

## PCC Spotlight 3

Women in contact with the criminal justice system

By Shane Britton



# PCC spotlight: Women's Offending

Through our First Generation Project, Revolving Doors Agency and the Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A) aim to show how Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) across the country can help to cut crime, end 'revolving door' offending, and improve responses to young adults and people with multiple needs who come into repeated contact with the police.

This is the third in our series of PCC spotlights, highlighting promising work among PCCs on key issues. We aim to share examples of promising approaches, and inform the future development of the PCC role.

## Introduction: a distinct approach

Women's offending has a distinct profile compared with men. Women make up just 15% of the probation caseload and 5% of the prison population, while 81% of women entering prison under an immediate custodial sentence have committed non-violent offences.<sup>i</sup> Women involved in the criminal justice system are also likely to face poor mental health and multiple and complex needs, often including histories of victimisation and abuse:<sup>ii</sup>

- 71% of female prisoners suffer two or more mental disorders
- 70% of women entering prison require clinical detoxification
- 53% of women in prison experienced emotional, physical, or sexual abuse as a child
- More than half of women in prison report having suffered domestic violence
- Six out of ten women in prison have at least one dependent child

As the Corston report set out in 2007, there is a need to take a tailored, gender-specific approach to women's offending. There is also growing evidence that the holistic support provided by women's centres in the community represents an effective alternative

to custody for many women,<sup>iii</sup> and promising evidence that this approach provides a cost benefit.<sup>iv</sup>

With recent Justice Select Committee reports joining calls for increased community provision to reduce the “*expensive and inefficient*” use of short prison sentences,<sup>v</sup> and the government committing to explore alternatives to custody for women offenders and championing a ‘whole system’ approach through the renewed Advisory Board on Female Offenders, there is a welcome focus on this agenda nationally.<sup>vi</sup>

However, the levers to deliver a more effective approach for women in contact with the criminal justice system increasingly lie at a local level. With their strategic partnership role, police and crime commissioners can play an important part in this agenda. This briefing highlights examples of promising practice from a number of PCC areas, and draws together some key lessons from their approach.

## Northumbria: Prevention and earlier intervention

Acknowledging that many female offenders have multiple needs concerning relationships, domestic abuse, homelessness, substance misuse and mental health problems, Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) Vera Baird has approached women's offending with a focus on prevention and early intervention. This has involved developing strategic partnerships with the six local authority areas within Northumbria, and working closely with health, police, Crown Prosecution Service, court services, probation providers, and local voluntary sector organisations to encourage all agencies to work together to divert from custody and reduce unnecessary imprisonment of women.

Specific initiatives that have been supported by the PCC and key partners include:

- **Voluntary Intervention Programme pilot** - commissioned by the PCC as a 'one stop shop' service for women to address areas in their lives which are leading them towards offending behaviour. The pilot invites women arrested in the Newcastle area to attend the Central Newcastle Women's only Community Hub, where an allocated worker completes a needs assessment and offers women direct access to interventions in a safe, women-only setting.

- **Bright Futures** – The PCC has supported community project Bright Futures to engage with young women aged 14-25 through a variety of sources, including street-based outreach work, at times when they may be involved in alcohol misuse and further associated risks including crime and anti-social behaviour.<sup>vii</sup>
- **Here not There project** – supported by the PCC and delivered by Changing Lives, the project provides intensive support to vulnerable young women at risk of sexual exploitation, many of whom lead chaotic lifestyles, may have come into contact with the criminal justice system as offenders, and are often deemed 'hard to reach' <sup>viii</sup>

The PCC also champions enhanced support for victims of domestic and sexual abuse, and has developed a joint violence against women and girls strategy in partnership with the other PCCs in the north east. Progress has been made across the 20 priorities identified, including tackling domestic and sexual violence and abuse, human trafficking, sex work, forced marriages, and harassment and stalking.<sup>ix</sup>

## Cumbria: Women's Community Matters

Cumbria Police and Crime Commissioner Richard Rhodes has invested around £100,000 from his innovation fund to contribute to the Women's Community Matters programme,<sup>x</sup> which opened its first women's centre in Barrow. Essential to the vision is the community-based nature of the support, and its function to provide a hub and link with other agencies working with women. Programmes supported by the PCC include:

- **Being, Feeling, Keeping Safe:** a personal and social development programme for women who have experienced domestic violence or have experience of the criminal justice system. The ethos is to engage non-judgmentally in a women-only space, with a range of programmes helping to build a greater sense of purpose, safety and autonomy. As well as addressing the often complex needs of women involved in the programme, it seeks to encourage women to forge friendships and networks that will offer the long term support they need to remain out of the criminal justice system.

- **Reducing offending and re-offending**– a programme of activities, workshops, and one to one counselling is also available specifically for women convicted of an offence. Aiming to be recognised as a clear alternative to custody for women in the area, it gives women the opportunity to seek solutions to prevent offending or re-offending by building on their strengths and addressing their often complex needs in a safe environment.

The project is in its early stages, however it has worked with a total of 41 women so far and there is no known re-offending by those who have taken part.

Further information on the project, including a video featuring interviews with clients, is available here:

<http://www.womenscommunitymatters.org/the-being-feeling-keeping-safe-event/>

## Greater Manchester: a 'whole system' approach

In Greater Manchester, the Police and Crime Commissioner is supporting efforts to embed a 'whole system' approach to reducing women's offending, linked to broader Transform Justice initiative across the region.<sup>xi</sup> This involves working closely with a range of partner agencies, who have agreed to fund a network of women's community services with a common framework. This Providers' Alliance has also agreed a data sharing protocol.

Key aspects of the model include: women's triage; delivery of women-specific community orders (including via a problem solving court); and resettlement services. The approach aims to:

- Reduce demand in the criminal justice system by intervening at the earliest opportunity
- Embed community and voluntary services in an integrated way to support behaviour change and re-engagement with communities

- Improve outcomes for women offenders including a reduced "revolving door effect", reduced incidences of child safeguarding and children taken into care, improved health, and reduced anti-social behaviour
- Avoid taking away protective factors such as family links, home and employment (which are expensive and take time to reinstate) while enforcing the courts' decisions

This new approach has seen partners working together to invest in Greater Manchester's nine women's centres, and is expected to support more than 3,000 women in the area. The PCC has commissioned a full evaluation, covering all aspects of the model and assessing offending, dependency, health and wellbeing, and cost-benefit outcomes.

## Humberside: Hull women's triage project

Hull women's triage pilot is a partnership between Humberside police, Hull Youth Justice Service, and Together Women Project which builds on the success of the Youth Triage system. One of six national women's Integrated Offender Management pathfinders, the project recognises the distinct and complex needs faced by many women offenders and seeks to divert appropriate suspects away from the formal criminal justice process to address the underlying cause of their offending.

The pilot aimed to assess all women in custody. Those considered suitable for diversion (who also admit the offence, and with the wishes of the victim taken into account) are given an appointment at Together Women Project within a week.

If diversion is not appropriate, the outcome is considered on a sliding scale from conditional caution to charge, while retaining a focus on rehabilitation.

The project has been evaluated by the University of Hull, which found a 46% reduction in the rearrest rate over a 12-month follow up period compared to a control group of similar offenders.<sup>xii</sup> The success of the scheme has led to Humberside Police piloting a similar triage model for young adult offenders aged 18-23.<sup>xiii</sup>

For further information see Brennan et al (2015) *An experimental evaluation of an adult female triage pilot project for Humberside Police Hull: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies*.

Available here:

<http://library.college.police.uk/docs/Police-Female-Triage-Report-Hull-University-2015.pdf>

## Other areas

Many other areas are also championing gender-specific approaches, including:

- **Lancashire PCC** Clive Grunshaw provided funding to Lancashire Women's Centre for the AVERT programme, which places female caseworkers in police custody and diverts women into support either voluntarily or via a conditional caution. The service accepts both persistent and low-level offenders, offering a tailored 12-week package of support. An interim evaluation found that in the early stages, 93% of those who completed the course had not re-offended.<sup>xiv</sup>
- **London** the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime are working closely with the probation provider and the London Women's Consortium to develop a pan-London approach for female offenders. Advance Minerva are also providing an innovative approach to diverting young adult women into support in Hammersmith and Fulham as part of the T2A pathway pilots.<sup>xv</sup>
- **West Mercia PCC** has commissioned ASHA women's centre to help improve early intervention support for women offenders, and has contributed a grant for RITE Social Enterprise Ltd to provide a residential Alternative to Custody programme for women.
- **Merseyside PCC** and the local Community Rehabilitation Company provide funding for charity PSS to run the Women's Turnaround Project, which provides a 'one stop shop' for female offenders, offering counselling, life skills, and domestic abuse support and programmes that promote self-confidence. The PCC has also championed improved partnership working for female offenders through the Merseyside criminal justice board.
- **Norfolk PCC** is working with local partners to fund specialist provision for vulnerable women, including female offenders diagnosed with personality disorder and a new programme safeguarding women involved home-based sex work.

## Conclusion and key themes

Local leadership is key to improving responses for women in contact with the criminal justice system, and as the examples above show Police and Crime Commissioners can play an important role. PCCs should be an advocate for a women-specific approach in their area, and champion improving responses as a key partnership priority locally.

Themes that that could inform this approach from practice reviewed include:

- **Supporting women's centres** – Most approaches reviewed built upon the work of established and effective local women's centres, and in the case of Cumbria worked with partners to support the establishment of a newer women's centre. In a challenging local funding environment, support for these gender-specific services is key to a more effective approach, providing opportunities to divert into support early and boosting the community options available to sentencers.
- **Diversion and earlier intervention** – promoting earlier intervention is also a common theme, with a 'police triage' approach for women being adopted in a number of areas. In Lancashire and Hull, this model of diverting women into support early where appropriate appears to be having a positive impact on rearrest rates.
- **Young adult women (18-24)** – The T2A pilot in Hammersmith and Fulham is developing a distinct approach for young adult women, and other schemes in Northumbria and Gloucestershire<sup>xvi</sup> have also identified the need for a distinct approach for young adult women who can fall through the gaps at a crucial time in their lives.
- **Women and girls at risk** – A number of PCCs have also supported initiatives aiming to intervene earlier with other at risk groups, including girls and young women becoming involved in anti-social behaviour. **Women involved in prostitution** have also been identified as a high risk group who are likely to face multiple and complex needs, with schemes in areas such as Norfolk targeting an improved response.
- **Women's victims services** – The majority of women involved in offending are also victims of crime, including high levels of domestic abuse. Some PCCs have acknowledged this overlap and are supporting targeted work for some of the most excluded women through their victims commissioning role. This also highlights the importance of **trauma informed services** for women in contact with the criminal justice system, whether as victims or offenders.
- **More effective use of community sentences** – For women who are charged, there is scope to further expand the use of community disposals, including requirements delivered by local women's centres. In a number of areas, the principles of integrated offender management approaches have been tailored to work more effectively in coordinating support for women offenders in the community, which could also reduce the number of primary carers of children being taken into custody.
- **A strategic partnership approach** – The multiple needs faced by women in contact with the criminal justice system mean that it is the responsibility of a range of agencies to work together for a more effective approach. In many cases reviewed, PCCs have worked with police, local authority, voluntary sector and health partners. In Manchester and other areas, improving responses for female offenders has been part of an ambitious public service reform agenda with strong partnerships at a strategic level.

## Further resources

The T2A pathway programme is delivering interventions to young adults in six locations across England over three years, including one that includes a specific focus on young adult women. Further information available here: <http://www.t2a.org.uk/pathway/>

**Revolving Doors Agency (2011)** *Counting the Cost: the financial impact of supporting women with multiple needs in the criminal justice system*. Available here: <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/documents/counting-the-cost/>

**Ministry of Justice (2015)** *Justice Data Lab Re-offending Analysis: Women's Centres throughout England*, available here: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/427388/women-centres-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/427388/women-centres-report.pdf)

**House of Commons Justice Committee (2015)** *Women Offenders: Follow up. Thirteenth report of Session 2014-2015* available here: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmjust/314/314.pdf>

**Prison Reform Trust (2015)** *Why Focus on Reducing Women's Imprisonment?*

Available here:

<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/why%20focus%20on%20reducing%20women's%20imprisonment%20BL.pdf>

**Prison Reform Trust (2014)** *Brighter Futures: Working Together to reduce women's offending*. Available here:

<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Brighter%20Futures%2025314web.pdf>

**Brennan et al (2015)** *An experimental evaluation of an adult female triage pilot project*

*for Humberside Police Hull: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies*. Available here: <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/Police-Female-Triage-Report-Hull-University-2015.pdf>

**New Economics Foundation (2012)** *Women's Community Services: A wise commission*, available here:

<http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/womens-community-services-a-wise-commission>

**Revolving Doors Agency** is a charity and social enterprise working to change systems and improve services for people who face multiple and complex needs, including poor mental health, and come into repeated contact with the criminal justice system. For more about our work and our consultancy services, see: <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk>

**The Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A)** is a coalition of 13 criminal justice, health, and youth organisations, which identifies and promotes effective ways of working with young adults (18-24) throughout the criminal justice process. For more information see: <http://www.t2a.org.uk/>

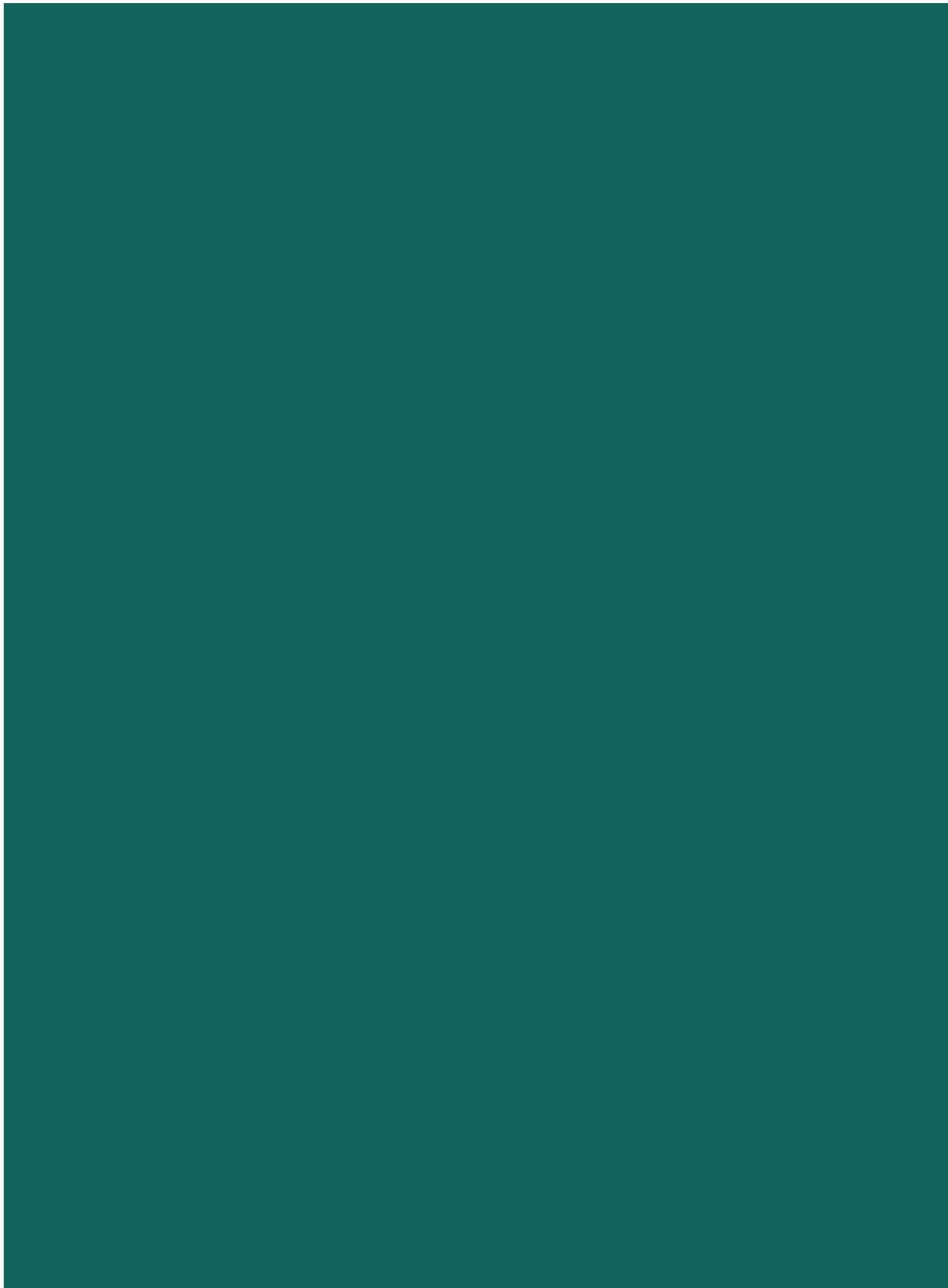
For further information on this briefing, or if you would like to share any examples of promising practice in your area, please contact:

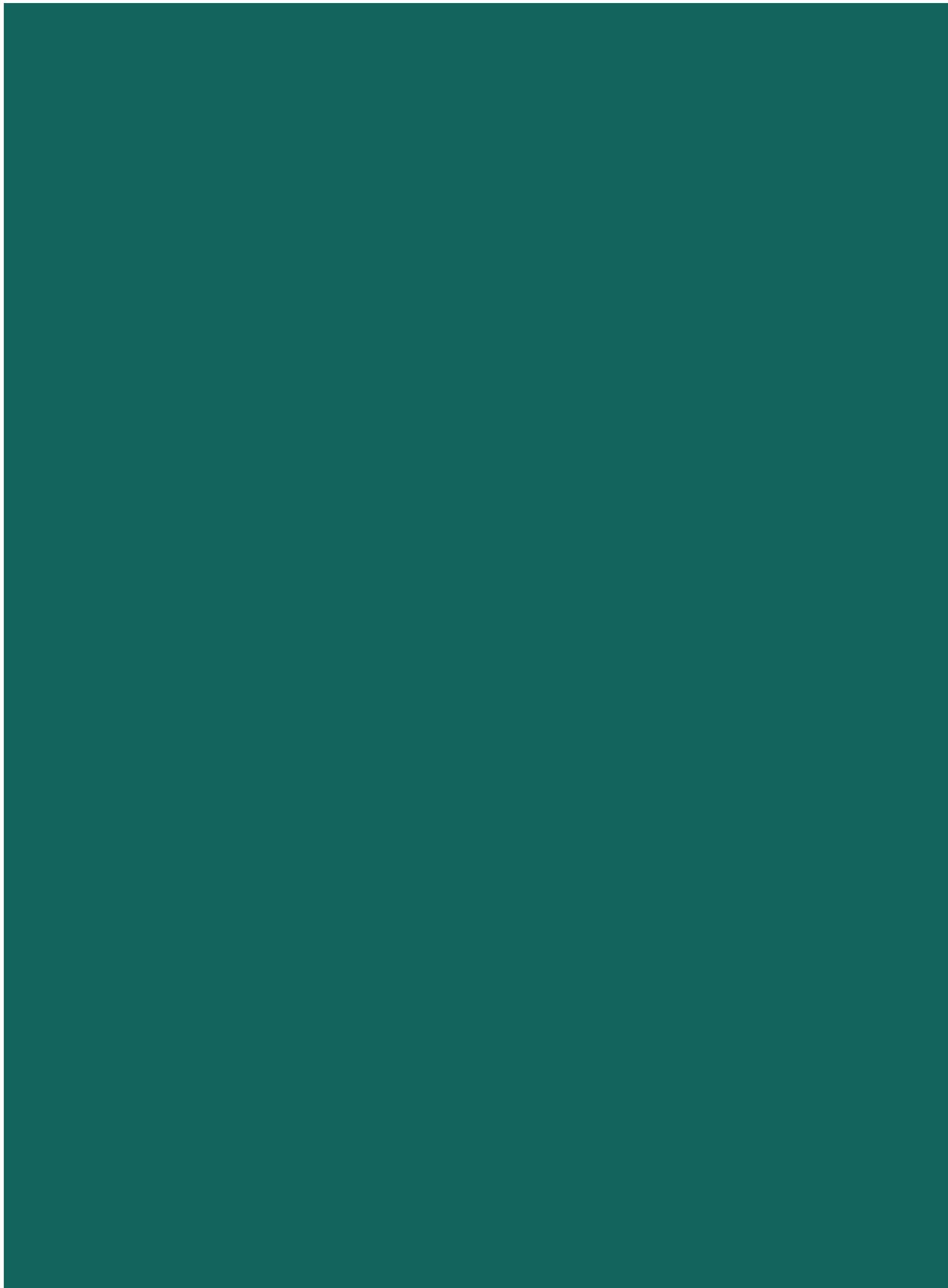
**Paul Anders, Policy Manager, Revolving Doors Agency**  
Email: [paul.anders@revolving-doors.org.uk](mailto:paul.anders@revolving-doors.org.uk). Tel: 020 7407 0747

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Prison Reform Trust (2015) *Why Focus on Reducing Women's Imprisonment* London: Prison Reform Trust, p 4.
- <sup>ii</sup> See Prison Reform Trust (2014) *Brighter Futures: Working together to reduce women's offending*, p. 7-8 for fuller profile of women in the criminal justice system.
- <sup>iii</sup> Analysis by the justice data lab showed a statistically significant decrease in reoffending among those receiving support from Women's Centres. See Ministry of Justice (2015) *Justice Data Lab Re-offending Analysis: Women's Centres throughout England*.
- <sup>iv</sup> See for example Revolving Doors Agency (2011) *Counting the Cost: the financial impact of supporting women with multiple needs in the criminal justice system* & New Economic Foundation (2012) *Women's Community Services: A wise commission*.
- <sup>v</sup> House of Commons Justice Committee (2015) *Women Offenders: Follow up*. Thirteenth report of Session 2014-2015
- <sup>vi</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/advisory-board-for-female-offenders>
- <sup>vii</sup> See <http://brightfutures.uk.com/>
- <sup>viii</sup> See <http://www.changing-lives.org.uk/how-we-change-lives/for-women/>.
- <sup>ix</sup> For further information see: [https://www.northumbria-pcc.gov.uk/v2/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/NP\\_1172\\_Violence-Against-Women-and-Girls-A4-One-Year-On-4pp.pdf](https://www.northumbria-pcc.gov.uk/v2/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/NP_1172_Violence-Against-Women-and-Girls-A4-One-Year-On-4pp.pdf)
- <sup>x</sup> See <http://www.cumbria-pcc.gov.uk/news/commissioner-presents-cheque-to-womens-community-matters.aspx>
- <sup>xi</sup> See <http://www.agma.gov.uk/gmca/greater-manchester-public-service-reform/justice-and-rehabilitation/index.html>
- <sup>xii</sup> See Brennan et al (2015) *An experimental evaluation of an adult female triage pilot project for Humberside Police Hull: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies*.
- <sup>xiii</sup> See <http://www.hulldailymail.co.uk/Triage-project-open-men-slashing-reoffending/story-2166607-detail/story.html>
- <sup>xiv</sup> McGowan, B. & Sapouna, M. (2014) *An Interim Evaluation of the Pilot Project: AVERT*. Available here: [http://www.womenscentre.org/images/stories/final%20%20-%20an%20interim%20evaluation%20of%20the%20pilot%20project%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.womenscentre.org/images/stories/final%20%20-%20an%20interim%20evaluation%20of%20the%20pilot%20project%20(2).pdf)
- <sup>xv</sup> See <http://www.t2a.org.uk/pathway/>
- <sup>xvi</sup> For further information on Gloucestershire PCC's approach, see our previous PCC spotlight briefing focused on young adults. Available here: <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/documents/pcc-spotlight-young-adults/>





**Revolving Doors Agency**  
Room 2A31  
Southbank Technopark  
90 London Road, SE1 6LN  
[www.revolving-doors.org.uk](http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk)  
020 7407 0747  
@RevDoors

