting thinking that people are going to judge me when I go for the appointment, but the appointment never came.”*

### **Mental health assessment in prison**

Some women described the mental health assessment given as part of their induction to the prison as inadequate.

*“I think I saw a Listener once briefly, you know when they come around, because they messed up my induction, they moved me. I spent one night in induction and then I was put straight on to a normal house block.”*

*“I saw healthcare, but they were very dismissive...”*

*“I felt even worse then and I was too anxious to approach anyone to ask, you know what I need to do, but no I didn’t see anyone about my mental health.”*

### **Mental health support in prison**

One woman explained that her mother died shortly before her court proceedings, and she was unable to attend the funeral. She spoke about how destroyed her relationship with her daughter, which made her mental health deteriorate. When she was sentenced, the prison were aware of the situation and her ongoing mental health needs, but failed to offer her any bereavement counselling or any other mental health support; despite being identified as vulnerable.

*“My mum died 9 days before my trial; they wouldn’t let me go to her funeral, which killed the relationship between me and my daughter so that was more added mental health issues. Then 6 days after my mother died, I was sentenced to 11 years in prison and Bronzefield didn’t even put me on an ACCT book.”*

A few of the women highlighted the difficulties of accessing support for their mental health needs.

*“I got to open prison; everything kicked off in terms of my illnesses and that’s like physical and mental as well, and I struggled quite a lot there. Unless you were really ill, they didn’t let you see anyone; it was just a case of here goes.”*

### **Accessing medication in prison**

Several women raised concerns about how their medication had been removed from their personal belongings when first entering prison, and then waiting a long time for it to be returned. At times, several women reported they were left without medication for 14 days.

*“...I was taken to [prison]; they took my inhalers off me, they didn’t give me my medication, they didn’t even give me my painkillers and I had to wait 6 weeks before they gave me mine.”*

In addition to the difficulties of accessing medication, most of women had problems with being given the correct medication at the appropriate time.

*“Meds are the same time as dinner and my medication helps me sleep as well. So you have to rush, get your dinner, throw it on the bed, run and get your medication, but it made me really sick taking medication without food. So, I would sit there most of the time not being able to speak and physically almost throwing up.”*

### **Impact of the prison environment on mental health**

One woman spoke about the detrimental impact the prison environment had on her mental health, how distressing the situation was, specifically being around other women struggling with mental ill health who also weren't receiving support.

*“So it was quite hard, and it was hard seeing the other girls around me who had really bad mental health issues and so many girls needed support and they were being put in with the general population rather than being taken to health care or actually getting further support they needed, not in a prison environment, and that sets you off as well.”*

*“I kind of went into shutdown and it was hard, especially seeing all the girls cutting themselves and them screaming and the chaos of it all, you know it's so difficult.”*

The women spoke about the difficulty of trying to cope with their emotions in prison. For one woman the only way she felt her pain was manageable was to self-harm, to give herself a bit of control.

*“I kind of went really numb and I was cutting my legs, gouging chunks out of my arms but I wasn't even registering that I was doing it. So I was sat there and my palms were cut to shreds where I would dig my nails in but all to just try to keep my emotions in.”*

There was a strong consensus that asking for help was not thought to be a positive solution within prison.

*“If you don't shout the loudest or if you don't scream that you are depressed then they don't take it into consideration, but the ones that shout the loudest are not usually the ones that want the help.”*

### **Mental health support in the community**

*“[On release], that was when the anxiety and the depression really sunk in. I ended up taking an overdose; I had been out of prison for not even a month and I took an overdose, and I could have been dead if it wasn't for someone looking out for me.”*

A few of the women felt that being supported by a peer mentor who also had experience of mental ill health and prison would be the most helpful way of ensuring women had vital support upon release.

*“I really needed support and you can't get the kind of support you need from strangers. It needs to be someone who has had a bit of shared experience or that you know and trust.”*

One woman who had received a community sentence had a negative experience of asking her GP for help with her mental health; she was grieving her husband's death, but she was dismissed by her GP, who told her she didn't have any 'real problems'.

Some women spoke about how it is difficult to admit that help is required for fear of social

services becoming involved. One woman felt it was difficult to ask for her GP for help, especially if there is concern that your child could be taken into care.

*“When you are sat in the doctors and you try to tell them how you feel, you know you are worried that they are going to take your child. But when you’re sitting in a police cell you just don’t care anymore because you think, ‘Well I’m here,’ and ... you might as well tell them everything. I think there needs to be that stop gap in the middle before people get that low.”*

*“Counselling should be a safe environment. You should be able to say how you feel, without any ramifications or any kind of comebacks from it, because that’s what kills you.”*

## **5. Problematic alcohol and drug use**

### **Substance use as a coping strategy**

A number of women explained how alcohol and drugs were used as a means to numb their emotions in response to the abuse they were experiencing, as well as bereavements, childhood abuse, and mental ill-health.

*“That was what I was frightened of since I lost my mum; I was terrified of a day sober.”*

*“When I was 7 and a half months’ pregnant he [partner] passed away unexpectedly...I was left alone with three children...so I started drinking to get me out to do the school runs, to get me out to the shopping, as everything was getting more and more overwhelming...it snowballed to point that I wasn’t just drinking to cope, I was drinking because I needed to drink...got to the point when I had a total breakdown.”*

*“I was raped...it was really messy, and really messed up...carried on drinking, taking all the drugs...became friends with [friend], and she ended up killing herself...and then after that it all went horrendously wrong.”*

*“I was on bail for a year, which really took its toll on my mental health, it got to stage where I’d go to my Dad and say I need some money for sanitary wear, just so I could go out and buy some alcohol or drugs or whatever...”*

### **Substance use in childhood**

Several women explained that their substance use had started in childhood and described how they felt their early use of drugs such as cannabis led to the use of more hard drugs. Several participants said that this transition had been encouraged by abusive partners and was mirrored by an escalation in criminal offences.

*“I was a crack addict since I was 19, previous to that it was just coke and cannabis; my ex-partner introduced it to me. Family relationships started going downhill because they didn’t like him [ex-partner], and that’s when I started getting into trouble, thieving and things like that to feed the habit.”*

### **Drugs fuelling offending**

A number of women stated that most of the offences they committed had been to fund their drug habits. This included prostitution, selling drugs, shop lifting, and other forms of theft.

*“My offending was definitely a product of my using.”*

*“Whatever I had to – robbing people at knife point, burglaries.”*

### **Self-worth and purpose**

A low sense of self-worth and confidence was noted by a number of women as a significant barrier to moving forward with their lives, both in regard to their substance misuse, and also for building more healthy support networks.

*“My life just spiralled out of control...self-sabotaging, just feeling totally worthless.”*

*“Everyone was taking advantage of me, and I was letting them because I just didn’t want to be on my own.”*

*“He [ex-partner] kicked my teeth out on Christmas morning, and then I ran into the arms of the first man who was kind to me, a man who was a lot older than me...I wanted to be needed.”*

In this regard, peer-models or support were flagged by all participants as instrumental in re-building their confidence and sense of worth and providing them with a positive sense of purpose.

*“For me if I didn’t have User Voice, I don’t know where I would be because days when I want to get off my nut and sit indoors and I wanted to just not think or feel, [User Voice] would message me and say, ‘Come on come out,’ and I would...life saver, I probably would be in prison right now.”*

*“To get involved with the [User Voice] it’s just amazing, this is my new drug.”*

### **Support in prison for problematic substance use**

Some women spoke positively of the support available in prison for problematic substance use.

*“When I went into prison with addiction before ... the last time I had the mental health when I was really ill, they gave me methadone practically straight away. I had to see the doctor which took a little bit of time because there were quite a few receptions. I had to give a urine sample and it showed for Valium and stuff like that and they gave me medication straight away. I thought that was pretty good, they test it for whatever they test it for, but they test for benzos as well and then they give you a shot of methadone just to stop the turking.”*

*“I have a CAROT worker, bless him never taken a drug in his life, but he was really good. He tried to empathize so much but he was a male drug worker in a women’s prison with a woman who has been in domestic abusive relationships continuously for years with traumatic stuff going. He doesn’t know how to deal with any of that stuff that I was talking to him about, but he tried to do his best.”*

*“I had an amazing CAROT worker, she was absolutely amazing with me and because I did I didn’t want to use again and I didn’t want to go out with all the other prisoners that were getting released that day, because I knew I would end up using and I didn’t want to use, and I was so determined not to, she saw determination in me. She actually spoke to the governor and they let me go after they released the other people and it actually worked and I haven’t used since”*

### **Punitive vs positive approach**

A positive sense of purpose was described by all participants as key in supporting them to overcome problematic substance use. Several participants emphasised that support which was positive in its approach, strength-based, and incorporated positive incentives, was more effective than punitive approaches.

*“Someone as User Voice said, ‘You know what, I believe you can do that job, but you’ve got to stop drinking,’ and absolutely gave me massive amount of support...It was the incentive as well, that I was to get that job and I was to do this with User Voice, rather than, ‘You’ve got to stop drinking.’...I don’t know how to explain it, but even though someone is threatening to take your children if you don’t stop drinking – it’s terrifying, and your reaction should be, ‘OK I’m going to stop drinking,’ but actually, ‘Oh my god that’s scary – right, double lock the door before I have double drink because I am scared.’ But when someone is saying, ‘Actually I think you can do this job if you stop drinking,’...that was incentive to open the door...and I was honest with social services and got the support I needed.”*

### **Openness and trust**

Regarding holistic models of support, a number of participants noted that services often want a great deal of personal information upfront for example about experience of abuse, without building a trusting relationship first.

*“When you start going to any organisation it can be quite structured and they want this out of you and they want that out of you, and when I first started going to [organisation] and they wanted to know my history. I wasn’t ready to open up and it took me ages to open up. And they try and do things that you don’t necessary want...even though we might need the help, we don’t necessarily want it for that specific part of our life at that specific time.”*

A number of participants noted difficulties in their relationships with probation and social services, as it was not built on trust, openness, and a supportive framework.

*“I just thought the [probation] were there to help, I didn’t really know you weren’t meant to tell them everything – I just thought the more honest you were the better...I was, ‘Help, I want to change.”*

*“I would like it to be less of punishment and stigma and more about helping and being really open about, ‘We are here to help, if you’re honest you won’t be punished for it.”*

## **6. Housing needs**

### **Consideration of housing needs in court**

Some women felt their housing needs were not taken into consideration by the courts. Their circumstances were included in their pre-sentence report, but the courts did not perceive this as a mitigation or understand the effect this had on their offending.

*“I was homeless and it went into PSR reports because obviously I wanted it to work in my favour but they didn’t look at my housing as an issue.”*

One woman commented that at times she was thankful to be sent to prison because she did not have anywhere else to go. She felt that prison was the best option for her; it provided her with safe shelter and the opportunity to be given the support she needed with her addiction.

*“It was such a relief going into prison because I had a horrendous drug habit and I would say that prison saved my life on a few occasions. It was to have a roof over my head because I really didn’t know what else to do.”*

### **Support in prison with housing needs**

A number of women commented that they were offered no support with their housing needs while in prison. The women explained that due to the extensive waiting list for housing, if you were serving a short sentence you were unlikely to have an appointment before being released

*"It was such a big bottleneck; it was such a big thing in prison and if you were doing a long a time then you had to wait because there so many people in front of you. So, on a short sentence you had no chance."*

*"I always had short sentences; by the time I was able to see someone I was already out. When I did get out...there was no resettlement there, there was no housing, I was just back in the cycle again."*

One woman had concerns about seeking housing advice in prison, as she had to give her information to a fellow prisoner, and this made her feel uncomfortable disclosing confidential details about herself.

*"I had to put in an app, they had a housing officer down at the link and she was an inmate or a red band. At first I didn't feel comfortable telling her, an inmate where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do..."*

### **Support with housing needs on resettlement**

Some women had been released from prison with accommodation in place.

*"My mum put me up for a parole address so I wasn't homeless; I needed an address for parole. So my mum gave me her address; she didn't want me there really but she did it just to get me out."*

*"I was out into a place called St Pat's and it was a woman's landing and I knew some of the women there, so I actually felt quite safe"*

*"I am now in a supporting housing which is for people with mental health issues as well. I am the only one who has dual diagnosis with drugs and mental health but that works out well because I don't have to be around drugs or alcohol or anything like that."*

However, a number of women had been released without secure accommodation. One woman felt let down by probation around accommodation and the lack of support in helping her find suitable housing

*"I didn't hear from probation, hardly even saw them when I did they just gave me a form to fill out basically to tick their boxes. There was no real duty of care to, 'Yes, we will try and find you somewhere in [area].' There was no intervention there from probation or anyone else who could help me."*

The women spoke about their experience of being released from prison to bail hostels; these were often in a different area from the women's families and there was an agreement that they were full of drugs.

*"The only time that I got a roof over my head was when I went to a bail hostel in [area] because there was nowhere in [area]."*

*"They helped me to get into hostels, but the only trouble with that is...they are f\*\*\*\*\* infested with drugs."*

## **Suggestions for Improvements**

Women discussed different ways to improve pathways into suitable accommodation for women to lower their risk of reoffending.

*"I think they need to look at women's records so that they can see the best areas to house them in to try and stop them from being at risk of reoffending or relapsing back into drugs."*

*"So it comes from the council directly, so a housing officer can come into the prison and work with the women so they can know what they need to do."*

## **7. Education, training and employment**

### **Education in prison**

A few of the women spoke about negative experiences of the education system including negative attitudes from some of the education staff in prison and poor teaching.

*"I asked her what a consonant was and she just looked at me and said, 'How can you not know what a consonant is?'... made me feel stupid."*

Some of the women gave more positive accounts but emphasised this was dependent on the importance of being inspired and taking responsibility, so that the challenges were worthwhile.

*"I spoke a music teacher, who used to work at the Albert Hall and I asked him, 'Why did you decide to come to prison and teach?' He said it is because he loves music and he loves to teach. I could see the passion in him and his love of music."*

*"I had to go down to education and tell them that I didn't want to come because they weren't teaching me anything. I wasn't getting taught the basic skills...the Governor allowed for me to become the teaching assistant in the class."*

*"She [author] told us about how she got into writing and what motivates her. By the end of it we felt so inspired by her ... she had come in and told us what we could achieve."*

### **Employment after prison**

Some women spoke about their experiences of gaining employment after a prison sentence.

*"I was told not to bother applying because I wouldn't get it because I had been to jail."*

Nevertheless, all of the women agreed that serving a custodial sentence placed them in the best position to help other women.

*"We have the insight to help other women. We could go out and hand out leaflets at the prison gates with contact details on of services that they will need to help them get through."*

## **Suggestions for Improvements**

A number of women offered suggestions for improvements relating to employment.

*"They should have careers days or whatever, where outside employers come in and say, 'OK you guys, you are down to the last 6 weeks in prison; these are the tests that you need to do to be able to complete your application; work your way through them. When you are released, complete the application and we will prioritise it because we have met before and you might get a job at the end of it.'"*

## Methodology

PRT commissioned User Voice in 2016 to gather qualitative evidence from women in England with recent experience of the criminal justice system, to strengthen and inform PRT's advocacy in seeking to reduce the unnecessary imprisonment of women from London. This work was supported by the Hibiscus Initiatives in London and formed part of a wider programme of service user engagement by PRT, working in partnership with Llamau in Wales and the 218 Service in Glasgow. Questions for discussion with women were developed by PRT in consultation with User Voice and scope was allowed within discussion for the women to raise and expand upon themes that mattered to them.

The following ten focus group meetings, held between June 2016 and October 2018 were conducted and written up by User Voice, with PRT also represented at most meetings. Between four and nine women took part in each meeting, with some participating in more than one. All had recent experience of the criminal justice system.

- **9 June 2016: Experiences of the criminal justice system** – seven women attended this Council. Experience of the criminal justice system were varied – women had experience of community orders, suspended sentences, prison sentence. One woman attended who was currently serving a life sentence at East Sutton Park and had been granted day release to come attend the meeting.
- **10 October 2016: Experience of the criminal justice system** – seven women attended this Council, all with different experiences of the criminal justice system. Most had received a custodial sentence as well as community sentences including restorative justice.
- **17 January 2017: Experience of domestic abuse as a driver to women's offending** – seven women attended this Council, all with different experiences of the criminal justice system. Most had received a custodial sentence. All had experience of domestic abuse and violence. Also in attendance was a senior probation officer from the domestic violence unit.
- **26 April 2017: Impact on children of mother's experience of the criminal justice system** – six women attended this Council, all with different experiences of the criminal justice system. All of them had children.
- **18 July 2017: Mental health and the criminal justice system** – five women attended this Council. The women spoke about their experience of the criminal justice system and the impact it has had on their mental health, discussed experiences in police custody, court, prison custody and in the community.
- **7 November 2017: Housing needs and access to education, training and employment** – four women attended this Council. The women spoke about their experience of the criminal justice system and their housing needs at the point of arrest and again at the time of release, as well as looking at access to education, training, and employment.



- **26 January 2018: Problematic alcohol and substance misuse** – six women attended this Council and spoke about their histories of drug and alcohol misuse and how this has contributed to their experience of the criminal justice system.
- **10 May 2018: Journey through the criminal justice system** – four women attended this Council and discussed their experience of the criminal justice system.
- **October 2018:** A total of about 15 women attended these two workshops at which PRT fed back to the women about how their insights had been communicated to policy makers and practitioners and what progress was being made in key policy areas; the women reflected on the experience of being in the group and provided input into planning the Women's Summit.

## Transforming Lives resources

- On the insights of women with lived experience of the criminal justice system, see our [Women's Voices series](#)
- On local data, see our online local data resources, fact sheets and 'Why Women' [briefings](#)
- On employment options for women who have had contact with the criminal justice system see: [Working it Out: Employment for women involved in the criminal justice system](#) (updated February 2020)
- On recall of women see: [Broken Trust: The rising numbers of women recalled to prison](#)
- On the experiences of foreign national women and trafficked women in the criminal justice system see: [Still no way out: Foreign national women and trafficked women in the criminal justice system](#)
- On the impact on children of maternal imprisonment and recommendations for reform see: [What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system](#)
- On the availability of accommodation for women on release from prison and the impact this can have on successful resettlement see: [Home truths: housing for women in the criminal justice system](#)
- On domestic abuse and the link between women's victimisation and their offending see: ["There's a reason we're in trouble" - Domestic abuse as a driver to women's offending](#)
- On the experiences of BAME women in the criminal justice system see: [Counted Out: Black, Asian and minority ethnic women in the criminal justice system](#)
- On the benefits of 'problem-solving approaches' and early intervention for women see: [Fair Cop? Improving outcomes for women at the point of arrest](#)
- On the way local authorities can support women involved in the criminal justice system see: [Leading Change: the role of local authorities in supporting women with multiple needs](#)

Many women in prison have been victims of much more serious offences than those for which they have been punished. The Prison Reform Trust's Transforming Lives programme aims to reduce women's imprisonment by raising awareness of the distinct needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system and promoting community solutions. This briefing provides a thematic account of the insights of women in Birmingham with lived experience of the criminal justice system. It is intended to help inform the work of criminal justice, health and social care agencies, policy makers and commissioners in the West Midlands in their work to improve responses to women in contact with the criminal justice system or at risk of such contact. An equivalent report is available about the insights of women in London.

Our summary report 'Women's Voices', published in April 2019, gives an overview of the Transforming Lives programme and our work with women with lived experience of the criminal justice system. All the Women's Voices reports can be downloaded at: [www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Women/WomensVoices](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Women/WomensVoices)

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