

‘Diversion is absolutely amazing’: How Advance diverts women from the criminal justice system

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The need for Diversion Services for women

‘The support from Diversion has been a lifeline.’

England and Wales see one of the highest global incarceration rates,¹ and with evidence repeatedly identifying the harms of incarceration for women,² credible alternatives to custody are critical. Diversion services are one such alternative, alleviating systemic pressures and offering much-needed early intervention for those with multiple needs and histories of trauma, as is often the case for many criminalised women.³ Diversion is a strategic priority of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ),⁴ with the recent Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan (FOSDP) promising funding for initiatives involving statutory and voluntary partnerships.⁵

The London Women’s Diversion Service (LWDS), or Operation Elpis — named after the goddess of hope in Greek mythology — began as a pilot in September 2019. Led by Advance, the project operates pan-London, in partnership with other specialist delivery organisations,⁶ and funded by the London Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and the MoJ, the service diverts women who have committed low-harm offences away from the criminal justice system (CJS), and into dedicated support services. Partnering with the Metropolitan Police Service, the LWDS aims to

break the cycle of criminalisation by addressing underlying drivers of offending, such as mental ill-health and experiences of abuse and trauma.

Women constitute a small proportion of people who commit crimes in England and Wales. Most crimes committed by women are considered lower-level, non-violent offences,⁷ and they report multiple and complex needs more frequently than men.⁸ For example, women are more likely to report problematic substance use and/or mental ill-health, with evidence indicating their offending can be directly linked to experiences of gender-based trauma.⁹ Taken together, this means that criminalisation can be more damaging for women in both the short and longer terms, often having additional, negative repercussions for their children, the cost to whom is often far greater than any social benefits reaped by criminalisation, due to the low-harm nature of women’s offending.

Diversion enables women to rebuild their lives through empowerment, by acknowledging their gendered experiences and offering tailored practical and emotional support. This may take the form of referrals to therapeutic counselling or substance use support, or provision of well-being-focussed activities in dedicated community-based women’s centres. Women receive one-to-one support from key workers, who advocate on their behalf to other professionals, such as housing officers. Diversion can mean that women are spared a drawn-out, and often

1. Jones, C., & Lally, C. (2024). *Prison population growth: drivers, implications and policy considerations*. Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.
2. Corston, J. (2007). *The Corston Report: A report by Baroness Jean Corston of a review of women with vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system*. Home Office; Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). The Gendered Pains of Life Imprisonment. *British Journal of Criminology*, 54(6), 1359-1378; Prison Reform Trust (2022). Why focus on reducing women’s imprisonment? Prison Reform Trust.
3. See footnote 2: Corston, J. (2007); Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017).
4. Ministry of Justice (2018). *Female Offender Strategy*. MoJ.
5. Ministry of Justice (2023). *Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022-25*. MoJ.
6. Hibiscus, Pecan, and Women in Prison alongside Advance delivered the Diversion pilot. Our specialist partners are Working Chance, Housing4Women, Heart and Mind, Clean Break, and Inspirit.
7. Ministry of Justice (2022). *Women and the Criminal Justice System 2021*. MoJ.
8. See footnotes 2 and 4: Corston, J. (2007); Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017); Ministry of Justice (2018).
9. Booth, N. (2021). Gendered prisons, relationships and resettlement policies; three reasons for caution for imprisoned mothers. *British Journal of Criminology*, 61(5), 1354-1371; Baldwin, L. (2023). *Gendered Justice*. Waterside Press.

retraumatising, experience in the CJS, resulting in a more expedient process to address their drivers to offending, thereby reducing the likelihood of recidivism. As previous evaluations of the LWDS have recommended, Diversion services could offer an alternative to criminalisation by referring women to support at the earliest point of contact with the police.¹⁰ That said, funding and contractual commitments sometimes narrow the scope of who can be offered support and instil a ‘postcode lottery’ where women are unable to access services due to geographical limitations.

It is well evidenced that incarceration is highly costly to the public purse. MoJ data shows that the average cost per prisoner in the women’s estate has increased by 50 per cent in 4 years, from just over £52,000 in 2020 to nearly £79,000 in 2024.¹¹ Conversely, a year’s worth of Diversion support is approximately 2.5 percent of this cost, at around £2,000 per year, per woman.¹² In addition, numerous studies have demonstrated the return on investment presented by Women’s Centres, which in 2020 was put at £4.68 for every £1 invested.¹³

The current LWDS model is focused on supporting women who have received an Out of Court Disposal (OOCd). Reform to the OOCd framework has been a political football for over a decade and is undergoing further amendments. In 2022, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act introduced two new statutory disposals — the Diversionary Caution and the Community Caution — to replace and streamline the existing six options. At the time of writing, these changes are expected to take effect in Spring 2025. These proposed changes present an opportunity to build on learnings in the delivery of women’s Diversion services, however, it is unclear whether they will be implemented with sufficient additional funding for specialist services to cope with the likely increase in demand. Without additional funding, there is a risk that fewer people given OOCds will receive the tailored, specialist support they need to break the cycle of reoffending. Success also rests on appropriate police awareness of

Diversion enables women to rebuild their lives through empowerment.

diversionary options and embedded processes to ensure that eligible women are consistently given the option of support. Before these changes are embedded, it is vital that police forces and associated agencies are aware of the positive impact of specialist women’s Diversion services, such as the LWDS.

Given this landscape, this article aims to share findings and good practice from Advance’s role in the LWDS so that criminal justice agencies and practitioners working in related fields may benefit from a better understanding of the opportunities presented. The next section further outlines the LWDS model, followed by an overview of the research methods and findings which show how women significantly benefit from this intervention which enables Empowerment in Practice via Emotional Support and Practical Help.

The LWDS model outlined

‘Receiving a conditional caution was a second chance.’

Following a pilot of the LWDS,¹⁴ the service has been delivered as part of a wider MoJ Commissioned Rehabilitative Service contract. The LWDS is delivered in four Basic Command Units across nine London boroughs, in partnership with Women in Prison, Hibiscus Initiatives, Working Chance, Housing4Women, Heart and

Mind, Clean Break, and Inspirit.

Police referrals can be made as part of a caution with enforceable conditions, with which the woman must comply to avoid any further sanctions. The woman must complete two mandatory appointments with the LWDS to complete the conditions of her caution. However, the nature of a conditional caution means that women acquire a criminal record, which along with the required admission of guilt, can at times present a barrier to their positive engagement with the LWDS and trust in the CJS; it is well-evidenced that women’s trust in the police and other enforcement agencies is low, so they may be unwilling to accept help which appears to be a double-edged sword.¹⁵ To mitigate this and the initial low number of referrals from the police, Advance proactively

10. Advance (2021). *London Women’s Diversion Service: The impact of community support on diverting women from the criminal justice system*. Advance.
11. Ministry of Justice (2020). *Prison performance data 2017 to 2018: Costs per prison place and prisoner by individual prison 2022 to 2023* (Table 2 Supplementary data). MoJ; Ministry of Justice (2024). *Prison performance data 2022 to 2023: Costs per prison place and prisoner by individual prison 2022 to 2023* (Table 2 Supplementary data). MoJ.
12. Advance’s calculations based on the latest full cost recovery model and caseload available.
13. Women’s Budget Group (2020). *The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women’s Centres*. WBG.
14. See footnote 10: Advance (2021).
15. End Violence Against Women Coalition (2021). *YouGov/ EVAW Survey Results*. YouGov.

worked with the Metropolitan Police and delivery partners to initiate a voluntary referral option, with funding from MOPAC. Women can refer themselves to the LWDS without a caution, meaning they do not have a criminal record and can still access support. The adaptation of the project in this way has proved successful because many more women have accessed support. Regardless of their pathway into the LWDS, engagement rates are high – 95 percent for conditional cautions and 87 percent of voluntary referrals.

During an initial assessment, an assigned key worker develops a needs-led support plan alongside the woman and reviews her current needs within the Justice Star framework.¹⁶ Broadly mapped against the seven criminogenic needs identified by the MoJ,¹⁷ the 10 areas of the Justice Star provide some insight into the individual's own assessment of their circumstances at a given time. An individual is invited to plot themselves on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 meaning the individual is not recognising the problem or accepting help, to 10 where the woman has started to accept support, take responsibility, and become self-reliant).¹⁸ Using this data, the key worker supports the woman in a trauma-informed intervention session, co-creating strategies to address the needs identified.

Women are then given the option to remain with Advance for additional longer-term support: more than half (n=81) of the women supported between Jan 2019 and Dec 2023 remained with the service for over 3 months — substantially beyond the mandated two appointments for conditional cautions. This longer-term support aims to further address the underlying drivers of a woman's offending which could include mental ill-health, problematic substance use, or domestic abuse or, as is often the case, a combination of all three. This longer-term approach and flexible funding is fundamental in helping women to rebuild their lives after trauma and criminal justice involvement.

Longer-term support aims to further address the underlying drivers of a woman's offending.

The LWDS is delivered in line with Advance's Minerva Wrap Around Approach, which recognises that a woman's experience of abuse and trauma will have an inevitable impact on her life, including through offending. The Minerva Approach is underpinned by positive regard for, and consistent communication with, the woman being supported. Key workers, peer mentors with lived experience, and specialist partners provide practical help, emotional support, and advocacy to help women overcome barriers. It is an approach underpinned by empowerment, a process through which women can gain some control over their lives, and access resources needed to improve aspects of their circumstances.¹⁹ The intention is to provide a safe, supportive environment to encourage women to develop pro-social identities, build trust to support disclosure of the challenges they are facing, and access help for them and their children. In doing so, the LWDS

aims to address the underlying issues that have contributed to the women's offending and thus help to break the cycle of criminalisation.

Method and Findings

The LWDS supported 165 women between September 2019 and December 2023 with an engagement rate of 92 percent.²⁰ Sixty-seven percent (n=133) of referrals were for women with a conditional caution and 33 percent (n=55) were voluntary. This is the sample from which the findings in this article are drawn and their demographics and histories represent some of the wider literature on women in contact with the criminal justice system.²¹ For example, half (n=82) were mothers, 71 percent (n=117) reported a mental health diagnosis or unmet mental health need, 64 percent (n=106) reported substance misuse issues,²² 44 percent (n=72) disclosed some experience of abuse, assault or trauma, and a smaller but still notable 13 percent (n=21) disclosed Adverse Childhood Experiences.²³

16. The Outcomes StarTM was first published in 2006; it has been proven to be a valid and reliable measure of personal outcomes across different sectors, based on the knowledge that change is possible and supporting change through action plans through an empowerment approach, alongside the individual.

17. Seven criminogenic needs are: Accommodation, Employability, Relationships, Lifestyle, Drug Misuse, Alcohol Misuse, and Thinking and Behaviour; MoJ (2019). *Identified needs of offenders in custody and the community from the Offender Assessment System*, 30 June 2018. MoJ.

18. Terms used in The Justice Star.

19. Barringer, A., Hunter, B. A., Salina, D., & Jason, L. A. (2017). Empowerment and Social Support: Implications for Practice and Programming among Minority Women with Substance Abuse and Criminal Justice Histories. *Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 44(1), 75-88.

20. Out of 182 women successfully contacted

21. See footnote 2: Corston, J. (2007); Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017).

22. Drug and/or alcohol use.

23. ACEs are potentially traumatic events that occurred in childhood which are thought to have an impact on physical and mental development and outcomes.

Table 1. Average change in outcome star scores for 99 women supported through the LWDS

	First Star (average)	Last Star (average)	Change (average)
Accommodation	6.0	7.5	1.5
Mental health and well-being	5.4	6.8	1.4
Managing strong feelings	5.6	7.0	1.4
A crime free life	7.6	8.9	1.3
Friends and community	6.2	7.2	1.0
Relationships and family	6.5	7.3	0.9
Positive use of time	6.5	7.4	0.9
Drugs and alcohol	7.1	7.9	0.8
Parenting and caring	7.9	8.5	0.7
Living skills and self-care	7.2	7.9	0.7
Average	6.6	7.6	1.0

Based on existing research we know that disclosures of abuse are likely to be underreported.

The data collected are both quantitative and qualitative, therefore different analytical methods have been used. The Justice Star provides indication of the impact of the LWDS via quantitative measures, whereas the findings thereafter are more qualitative in nature. Drawing on women’s responses as part of a survey, which they are invited to complete when their case closes with Advance, verbatim quotations are included as the article explores the nature and mechanics of the service, steeped in the Minerva Approach, which produces *Empowerment in Practice via Emotional Support and Practical Help*.

Justice Star: Identifying and responding to criminogenic needs

The women at LWDS were asked to complete the Justice Star during their initial assessment with the service, at three monthly intervals, and at the end of support. As shown in Table 1, the distance travelled by 99 of the women (for whom data is available) is considerable.^{24 25} These data show a 1-point improvement in outcomes on average for women engaged with LWDS, with an increase recorded across all 10 areas of the Justice Star, suggesting that some women were significantly benefiting from the intervention.

However, as with any evaluative tool, there are some limitations. All areas of the Justice Star are plotted whether there is an identified need or not, so sometimes this results in no change to an individual’s score. The tool is reflective of the point at which someone scores themselves, which can fluctuate on different days and is reflective of the non-linear trajectory of a woman’s journey. On other occasions a

point decrease may occur when disclosures are not made in the initial reviews; for example, if a mother fears discussions concerning her children or parenting in case this should result in local authority involvement. However, as women build more trust in their key workers, and understand that their key worker is there to advocate for and support them, they may be more inclined to share their experiences more honestly and less favourably. Indeed, it is the quality of the relationship and nature of the support offered by key workers that appear to have the greatest impact on the women’s overall experiences and outcomes. To demonstrate this, the following sections are focused on qualitative insights provided by the women.

Empowerment in practice

‘I feel much more in control.’

Having already identified how women reported improvements in their personal outcomes via Justice Star data, this section seeks to unpack how and why this was achieved, with the aim of sharing findings which demonstrate good practice. Premised on trauma-informed, gender-specific, personalised support for women, the LWDS focuses on mechanisms that can better position women to feel empowered. One participant, Abigail,²⁶ indicated how the LWDS offered a much-needed lifeline to her at a very low point in her life:

‘It was a great change to feel supported. I was at a very low point when I was referred. When the police officer told me about Diversion I actually started crying because I felt so relieved that they recognised I needed help.’

24. Of the 165 women engaged, 99 women had at least two Justice Stars, enabling comparison.
25. Whilst the Justice Star is an evidence based tool, there is no perfect way to capture distance travelled; it is a snapshot of the woman’s feelings on the days that she is asked to complete the tool.
26. All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

Women are often dealing with multiple, practical difficulties on their own when they are referred to the LWDS, and pragmatic support can make a huge difference to their feelings of independence. However, supporting women to feel empowered is a difficult balance to strike as it ought to be about providing opportunities to make decisions, rather than simply telling women what to do, as has sadly been the case in some supposedly gender-specific initiatives.²⁷ The LWDS supports women to understand the available options, considers their wants and needs, and ensures that the decisions are theirs. The key worker then supports women by advocating on their behalf with multiple agencies to ensure that their perspective is heard, and this can have an incredible impact on how women feel:

'My key worker has given me so much confidence and support and I feel like I wouldn't be in a good place without the support I got.'

'Advance have helped me gain my confidence back. When I started, I was in a bad place mentally and now I feel much more in control and like I've been listened to and heard. I am grateful to have been able to work with my key workers.'

These findings illustrate that the LWDS can be effective in empowering women, and enabling them to advance their personal circumstances, which is an outcome which sits in great contrast to the experiences of women serving custodial sentences.²⁸ This directly supports the MoJ's priority to reduce the number of women coming into contact with the CJS and demonstrates a means by which Diversion could be achieved for a larger proportion of the women committing lower-level offences in England and Wales.²⁹

With appropriate, ring-fenced funding, there is the potential to continue and even expand this good practice across the CJS and potentially to prevent future offending. For example, as identified through the service's closing survey, 99 percent of women receiving support felt more confident to make alternative choices and engage with their community, while 97 percent felt that the support received through LWDS had helped

reduce their offending. As two women commented, the LWDS provided a chance to take a different path in their lives

'It was a better avenue to go down than the typical police route. I also know that I can contact you in the future should I need further support.'

'I think it's a great opportunity to avoid other outcomes.'

To further explore the mechanics of the LWDS approach, the following sections provide insights into how empowerment is achieved and how change is enacted. Two sub-themes are included: Emotional Support and Practical Help.

Emotional support: 'Having someone to talk to'

The provision of emotional support is critical to ensuring women feel empowered. Mental health and well-being require targeted support; without this, other needs may be more difficult to address. To that end, LWDS key workers build trust and stable relationships with women, which is a significant factor in supporting mental welling, as Tara explained:

'[My key worker] has checked in with me regularly to track my progress and I have been able to improve my mental well-being through having someone to talk to.'

Across the sample, 97 percent of women felt that their general health and well-being had improved since being supported by the LWDS. One client, Alice, received emotional support from her key worker which acted as a stopgap while she awaited more formal interventions for her unmet mental health needs. Alice was dealing with a difficult period and was awaiting specific mental health support when she committed her first offence and was arrested; as previously discussed, there are links between mental ill-health and law-breaking for women.³⁰ Because of the opportunity to

With appropriate,
ring-fenced
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27. Ahearne, G. (2023). Empowerment or Punishment? The curious case of women's centres. In N. Booth, I. Masson, & L. Baldwin (Eds.), *Experiences of Punishment, Abuse and Justice by Women and Families*. Bristol Policy Press.

28. See footnote 2: Corston, J. (2007); Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017).

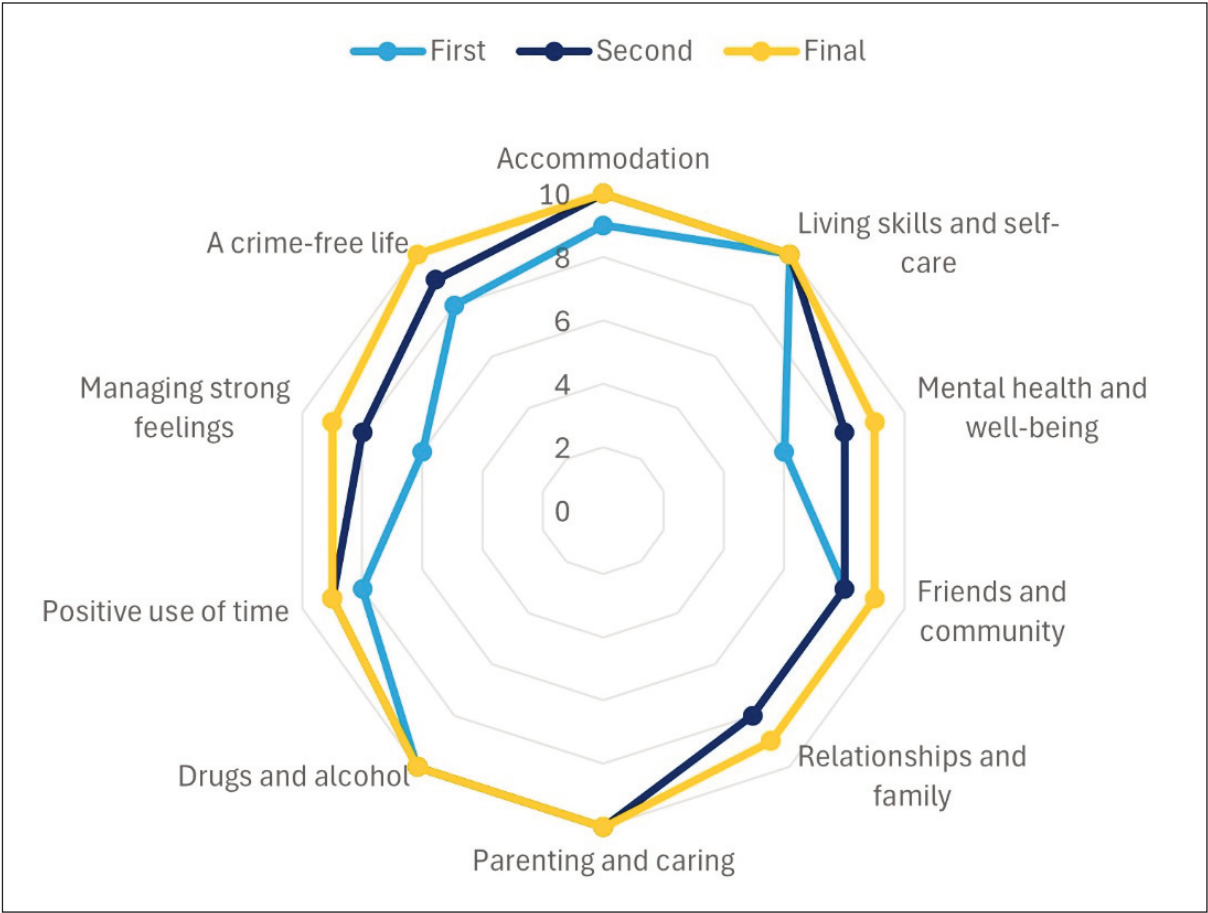
29. See footnotes 4 and 5: Ministry of Justice (2018); Ministry of Justice (2023).

30. See footnote 4: Ministry of Justice (2018).

be diverted from the CJS, Alice engaged positively with her key worker and applied for a new job, which in turn impacted her mood, mental health, and financial position. Three months into receiving support, Alice had not had any further offending incidents and the impact of this positive intervention can be seen in her

Justice Star (Figure 1). Alice's progress is evident across all 10 factors in the Justice Star with improvements and/or no change being seen with each plot in Figure 1 in August 2020 (denoted by the light blue), November 2020 (denoted by the dark blue), and January 2021 (denoted by the yellow).

Figure 1. Alice's Justice Star



As a holistic model, LWDS addresses a whole host of relationships, including parents, children, partners, peers, neighbours, and professionals. This can help to support women's positive networks, identify the damaging relationships, and build better engagement with professionals, such as social workers and housing officers. A staggering 99 percent of the women receiving support from LWDS felt better prepared to have a positive relationship with professionals, with one client, Sarah, indicating that this emanated from the quality of the tailored emotional support offered by their key worker:

'This whole process restored my faith in professionals ... You've always treated me in a non-judgemental way and helped me understand this. Over the past six months you have been the only consistent support which I

have found the most important thing and what was needed. You helped me to focus and allowed me to work things out without pressure and you listened ... I don't know what I would have done without you.'

In building trusting relationships with key workers, women feel more able to disclose some of the more traumatic and harmful experiences which are overrepresented amongst justice involved women.³¹ Disclosures of this nature may go some way in explaining why 89 percent of women receiving support, who had experienced domestic abuse or felt at risk from harm, felt safer since engaging with the LWDS. Likewise, women indicated that their engagement in LWDS resulted in positive outcomes for their children, such as Aisha, who felt her children were also being cared for:

31. See footnotes 2, 4, and 9: Corston, J. (2007); Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017); Ministry of Justice (2018); Booth, N. (2021); Baldwin, L. (2023).

'My key workers have helped me get my motivation back and I feel so relieved and so much better now. I feel like my children have been looked after and looked out for in a way I never thought anyone else would get involved in and our quality of life is so much better.'

Eighty-nine percent of the women from LWDS who had children reported an improvement in their children's health and well-being. This illustrates the wide-reaching and meaningful impact that personalised emotional support can foster for not only women, but also for their children. It is hoped that this could help to mitigate and/or prevent intergenerational harm which might otherwise occur through maternal imprisonment, instead having crucial benefits for individuals, families, and society.

Practical help: *'If it wasn't for you guys, I wouldn't be here right now'*

The provision of practical help is also identified as a need for many clients, specifically creating a multi-dimensional and customised support package for the women. As Aisha suggests, this assistance provided her with effective and meaningful support.

'Advance have been so helpful. It's amazing how many different things you help with — housing, emotional support, mental health! It has been a really stressful difficult time but having your peaceful presence and support has made a huge difference. The service you provide is so important.'

Practical support with housing can enable women to live independent lives away from potentially harmful environments. This was the case for Bryony who was living with a sibling temporarily after her property had been cuckooed.³² In supporting her with her accommodation application, including access to the

internet to complete it, LWDS provided much-needed, tangible support so that Bryony could secure alternative housing and better approach her own substance misuse issues. Similarly, Polly was supported to secure her own home which she attributed to the support provided at LWDS:

'If it wasn't for you guys, I wouldn't be here right now. I was homeless when your service met me and this morning, I've just got my keys to my own council property.'

Pragmatic support and advice can make a huge difference to women's independence and empowerment. For example, the LWDS helped Francesca to read her energy meters, which were previously inaccessible to her. This had a huge impact on Francesca being able to take control of her own finances and set up a repayment plan with her provider.

Similarly, the LWDS has provided support and advocated on behalf of women such as Dana, for a place in a rehabilitation centre. The LWDS liaised with Dana's rehabilitation provider, and Dana was supported by her key worker until she physically arrived at the centre. Another important concern was alleviated by her key worker who arranged temporary care for Dana's pet. As can be seen in Figure 2, there were some significant improvements

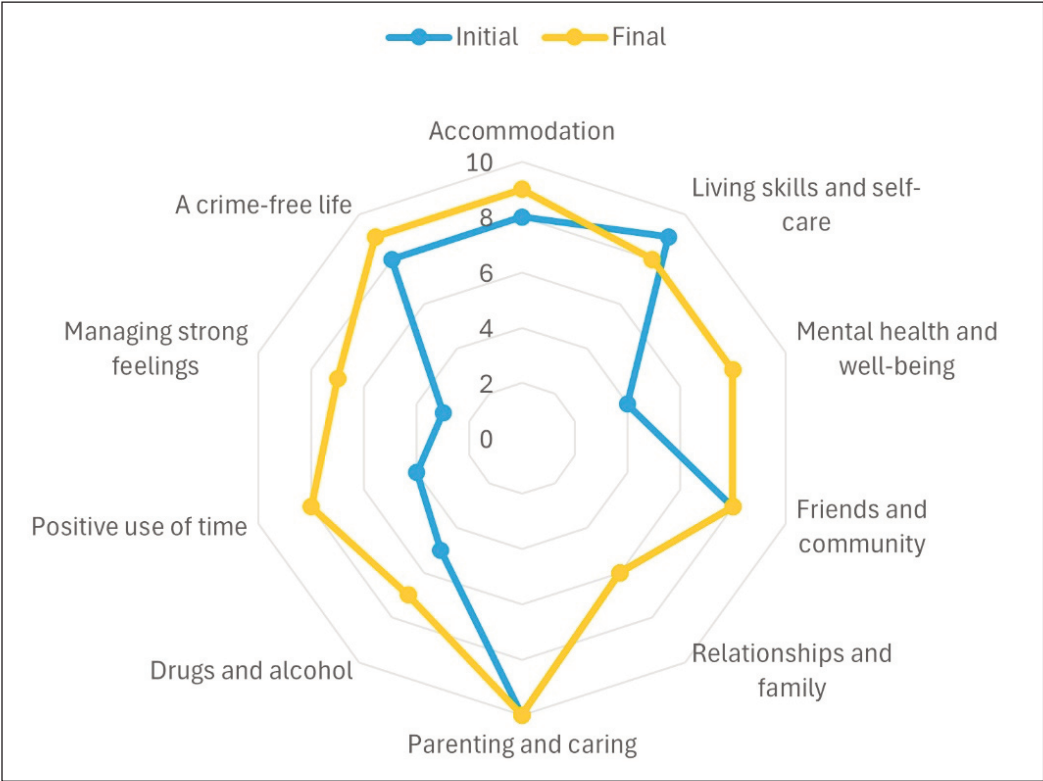
documented on Dana's Justice star in 6 areas between the first plot in December 2019 (denoted by the colour blue) and February 2020 (denoted by the colour yellow). Whilst there was a one-point change in her living skills and self-care this may be for a variety of reasons, including increased trust in her key worker and fluctuations in how she felt at the time.

Key worker support with sometimes small, but often seemingly insurmountable, responsibilities and tasks can enable women to move forward which is a key component of the practical support offered. Lucy appreciated the opportunity to be relieved of some of the pressures she was facing:

"Pragmatic support and advice can make a huge difference to women's independence and empowerment." "I didn't even know services like this existed"

32. "Cuckooing" is the term used when an individual's home is taken over for criminal activity, for example dealing drugs.

Figure 2. Dana’s Justice Star



‘You were dedicated to my specific issues I could put it all on you and let you mill through it to take the pressure off me. And just being able to talk to you when I needed it was good. God bless you.’

Conclusion

‘I didn’t even know services like this existed.’

The findings shared in this article highlight how the LWDS may have a profound impact on women in contact with the CJS, many of whom are facing multiple disadvantages, and that this holistic support has a positive effect across all interconnected areas of their lives. The relationship with a trusted professional, who stands in a woman’s corner when she needs it, can fundamentally change how she engages with various services in the future. This builds women’s trust in the system and is so essential to empowering women to help them to address underlying, driving factors of offending.

Delivered via Emotional Support and Practical Support, the LWDS positions and empowers women to better their current circumstances and, indirectly, the lives and well-being of their children. What these

findings suggest, critically, is that there may be scope via effective Diversion services to reduce intergenerational harm and to support many to move away from criminality.

The diversionary model depends on positive, multi-agency working to ensure success. Strategic and operational prioritisation of this service from the police, as well as openness and collaboration from other statutory services, are crucial in ensuring women receive the necessary support at the right time. The benefits of prioritising this approach can be seen within this article, and we hope utilised more widely. Likewise, central ring-fenced funding must be made available for Diversion.³³ In the past there have been broken promises around funding and provision of much-needed specialist services for women.³⁴ As a result, there is some anxiety from the women’s sector that the upcoming changes to Out-of-Court Resolutions (OOCR) will mean that this initiative will fall victim to similar issues. Therefore, this article has demonstrated that the planned roll-out of the two-tier OOCR framework must be accompanied by resources for gender-specific support services, like the LWDS, nationally, to ensure that every woman has access to the necessary support to enable her to rebuild her life, before she is criminalised, and wherever she is in the country.

33 See footnote 5: Ministry of Justice (2023).
34 Booth, N., Masson, I., & Baldwin, L. (2018). Promises, Promises: Can the Female Offender Strategy deliver? *Probation Journal*, 65(4), 429-238.