



# COMMUNITY PLAN FOR HOLLOWAY

MOPAC, Probation Services and the Holloway Women's Space:  
Short Report by Community Plan for Holloway, July 2024

## **Introduction**

*"We have a golden opportunity to choose social justice, and the empowerment of communities so that the site is used to demonstrate what a different system could look like: Where communities hold the answer to issues faced by women with complex needs and those who offend – not prisons."*<sup>1</sup>

[After Holloway: Consultation with women affected by the criminal justice system](#)

Community Plan for Holloway (CP4H) originally emerged from the work of the Centre for Crime and Criminal Justice Studies, and now exists to amplify the voices and views of local residents and women's organisations, who want to see the best possible outcomes from this site which holds so much meaning for so many.

According to the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies<sup>2</sup>, "most women in prison have experience of domestic or sexual violence, are battling addiction, serious mental ill-health or are homeless and living in poverty. A third of women in prison grew up in care." However, women are disproportionately sentenced to custodial time. "In the UK there is a chronic overuse of imprisonment with 84% of women sentenced to prison for a non-violent crime on a short sentence, often for theft such as shoplifting. One in four

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<https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publications/after-holloway-consultation-women-affected-criminal-justice-system-0>

<sup>2</sup> id.

women who are sentenced to prison are sentenced to one month or less.” These women already face huge barriers in their lives, and these are vastly increased by a prison sentence.

The dedicated women’s space on the site of the former Holloway Prison will be central to the site’s legacy for women, and the role that the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and probation services will or will not have in the space will determine how this new space will function and the needs it will be able to meet.

Since 2016, the question of whether MOPAC and probation services are part of the women’s space, and how this could work for women, has been discussed by a huge range of organisations and women from different backgrounds and with different experiences, including many who were imprisoned in Holloway before it was closed. This report highlights issues raised at a recent meeting convened by CP4H to explore the views of organisations who had expressed an interest in the tender for Operator of the women’s space, as well as individuals and organisations who have a more general interest, and views were also sought well as by email and through one to one meetings.

We are unaware of any women-only probation offices in London. Probation services are currently mixed and all women with licence conditions will have to attend probation when they are released from prison.

CP4H believes that for a decision that will have such important consequences for the women’s space and the women that will use it, it is appropriate to look at this in more detail. We also hope to be able to make some practical recommendations for how to move forward.

Lastly, the Ministry of Justice recently stated that it plans to provide women with “better support on release.”<sup>3</sup> Everyone who participated in these discussions stated that the Criminal Justice System is not working for the women who have no choice but to engage with it. The focus here was on how to improve service provision for women caught up in the system, rather than how to change the system itself.

## **Methodology**

In May and June 2024, CP4H contacted our network with a series of questions, and invited individuals and organisations to respond by email, to attend an hour-long public

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<sup>3</sup> [Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system, 2022](#)

online meeting, and / or to arrange one to one conversations online and in person. During this process we spoke to three organisations: Treasures Foundation, Advance and the Prison Reform Trust. Alongside semi-structured conversations, we also posed several questions (in bold, below).<sup>4</sup>

## **Responses**

We have grouped the responses in a way that we feel is a balanced reflection of the different views we've heard and that reflects both the number of views expressed and the strength of feeling. Respondents were offered the option to remain anonymous if they wished. All the views expressed to us are detailed in Appendix 1.

### **1. What are the problems faced by women accessing probation services?**

Probation offices were described as unsafe and unwelcoming, and there were many barriers for women to access.

“As a woman it was awful for female attendees, mainly because it was mixed probation. The floor was covered in cups, there were men there with their hands down their trousers playing with themselves, if you didn't want to say your name you could write it down but staff would then say it out loud...I would have liked somewhere better to go.”

*Anonymous, former prisoner of HMP Holloway*

“The women I work with are expected to go to their centre where 95% of the people are male. One of my clients recently had a massive panic attack. Fortunately the probation officer was very thoughtful.”

*Sophie Benedict, local resident and therapist, Holloway United Therapies*

“It can be overwhelming to manage multiple appointments upon release, often leading to anxiety and disengagement.”

*Former Probation Officer (name provided)*

“We acknowledge the difficulties that women were having with probation: being mixed, recovering addicts, vulnerable women who were having to go to places where they

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<sup>4</sup> All text from the open WBWG meeting, from conversations and emails [HERE](#)

crossed paths with, for example ex associates and using addicts, putting them at real risk.”

*Jade Wye, Operations Manager, Treasures Foundation*

“Probation services need to look at the use of recall for women, and limit the ways in which this is applied in cases of ‘non-engagement’, where women are in fact facing significant barriers to engagement for multiple reasons. Recall heaps harm on top of harm, where we should be prioritising support and understanding. Probation services must also look at embedding a trauma-informed and gender-specific approach to working with women, in close partnership with specialist women’s voluntary sector providers.”

*Birth Companions*

“The hardest thing is to pick up your life after coming out of prison. Years ago I was one of the first probation and aftercare officers for community service, a community service officer. We noted, if we didn’t support people properly they will end up back in prison.”

*Rose McDonald, CP4H Trustee and social housing and health advocate*

“Probation services lack knowledge about the range of services that are available to women that women can go to.”

*Sophie Benedict, local resident and therapist, Holloway United Therapies*

## **2. Should probation services be part of this new space?**

People frequently talked about MOPAC and the probation service as synonymous. Some said that they would agree to MOPAC funding as long as this didn’t mean that they had a formal role in the space.

“Many people didn’t want MOPAC to be involved in funding the space because they are worried this would come with conditions attached. Like the probation service, MOPAC is a state organisation and represents state power and we wanted to get away from all that.”

*Anonymous, former prisoner of HMP Holloway*

“We believe this is entirely dependent on the wider provision of services in the space. Ultimately it is a question of balance. If, as was envisaged at the outset, the building is managed in a way that allows a wide range of services to be provided by specialist women’s providers with a focus on meeting the needs of those in contact with the criminal justice system, then an appropriately designed probation offer can be built into

that mix. However, if the wider mix of services falls short, the inclusion of Probation will not be appropriate; it will tip the balance towards statutory provision, and make the space feel unsafe and unwelcoming.”

*Birth Companions*

“With my previous professional experience in Probation, I believe it would be beneficial to include Probation services in the Holloway dedicated women’s space. Many women I managed on my caseload found it challenging to attend multiple different venues for engagement and support. A single space offering a variety of services would provide a more integrated approach, ensuring better accessibility and reducing barriers to engagement, including financial and psychological obstacles.”

*Former Probation Officer (name provided)*

“I completely understand that women may want a safe and neutral space to meet their probation officers and that the probation offices are not seen as safe spaces. I wouldn’t necessarily have a problem with women choosing to bring their probation officers with them to meetings, or meeting them in the Women’s Space. I feel this is significantly different from probation having a formal or permanent presence. The women should be able to dictate the terms by which probation is there.”

*Rachel Seoighe, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Kent*

“When the community surrounding Holloway Prison came together to demand a Women’s Building, the vision would be that it would be a place of healing for those who have experienced violence at the hands of the state. This can only happen if it is completely independent of these systems. No services that are linked to or co-operate with the Criminal Justice System should be housed in this building.

Women and non-binary people who have been criminalised need support. Probation services work through coercive means leveraging people’s access to freedom against them. This does not create the necessary environment to heal and recover from previous trauma or the trauma of incarceration. There can be no space for healing if probation services are in the building.”

*Sisters Uncut*

“Our London based members and in particular those led by and for black and minoritised women, including migrant and refugee women consistently report that their service users are very uncomfortable with state services, and housing state services within the planned women’s building would risk them self excluding from accessing the space. There is currently a severe lack of trust and confidence in state services in particular the police and the CJS.”

*Vivienne Hayes MBE, CEO Women’s Resource Centre*

“We would recommend that a probation model for the Holloway building should be co-designed with the specialist women’s services who will be involved in delivering support within the space, and with women with lived experience of probation supervision. This would allow the creation of an appropriate probation model as part of a wider pathway of care, and allow consideration of how this aspect of the provision looks and feels, including key issues such as approaches to recall.”

*Birth Companions*

### **3. If so, could probation be done differently than current available services, in ways that are better for the women using them?**

“I think now that probation (in the space) would be very useful: I would like to see a more holistic approach, less stigmatising. Probation anonymously coming to see women in a neutral space with access to additional services on site, seems like a good starting point to me.”

*Anonymous, former prisoner of HMP Holloway*

“Women leaving prison will always have a link with probation so its better to do it well. Build a relationship and develop a supportive approach. With discrete interactions. Nothing overt.”

*Jade Wye, Operations Manager, Treasures Foundation*

“The space should be appropriate for all women to access, especially the most marginalised as statutory services do not engage them well. Services and probation should be symbiotic, not just one leading the other – services can help effective engagement with probation. The Nelson Trust has a model where probation is based there. They have a model similar to Treasures. Their centre in Gloucester is amazing, a centre of excellence - women-led, safe, therapeutic space, support around domestic abuse and sexual violence, creative activities, creche, showers, somewhere for women to wash their clothes. This is what we should be aiming for. That feels appropriate and they seem to have it right.”

*A woman with lived experience of HMP Holloway who also works in the CJS sector with women (name and organisation provided)*

“I believe that having a single space where a woman can access all necessary services to address her needs and challenges would be immensely beneficial. In the past, many women struggled to access timely support. Having all relevant services in one location would allow them to receive the help they need promptly, ensuring continuity of care. This would be particularly beneficial for those transitioning from prison.”

*Former Probation Officer (name provided)*

“There should not be a formal partnership or presence. Probation is part of a punitive criminal justice system based on surveillance and control, which is framed as 'support' for women but is the system of monitoring women's reporting and engagement. Academics have talked about how the criminal justice system operates with a contradictory approach of 'care and control' when it comes to women. When women deviate from reporting or the programme set out for them, probation is the system that recalls them to prison. Recalls have risen enormously in recent years - for breaches of licence that are often very difficult to maintain - and for women in particular. It is part of a punitive system of surveillance. I don't think it should have any place in the Women's Space. This is entirely against the spirit of the community's call for a Women's Building since 2016.”

*Rachel Seoighe, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Kent*

“This space cannot be led by government and law makers. A lot of us are against the system but having to work with it. To do this much better - for women to have a triage process to sign on. Maybe probation are invited but not running it. It can't be like that. What was so good at Holloway was we were very connected to probation. I don't like the system but in order for probation to be successful we have to invite them in.”

*Sophie Benedict, local resident and therapist, Holloway United Therapies*

“In years of working in the prison, probation services were some of the most supportive in the prison, women had direct access, built up relationships and a good relationship is very powerful in the non-reoffending of women, who need to be respected in the way any human being deserves. Support is key to reintegration. Building relationships with individual people. We need to be alongside them – its very important for their progress back into the community. Anyone who worked in Holloway could see the importance to them being there.”

*Pamela Windham Stewart, Psychotherapist, worked in HMP Holloway (1996- closure 2016)*

"A women's space can provide a safer and more comfortable place to access probation. This practice needs to be done with consideration for all who use the space and with a level of expertise. Ideally, women would be encouraged to attend by their dedicated Keyworker, who can provide reassurance and a trauma-informed approach. Probation officers could visit and see women on an appointment basis at the centre, either as a three-way with their Keyworker or one-to-one meeting. There would need to be \*confidential\* bookable rooms that could fit 3-4 people.”

*Summer Alston-Smith, Director of Development & Insights, Advance*

“Creating a holistic environment would also likely lead to better training for Probation officers working in this space, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to support women with complex needs. This multi-agency, collective approach would ensure more effective support for these women.

To address the concerns, careful consideration could be given to the building layout and the placement of probation services. For instance, probation services could be situated on the top floor, separate from the support services located on the lower levels. This separation can help reduce anxiety and provide women with a sense of safety and control over the other services they choose to engage with in the lower levels.

Additionally, it is crucial that a specialised space for women ensures regular training for all organisations operating within it. Adopting a trauma-informed care approach across all services will help create a supportive and understanding environment.”

*Former Probation Officer (name provided)*

“It’s about building relationships with officers and teams to reduce some of the anxiety in women we are working with. We can offer the reassurance. They might not always trust straight away, but we can chip away. And work with the system. In the same way a patient is admitted at the point of admission, we should be planning for the release of women and men at the point of being sent to prison. Getting probation embedded in services.”

*Jade Wye, Operations Manager, Treasures Foundation*

“My personal feeling, as a person with lived experience of prison and probation, is that support provided should be offered in a safe way and in a space that is safe. Sadly, because probation are able to, and often do, recall women back into custody, I question whether this is what we want in a safe space. This does point to a systemic problem with probation and I realise that there are probation officers that are sympathetic to women’s needs, however I worry that if women can’t attend an appointment at the Holloway Building (for very good reasons) then she will be recalled. For me that way of operating creates a tension between the services that want to support women in the community and probation officers that need to follow recall procedures.”

*A woman with lived experience of HMP Holloway who also works in the CJS sector with women (name and organisation provided)*

#### **4. Does anyone have comments about experiences of children when their parents/mothers are accessing probation services. How might the model we are talking about (bringing probation into the community) impact the children?**

“Children are the real victims of crime: only 5% of children with mothers in prison stay in their own homes. Playgroups and activities might encourage mothers to return for probation if there is childcare.” [This project] will need supported areas, and for the child



to see that mother is met with respect, which might be a very new experience for the child and the mother.”

*Pamela Windham Stewart, Psychotherapist, worked in HMP Holloway (1996- closure 2016)*

“There is a lot of stigma within the services that are supposed to support the children of women who have been in prison. Children are not allowed in probation offices and often children don't know what probation is and are often frightened or scared of it. Children are often left outside probation offices. Some mothers will only have supervised contact with their children and will want calm and quiet spaces for this. We need an integrative approach with everyone around the table. Bringing people together and relationship building is key.”

*Sarah Beresford, Prison Reform Trust Associate*

“Childcare provision for children shouldn't be identifiable as kids of women on probation. All children should be catered for and looked after.”

*Lawrencia Frempong, CP4H Trustee, Early Years educator/worker, local resident*

“There is a need for specific pathways of support for pregnant women and mothers of children up to the age of two within the probation system, supported by a comprehensive training package. This is a key recommendation of our recent report on dual contact with the criminal justice and children's social care systems. All too often women disclose needs that probation have limited understanding of, or are ill-equipped to help address, or they choose not to disclose needs for fear of judgement. For many of the women we work with, the involvement of children's social care and the risk of having their child removed from their care is a dominant concern.

“Our research with the charity Clinks highlighted a lack of recognition of, and responsiveness to, pregnancy and motherhood among probation services. Less than half of the voluntary sector representatives surveyed for the report felt that probation services take sufficient account of these needs.”

*Birth Companions*

## **Conclusion**

Peabody's recent feasibility study references a range of views around MOPAC and probation services in the women's space.<sup>5</sup>

There are widespread issues experienced by women accessing probation services. Probation offices were described as unwelcoming and sometimes dangerous spaces by people we spoke to. It's clear that there is a huge amount of reservation about the capacity of probation services to support women in a way that avoids stigma and is trauma-informed.

No one we spoke to supported a role for probation services in the operation or governance of the Holloway women's space. However many of the people and organisations we spoke to suggested that it could be possible for probation officers to visit the women's space to meet with women and that this could be the foundation of a different, more human approach. This approach may lead to a greater engagement with probation and a much greater range of other services for women.

Over and over it was repeated that relationships between women and the people working with them are key in delivering effective support. It is crucial that a specialised space for women ensures regular training for all organisations operating within it. Adopting a trauma-informed care approach across all services including probation will help create a supportive, understanding environment. Women must have a role in designing services in order for them to work. They must be treated as individuals and not numbers.

Lastly, nobody in our conversations welcomed MOPAC as a formal presence in the space. An indirect involvement, for example, through funding was considered acceptable by some, but this could not include a role for MOPAC in operating the space, or in direct leadership or governance.

## **Community Plan for Holloway**

For more details contact:  
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<sup>5</sup> Pages 24 and p27  
[https://hollowayparkcommunity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Holloway-Park-Womens-Building-Feasibility\\_Summary\\_Comp\\_V10\\_Optimized.pdf](https://hollowayparkcommunity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Holloway-Park-Womens-Building-Feasibility_Summary_Comp_V10_Optimized.pdf)).