



## Transforming Lives evaluation – Lessons for future advocacy

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## Foreword

The Prison Reform Trust's Transforming Lives programme 2015-2020 has a single aim - to reduce the unnecessary imprisonment of women UK-wide. This is in light of the compelling evidence that women are disproportionately imprisoned for minor offences, have often been victims of worse crimes than those of which they are accused, and are likely to be primary carers of children whose existence, let alone needs, is commonly overlooked when a parent is in contact with the criminal justice system.

Evaluating a national advocacy programme designed to tackle a long-standing and intransigent problem of social and criminal justice was a complex mission. We have been on an interesting journey with NatCen Social Research and I welcome this briefing which provides a summary of the conclusions they have drawn about the Transforming Lives programme to date. I hope that by publishing this we will provide a resource for other organisations engaged in advocacy, and enrich the conversation about what is most effective in achieving positive change for marginalised groups.

The lessons learnt from the Transforming Lives programme will continue to inform the advocacy work of the Prison Reform Trust and I hope will also provide inspiration and learning for others working to improve the criminal justice system for women. In the last two years we have engaged with over 150 women with lived experience of the criminal justice system, drawing on their insights to inform our findings and recommendations and providing a platform for their voices to be heard by policy makers and practitioners in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This has been an essential part of our advocacy and our engagement with women will be the focus of the next and final phase of NatCen's evaluation of the programme.

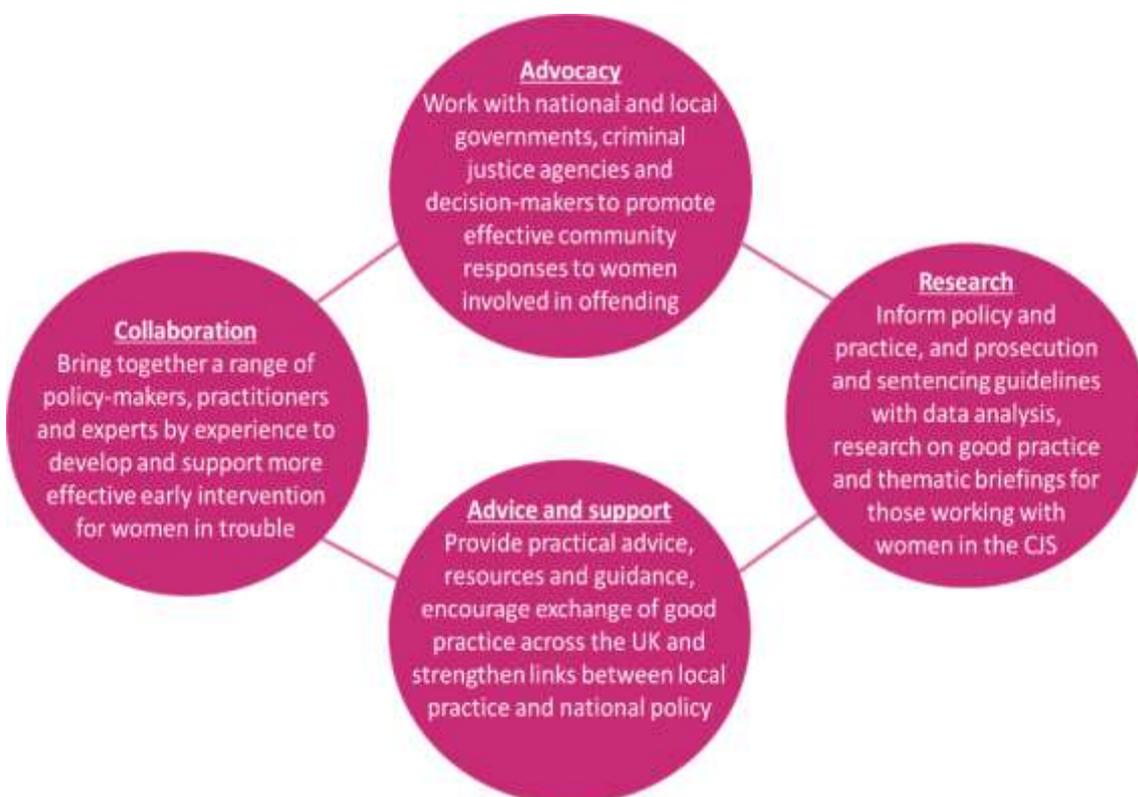
The main lesson I have learnt during my stewardship of this programme is that persistence and partnership are key to all our endeavours. We still have much to do to achieve lasting change and ensure equitable outcomes for women but working together, nationally and locally, I'm sure we'll get there!

**Dr Jenny Earle, Programme Director, Transforming Lives, Prison Reform Trust**

## 1. About the Transforming Lives programme

Transforming Lives is an ambitious, innovative advocacy programme led by the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) which aims to reduce the number of women sent to prison in the UK. Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, the programme engages with policy-makers, commentators and influencers, criminal justice agencies and third sector practitioners to raise awareness of the negative impact of women's unnecessary imprisonment, and influence the choices and actions of decision-makers.

The programme's objectives include improving the governance of women's justice and working intensively in selected 'high custody' areas to promote the use of early intervention and community solutions for women. Incorporating inter-jurisdictional learning from across the UK's four nations, the programme aims to increase awareness of the links between domestic abuse and offending, strengthen pathways into mental health and social care services, reduce the proportions of foreign national and black and minority ethnic women in custody, and promote non-custodial options for mothers. This is done through:



Transforming Lives is a collaborative programme which relies on close joint working with a range of criminal justice, women's and civil society organisations. It has been informed by an advisory group of academics and experts from statutory and third-sector delivery agencies. Partnerships with User Voice, KeyRing, Hibiscus Initiatives, Llamau and Women in Prison have helped ensure that insights from women's experiences of the criminal justice system inform the programme. The partnership with Families Outside has supported and strengthened the strategy in Scotland. PRT has also worked with Soroptimist International's UK Programme Action Committee, whose members gathered information on the state of women's justice in England, Wales,

Scotland and Northern Ireland for the 2015 *Transforming Lives: Reducing Women's Imprisonment* report that led to the development of the programme.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. How NatCen approached the evaluation

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) was commissioned to evaluate the Transforming Lives programme between 2016 and 2018 to explore progress towards its goal of reducing the number of women sentenced or remanded to custody and identify key barriers and facilitators to success. The evaluation aimed to examine how the advocacy and influencing work undertaken with a range of relevant government, criminal justice and third sector organisations may have contributed to changes in policy, practice or approaches to women's justice – either directly or indirectly.

### Advocacy evaluation and its challenges

Evaluating an advocacy programme aimed at influencing a significant, national outcome presents several challenges. Standard evaluation approaches seek to establish a comparison with what would happen in the absence of the programme or intervention, but this is not possible when the 'unit of analysis' is the UK.

Advocacy evaluation focuses on how organisations deliver against their intentions to influence public policy, rather than how they deliver more immediate or tangible outcomes (such as direct service delivery or funding). By mapping and tracking pathways to intended change, advocacy evaluation can assess an organisation's contribution to progress. However, the diffuse and network-based nature of advocacy work makes attributing change, specifically determining the contribution made by one organisation, a challenge. Even where intended outcomes are clearly achieved, tracing influence and apportioning credit will be complex.

### The Transforming Lives evaluation approach

With this in mind, the NatCen evaluation:

- Identified **four key pathways** by which progress towards the overarching goal of reducing the number of women in custody could be achieved through work with intermediary organisations. These pathways relate to governance; practice; specific groups; and evidence, analysis and knowledge transfer.
- Developed a **comprehensive logic model** that detailed the chain of linked outcomes between the programme and its goal, starting with raising knowledge and awareness, moving to generating commitment among key decision-makers and ending in behavioural change. Change relating to points along the 'offender pathway', and the actors that could affect those changes, were also mapped.
- **Tracked the programme's work**, collating internal information on the activities involved, and external evidence of the programme's influence. The latter included interviews with individuals involved in programme activities, as well as references to the programme in policy, political and parliamentary discussions and indications of any difference these had made.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Transforming\\_Lives.pdf](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Transforming_Lives.pdf)

### 3. The Transforming Lives Programme's policy achievements

With women making up just five per cent<sup>2</sup> of the prison population, their needs in the criminal justice system have historically been marginalised at the political and policy level. From its start in 2015, the Transforming Lives programme has sought to achieve concrete commitments to reduce women's imprisonment, to ensure that women are high on the criminal justice policy agenda and to achieve a detailed understanding of what a gendered approach means in practice. The programme has operated in a shifting political landscape with many ministerial changes and competing political priorities – from austerity to Brexit – at the local, national and international levels.

While the snapshot population of women in prison has not yet decreased, receptions of women into prison are coming down. Evidence from the evaluation suggests four overarching successes resulting from work under the Transforming Lives programme:

- **The UK government's Female Offender Strategy** was published in June 2018, closely reflecting the Transforming Lives programme's analysis and goals. It committed to reducing the number of women in prison and focussing on prevention, community support and rehabilitation, and confirmed that plans to build five new women's prisons had been dropped.

Publication of the Female Offender Strategy and the commitments it contains were the result of a number of factors, including significant contact between the Transforming Lives team and key policy figures in the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and other government departments. While questions remain about the funding available to implement the strategy, the Transforming Lives programme realised a major policy goal with its publication.

- **The case for a gendered approach to imprisonment has been kept on the policy agenda** in England, Wales and Scotland. The Transforming Lives programme played an important role in this by raising awareness and deepening understanding within key government departments and among decision-makers. This was achieved by continuously sharing information and evidence and encouraging exchange of good practice from across the UK.
- **There is now a national consensus on early intervention and diversion for most women's offending**, influenced by the Transforming Lives programme. The Female Offender Strategy commits to divert the most vulnerable women in the criminal justice system away from custody by providing tailored support. It places an emphasis on early intervention to support women who might otherwise progress along the offender pathway, including funding of community provision and domestic abuse services along with a commitment to diversion schemes and out-of-court disposals. The strategy recognises the impacts of women's imprisonment on children and families and encourages the use of community orders rather than short custodial sentences.
- **It is now widely recognised that women's offending is often driven by abusive relationships alongside factors such as unmet mental health**

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<sup>2</sup> PRT (2018) *Prison: the facts*. Bromley Briefings Summer 2018.

**needs.** This is explicitly acknowledged in the government's Female Offender Strategy and in its response to the consultation 'Transforming the response to domestic abuse'. The links between women's victimisation and their offending are also referenced in the government's Victims Strategy.<sup>3</sup> The Transforming Lives programme helped to secure this recognition through its key work stream to raise awareness and understanding of abusive and coercive relationships as a driver to many women's offending.

#### 4. Conclusions and lessons for future advocacy

##### Effective influencing strategies employed by the programme

The Transforming Lives team employed three effective influencing strategies, enabling them to make progress towards their overall aim and, in doing so, to identify and respond to other stakeholders, challenges and priorities within a complex and fast-changing policy landscape. In this evaluation, while it would be impossible to say whether a different approach would have resulted in a different outcome, we have identified evidence of how Transforming Lives' approach can be used to address the goal of reducing women's imprisonment.

- **Research and analysis:** A unique series of thematic briefings and local data resources has been published under the Transforming Lives programme, drawing together evidence from a wide range of sources and providing a platform for insights from women with lived experience of the criminal justice system and the services working with them. This has established a solid foundation of evidence for key audiences and partners in an accessible and policy-relevant format.
- **Being a critical friend:** By approaching governments, decision-makers and statutory agencies as a critical friend, the Transforming Lives team have in many instances been able to work 'inside the tent' as members of key advisory groups and decision-making forums rather than trying to exert influence from the sidelines. This in some instances enabled closer engagement and allowed evidence-based messages to be delivered directly to stakeholders.
- **Principled opportunism:** The Transforming Lives team worked nimbly and responsively to exert influence where opportunities arose. This was effective in enabling the team to communicate its messages to important stakeholders in a timely and strategic fashion.

##### Lessons for future advocacy

###### *The challenge of achieving behaviour change*

The Transforming Lives programme appears to have succeeded in achieving important policy commitments to its agenda. However, it is less clear to what extent this has been translated into behaviour change across the criminal justice systems in the UK and it has been harder for the programme to engage successfully with some target audiences than with others.

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<sup>3</sup> See: Ministry of Justice (2018) *Female Offender Strategy*, London: MoJ; HM Government (2018) *Victims Strategy*, London: MoJ; HM Government (2019) *Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse: Consultation Response and Draft Bill*, London: HM Government.

Focussing resources and influence on achieving concrete behaviour change would result in further positive outcomes for women. The NatCen evaluation identified this as key to increasing the programme's efficacy in future. This will require adopting a more deliberate strategy of activity that seeks to engage with selected stakeholders and decision-makers along the offender pathway.

### *Double loop learning*

Transforming Lives' use of research and analysis to achieve influence has been a key pillar in their approach and it is worth reflecting on the way in which this has achieved change. The theory of 'double loop learning'<sup>4</sup> argues that learning requires a questioning of existing assumptions so that 'instrumental learning' (which involves reflection on actions using existing conceptual frameworks or paradigms) is replaced by 'process learning', where underlying assumptions are questioned and the existing paradigm is 'broken'. The second kind of learning can involve not just a cognitive process but an emotional one, as having one's existing assumptions undermined can be experienced as disturbing.

There were hints in this evaluation that some audiences underwent double loop learning in response to Transforming Lives' reports and there is no reason to think that the Transforming Lives team should change its approach to research and analysis. However, it may be worth considering the process of delivering messages and how to support learning after someone has seen a report or piece of analysis. This should focus on making best use of the window of opportunity when a stakeholder may be questioning their assumptions and may be receptive to further input.

### *The influencing funnel*

The evaluation also found that the Transforming Lives programme's advocacy can be thought about in terms of the 'influencing funnel' concept used in social marketing contexts.<sup>5</sup> This funnel, shown below in Figure 1, indicates that as you move through the different stages of a theory of change, from awareness to commitment and behaviour change, the process of achieving the outcome becomes more difficult and it is increasingly hard to keep a wide range of stakeholders on board.

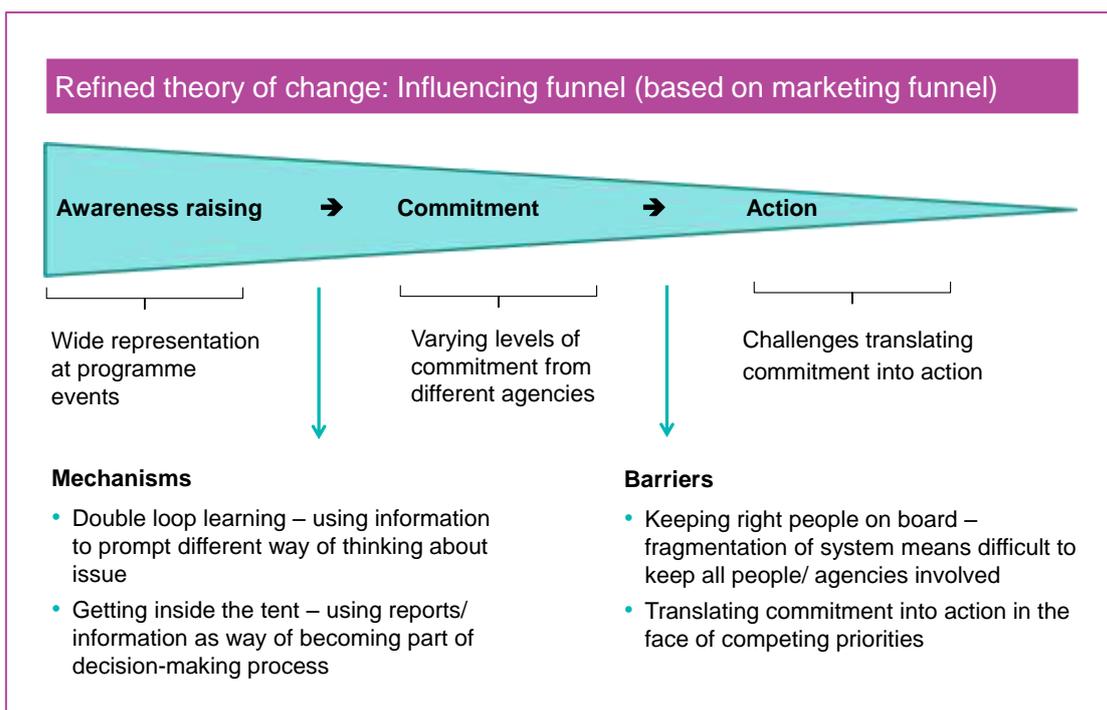
The funnel would suggest, for example, that while publication of the Female Offender Strategy is a remarkable achievement in terms of government commitment, translating this into the behaviour change that is needed to reduce the number of women in prison on a sustained basis is not straightforward. A range of strategies will be needed at different points along the outcome chain, recognising that the further along you get, the more challenging it is to overcome the barriers to change.

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<sup>4</sup> Argyris, C. and Schon, D. (1996). *Organizational Learning II*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison Wesley.

<sup>5</sup> The marketing funnel is used widely and is explained in a range of places, including here: <https://www.dummies.com/business/customers/the-traditional-marketing-funnel/>

**Figure 1 – The influencing funnel**



### Transforming Lives resources

For more information about the Transforming Lives programme and to download the following briefings and more, go to [www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/women](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/women):

- **Out of the Shadows:** Women with learning disabilities in contact with or on the edges of the criminal justice system
- **Broken Trust:** The rising numbers of women recalled to prison
- **Still No Way Out:** Foreign national women and trafficked women in the criminal justice system
- **What about me?** The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system
- **Home truths:** housing for women in the criminal justice system
- **“There’s a reason we’re in trouble”** - Domestic abuse as a driver to women's offending
- **Counted Out:** Black, Asian and minority ethnic women in the criminal justice system
- **Fair Cop?** Improving outcomes for women at the point of arrest
- **Leading Change:** the role of local authorities in supporting women with multiple needs