



The Believed Project

Supporting women in prison who
have experienced sexual violence
and abuse

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Believed

*The harsh light of fluorescent tubes
exposes truths unheard
the weight of lies
the gas lighting.*

*The snakeskin of other's sin
peels back the layers of scar tissue
the pain fresh and deep
words that cut and sliced
undeserved
I repeated
I believed
unreservedly
believing myself alone.
Worthless.*

*Freed,
lifted,
supported,
I look around and see
my truth is common.
I am not alone
no longer un listened to
no longer silent I find my voice
I find myself
I find belief
I find self love
I find my life.
I am believed*

Kerry, completed counselling with
The Believed Project in 2019.

“I have been in and out of this prison since 1999. The women in here deserve the chance to be believed. For a lot of us we were always told to be silent. I feel for the first time I’m being heard, and my voice finally listened to and believed. I have recently been given a life sentence, but I feel I’m gaining a chance to be alive again”

Stacey¹

Thanks to all the women who agreed to be interviewed and to the RSACC staff and counsellors for their invaluable support throughout the project.

Overview

The Believed Project is a prison-based intervention delivered by the Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Centre – Darlington and County Durham (RSACC, DCD) aimed at supporting women in custody who have experienced sexual violence and abuse (SVA). It was established as a pilot in response to the high numbers of women disclosing past sexual violence at HMP Low Newton and was operated between October 2018 and March 2020. The project was underpinned by a specialist and intensive 20-week counselling service, a 12-week group work programme (*The Recovery Toolkit*) and staff training in sexual violence disclosures and support. Counselling and group work were delivered by 3 trained RSACC staff who were based in the prison. *The Believed Project* was externally evaluated using a mixed methods approach.

There are five key recommendations based on the findings of the evaluation:

1. Specialist women-centred sexual violence services should be commissioned in prisons across the women’s estate.

This should include a specialist sexual violence counselling service, designed to be long-term and flexible and delivered by experienced sexual violence counselling staff (who should receive adequate training and ongoing support). *The Believed Project* provides a clear and workable model for such a specialist service.

2. This specialist women-centred sexual violence service model should be scaled up to include:

i) an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA);

ii) a designated counselling room designed in a trauma informed way;

iii) peer-led support groups established by women who have engaged with the service; and
iv) a range of additional alternative and complimentary support, such as creative writing and craft groups.

v) an outreach worker to work with women on short sentences to raise awareness of sexual violence and abuse and support available through the *Believed Project* and:

vi) tailored support for women young women during their transition through Young Offender Institute (YOI) into adult services;

vii) an outreach worker to engage in pathway planning to support women who are transferred to other prisons and to support the transition of women upon release back into the community and into community-based violence and against women and girls (VAWG) services;

3. The service (and team) should be embedded within a multi-agency partnership structure alongside the Drug and Alcohol Recovery Team (DART), mental health and family support workers. Within this framework:

i) engagement in the specialist sexual violence service by women should be voluntary and not mandated as part of their sentence planning.

ii) where appropriate, a hold should be placed on women engaging with the service until they have completed their counselling programme.

4. Commissioning of further research and service development work into the needs of racially minoritised women detained in prison who have experienced sexual violence and abuse. This should include:

i) meaningful consultation with specialist VAWG organisations that work with racially minoritised women (e.g. the Angelou Centre, Newcastle, Imkaan, Southall Black Sisters) to ensure that the establishment of prison specialist sexual violence support is attuned to, and meets the needs of racially minoritised women.

ii) actively employing counsellors and support workers from diverse backgrounds, particularly racially minoritised groups.

iii) legal and culturally specific training for counsellors and support workers to be delivered by specialist organisations that support racially minoritised women.

iv) providing more accessible information about sexual violence and abuse and the specialist service that reflect cultural diversity and overcome language barriers.

5. Roll out of trauma-informed training (with an emphasis on sexual violence and abuse) to all prison staff (especially personal officers) and women detained in prison in peer-support roles, such as Prison Information Desk workers and Listeners, to be delivered by specialist VAWG workers.

Introduction

As of March 2022, the women's prison population in England and Wales was just over 3,200, just under 5% of the prison population (MOJ, 2022). This figure is expected to rise in the months ahead because of two interconnected policy changes. First, the expansion in the number of police officers in England and Wales will mean that more women will come into contact with law enforcement and consequently, more women will be drawn into the harsher end of the Criminal Justice System. Secondly, instead of diverting women away from custody towards community sentencing and funding women's centres, the government is currently planning to expand the women's prison estate by providing a further 500 spaces by the end of 2022². This policy is being implemented, against the aims of the government's own Female Offender Strategy (2018) and despite a backdrop of well-established evidence demonstrating that a custodial sentence is unlikely to reduce reoffending amongst women³. Furthermore, the experience of imprisonment is likely to do significant harm to women and their children (if they are mothers)⁴.

What is clear, is that many women who end up in prison have been victims of much more serious offences than those they are accused of committing. The majority of women (80%) are incarcerated for non-violent offences. They are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to be serving a custodial sentence for theft and offences to support their own and their partner's drug use (PRT, 2021)⁵. Yet we also know that for most women, their criminal activities are often interwoven with their experiences of domestic abuse, coercive control and sexual violence and abuse (PRT, 2017; McGuigan and Walker, 2019). Consequently, many women who end up in custody bring past traumas into the prison setting; traumas that are often rooted in childhoods growing up in violent and abusive homes and from direct experiences of physical and sexual abuse as girls and young women (Williams et al., 2012). The charity, Women in Prison (2020), found that 80% of the women they surveyed reported childhood victimisation. Consequently, the women's prison population is a distinctly vulnerable group; the vast majority have complex health and social care needs that are further compounded by experiences of poverty, unemployment, and unequal access to services such as education

and housing. Unsurprisingly, we find that women in prison often use drugs, alcohol, self-medicate and self-harm as coping mechanisms to deal with sexual violence and domestic abuse that many have endured throughout their lives.

This report presents the findings of an external evaluation of *The Believed Project*, a specialist intervention designed to support women in prison who are victim/survivors of sexual violence and domestic abuse. It was undertaken by Dr Kate O'Brien and Dr Hannah King, researchers based in the Department of Sociology, Durham University⁶. The report makes a number of recommendations and provides HMPPS with an evidence base from which specialised programmes of work in the area of sexual violence and abuse (counselling, group work and staff training) could be enhanced and rolled out across the women's prison estate. It also shares evidence that addresses several strategic priority areas outlined in the MoJ (2018) Female Offender Strategy and also emphasised in the MoJ (2022) Improving Outcomes for Women in the Criminal Justice System, including;

- working with local partners, including the third sector, to develop a more collective approach to address the specific needs of women offenders and tackle the underlying causes of reoffending.
- improve the custodial environment to better enable rehabilitation and deliver better outcomes, for example, by improving 'health and wellbeing' of women prisoners and developing a 'trauma informed' approach to working with women.

The Believed Project

The Believed Project is a prison-based intervention delivered by the Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Centre - Darlington and County Durham (RSACC) aimed at supporting women in custody who have experienced sexual violence and abuse. *The Believed Project* was established as a pilot in response to the high numbers of women disclosing past sexual violence at HMP Low Newton. RSACC is a specialist sexual violence service that has been supporting women within local communities in this region of the north of England for 30 years. This is the first time RSACC has supported women⁷ within the prison setting. The aim of *the Believed Project* was to support women in prison who had experienced, or disclosed while in custody, sexual violence and abuse⁸. Specifically, the project aimed to achieve the following outcomes:

- women feel able to make everyday decisions
- women feel confident
- feel in control of emotions
- have positive coping strategies and skills
- take good care of self
- have people around who can be trusted
- feel closer to people who matter

Thus, women will:

- feel more in control of their lives
- feel that their health and wellbeing is improved
- feel more able to develop and maintain positive relationships
- feel more able to assert their rights
- feel more able to access further support
- be less likely to re-offend

The project was underpinned by a specialist and intensive 20-week counselling service, a 12-week group work programme (*The Recovery Toolkit*) and staff training in sexual violence disclosures and support. Counselling and group work were delivered by 3 trained RSACC staff who worked part-time and were based in the prison⁹. *The Believed Project* was delivered in HMP Low Newton women's prison and YO1 between October 2018 and March 2020. The project engaged directly with 201 women; 92 completed the counselling programme (105 started counselling) and 11 completed group work (30 started group work)¹⁰. Women were referred to the counselling service and group work in various ways; most were referred by prison staff, especially Offender Supervisors, but a small number of women self-referred. In the first year of delivery, there were 95 referrals. Although the counselling service was designed as a 20-week programme, there was some flexibility and women were able to end the sessions early if they felt ready to complete or extend their sessions if this was considered to be beneficial by the counsellor. An important goal of the project was to provide women with knowledge about where they can access support, especially once released. During year 2, on completion of a counselling programme women were given an information booklet designed to signpost to relevant services and resources on release and back in the community. The project also aimed to raise awareness and knowledge about sexual violence amongst staff and prison mentors through specialist training in sexual violence disclosures. The project is intended to be rolled out across the women's prison estate in England.

2. <https://campaigns.womeninprison.org.uk/stopthe500>

3. The reoffending rate for women sentenced to less than 12 months is 70.7% (Female Offender Strategy 2018).

4. For example, see Baldwin and Epstein (2017) on the impact on mothers who are separated from their children, especially women serving shorter sentences.

5. See also Light (2013) 48% of women in prison committed their offence to support someone else's drug use, compared to 22% of men.

6. Kate O'Brien and Hannah King deliver the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme at Durham University. (<https://www.insideoutcenter.org>). They set up Think Tanks (made up of inside alumni) at two of the prisons including one at HMP Low Newton. The researchers usually meet with Think Tanks each month and support members to engage in a range of research, teaching and training related activities; the Low Newton Think Tank played an important role in the development of the Believed Project evaluation, as will be discussed in this report.

7. We use 'women' throughout this report instead of 'women victim/ survivors'. Some of the women we engaged with during the evaluation did not see themselves as 'survivors', even though they were referred to as survivors by counsellors.

8. The Believed Project was funded by HMPPS, under the 'Enabling the voluntary sector to contribute to better outcomes for offenders in Public Sector Prisons, the National Probation Service and Youth Custody Service' funding stream 2018-20 July 2018 RSACC was awarded £126,000.

9. Unfortunately, due to factors outside of the control of RSACC, including the restrictions brought about by COVID 19, SVA disclosure training did not take place.

10. We didn't collect data on attrition. However, we know that some women withdrew from the programme because they were transferred or released. One woman we interviewed stopped and then restarted Believed counselling because she initially felt 'unready' to engage with the process.

Policy Landscape: Women and Prisons

The current criminal justice landscape within the context of the women's prison estate in England is complex and contradictory and in line with much criminal justice policy in England and Wales, is highly politicised. On the one hand the government wants to appeal to its voters and take a tough stance on crime and crime control. The proposed expansion of the women's prison estate is a clear expression of this political stance. However, on the other hand, several senior Ministry of Justice staff and a host of other significant policy makers and influential prison reform organisations, have for some time been advocating for an overhaul of the women's prison estate in England and Wales, calling for a woman-centred approach. Underpinning this call is a recognition that women in custody are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to have experienced physical and sexual violence and abuse at some point in their lives (PRT, 2021:22). Furthermore, compared to women within community settings, women in prison are more likely to have endured prolonged and multiple experiences of sexual and physical violence and abuse throughout their lives, including as children and young women (Women in Prison, 2020).

The Corston Report (2007) was a ground-breaking review of women's treatment in and by the Criminal Justice System. Baroness Corston made 43 recommendations, 40 of which were agreed with cross-party support, arguing "the need for a distinct radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach". A decade later, in assessing its implementation, Women in Prison (Corston +10, 2017) demonstrated that just two recommendations had been implemented. Corston (2007) argued that fundamentally, prison should be used as a last resort and only for violent offences for women, with community-based responses the norm. The report underlined the fact that prison sentences, especially short sentences, are ineffective in reducing offending amongst women (Women in Prison 2020) and the prison system is not designed to support one of our most vulnerable populations. 58% of women are reconvicted within one year of

leaving prison, rising to 73% for sentences of less than 12 months and to 83% for women who have served more than 11 previous custodial sentences (PRT, 2021). Embedded within Corston's (2007) proposed blueprint were key recommendations that addressed her concern about the sheer number of women who come into the prison system with deep and prolonged experiences of domestic abuse and/or sexual violence. Fundamental to this, according to Corston, is her finding that coercion by men and male family members is a key driver of criminality and for some women, a custodial sentence. Consequently, Corston argued for a woman-centred approach, located within 'a therapeutic environment' with specialist staff and resources suited to meet women's individual needs (Corston, 2007)¹¹.

As consistently demonstrated across the violence against women and girls' (VAWG) sector, distinct gender responsive approaches are required for working with women (Westmarland, 2015). Building on the Corston Report (2007), more recently, a recognition of the importance of a trauma-informed approach to working with women has gained traction. The MoJ (2018) have recognised the need for prisons to be trained in trauma informed work, acknowledging the gendered nature of trauma which is often experienced by women at higher levels both individually and systemically. This has long been argued by academics working in the area of women and imprisonment in the UK (see for example, Harden and Hill, 1997). Addressing women's trauma is central to calls from across the women's and prison reform sectors for the women's prison estate to be overhauled (see Petrillo *et al* 2020). Strengthening specialist support for women in custody who are especially vulnerable is key to this and *The Believed Project* is an example of an intervention designed to answer this call.

'The Female Offender Strategy' (MoJ, 2018), and the recently published, 'Improving the Outcomes for Women in the Criminal Justice System' (2022) further document the harms of imprisonment to women and their children; women's distinct vulnerabilities; and

the gender-specific needs of women who find themselves locked up within the prison system in England. They too focus on early intervention, community-based solutions and better conditions for women who are in prison and recognises the evidence base for a distinct women-centred approach. Following this, the cross-government Victims Strategy (2018) promised to "use trauma-informed approaches to support female offenders who are also victims." Lord Farmer's (2019) review explored the importance of families and relationships to women in prison and in reducing reoffending. In acknowledging that, "female offenders have often experienced abuse and trauma which can profoundly impact their ability to develop and sustain healthy, trusting relationships," he set out key recommendations to address the importance of good family and other relationships as a "golden thread running through the criminal justice system" (Farmer, 2019:5). He concluded that his recommendations "will need investment, from both national and local budgets, in women's centres, domestic abuse and other community services and inside prisons...a relatively modest investment will go a long way" (Farmer, 2019:5). Despite this and contrary to its own strategy, the government recently announced plans for 500 new prison places for women. This represents a 15% rise in places which are expected to be filled as a result of the planned recruitment of an additional 20,000 police officers. This is within the context of a generally declining women's prison population over the last decade, after a peak of approximately 4,500 women in prison in the early 2000s (PRT, 2021:22). Unsurprisingly the announcement has been met with widespread condemnation from the prison reform and women's sectors (Grierson, 2021).

¹¹ See also Ervin et al (2020) 'Addressing Trauma and Victimization in Women's Prisons' Urban Institute for a US perspective and a similar call for trauma-responsive correctional facilities.

Locating Sexual Violence and Abuse in Women's Prisons

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) defines violence against women as:

“Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

We know very little about the place and meanings of sexual violence amongst women who end up in prison in the England and Wales. The extent of the problem is largely unknown and so it is difficult to present an accurate or ‘true picture’. Existing evidence is largely drawn from self-report studies, which as we know, are inherently problematic when it comes to measuring the prevalence of highly sensitive offences such as rape, sexual assault and coercion (Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate, 2018). However, conservative estimates demonstrate how significant an issue it is. According to Women in Prison (2020), 79% of women in prison will have experienced sexual violence and abuse as adults and 53% will have experienced emotional, physical, sexual abuse as a child (see also PRT, 2021: 22). It is worth noting that the comparable figures for women within the general population; 20% of women have experienced some type of sexual assault since the age of 16 years (British Crime Survey, 2018) and 31% of young women aged 18-24 years report having experienced sexual abuse in childhood (NSPCC, 2011).

Women in prison are significantly more likely than men in prison to have experienced physical and sexual violence and abuse at some point in their lives (PRT, 2021: 22). More than half of women report having experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse as a child, compared to 27% of men (PRT, 2021, p.22). Furthermore, compared to women within community settings, women in prison are more likely to have endured prolonged and multiple experiences of sexual and physical violence throughout their lives, including as children and young women (PRT, 2021). As Rumgay (2010: 47) found, “woman offenders

often have histories of prior victimisation... childhood abuse, domestic violence and victimisation that occurred in the context of high-risk social relationships.” Indeed, most women in prison have been victims of much more serious offences than those they are accused of committing.

As we have already outlined, women's offending behaviours are inextricably tied to their past experiences of sexual violence and domestic abuse (see King et al 2022). This finding is explored in detail in a recent Prison Reform Trust's (2017) briefing, ‘There's a Reason We're in Trouble’, which found that domestic abuse was a key driver of criminal offending for many women who end up in prison. This briefing is relevant to *The Believed Report* because, as we know, it is very difficult to separate out sexual violence and domestic violence (Dobash and Dobash 1998) as they exist on a continuum (Kelly, 1988). The authors of the PRT (2017) briefing report highlight that a cycle of victimisation and criminality defines many women's lives because so many women in prison are subjected to abusive and coercive relationships. They argue that for some women, years of abuse can trigger behavioural problems, including violence and disorder offences. For others, domestic abuse is often used as a strategy to coerce women into criminal offending, for example, this is often the case for racially minoritised women who are trafficked, and/or end up in prison as foreign nationals. Similar findings are presented in McGuigan and Walker's (2018) report for the Griffin's Society on the links between domestic violence and female criminality in Northern Ireland. They emphasise that much more work is needed to support women in prison who are victims/survivors of domestic abuse and this should be delivered by specialist services such as trauma-informed counselling.

In a recent report conducted in Boston, USA, Rini et al (2020:4) examined the needs of formerly incarcerated women and men who have experienced of sexual violence and argued that, “people coming home from prison and jail have often experienced various forms of violence, neglect, and trauma at rates that far exceed the general population”, and went on to recommend that Rape Crisis Centres should play a more

significant role in supporting survivor's once they are out of prison, a finding we pick up on in later sections.

Understanding women's experiences of gender-based violence must be located within broader contexts and within an intersectional framework (Westmarland, 2015). Thus, it is also important to acknowledge that women in prison who are victimised because of their gender, might also be further victimised because of their class, ethnicity or sexuality. For example, we know from studies carried out within community settings that people who identify as LGBTQ+, or racially minoritised women, are likely to experience sexual abuse and domestic violence at much higher levels than heterosexual and non-marginalised women (see for example, Donovan and Barnes, 2016; Aghtaie and Gangoli, 2015). We also know from our own work with women in HMP Low Newton that a significant number of women will commit offences, or breach their licence, in order to return to prison as a place of safety away from their perpetrator. This was echoed in the Prison Reform Trust's (2014) study, which explored prison as a place of safety (see also McGuigan and Walker, 2018). We have found that women serving short sentences are more likely to fall into this category, indeed the government's own strategy recognises that short sentences can be particularly ineffective and harmful (MoJ, 2018)¹². We would also add that shorter sentences can also cause significant harm to families and children on the outside, when for example, care proceedings often follow a mother's imprisonment (see O'Brien and King, forthcoming). Shorter sentences also pose a particular barrier to women's engagement with programmes and interventions in prison which may be helpful to them. For example, within a context of limited resources women serving shorter sentences may not be eligible for certain types of support, and in the case of specialist counselling, would not have sufficient time to safely engage with a programme.

12. The Female Offender Strategy (2018: 3) acknowledges that “There is persuasive evidence that short custodial sentences are less effective in reducing reoffending than community orders. Short sentences generate churn which is a major driver of instability in our prisons and they do not provide

sufficient time for rehabilitative activity. The impact on women, many of whom are sentenced for non-violent, low level but persistent offences, often for short periods of time, is particularly significant.”

HMP Low Newton: support for women who report and have experienced sexual violence and abuse

HMP and YOI Low Newton in Durham is one of twelve women's prisons in England and has a capacity of 352. Throughout the period of the research, the population of the prison was between 302-352 residents. In March 2018, prior to the launch of *The Believed Project* in HMP Low Newton, 28% of women detained in the prison had disclosed sexual abuse at the point in which they were assessed coming into prison¹³. However, as we outlined above, the actual number will be much higher. In 2018, HMP Low Newton received an average of 4 disclosures a week¹⁴. Women are asked about their experiences of sexual violence as part of the reception process when they enter to the establishment. Women might then be referred to the mental health team, however, like other prisons across the women's estate, it is not uncommon for women at HMP Low Newton to wait several weeks for an appointment. There was limited access to an ISVA (Independent Sexual Violence Advisor)¹⁵ in the establishment during the evaluation period and no ABE (achieving best evidence) suite. Since the evaluation concluded, the prison has installed an ABE suite on site which is now up and running. The Psychologically Informed Planned Environment (the PIPE unit) provides some women who might have experienced sexual violence and abuse with specialist support in the prison, but this is largely restricted to women who also present with personality disorders and other complex needs. In line with most women's prisons in England and Wales, emphasis was, and continues to be placed on medical models of intervention when supporting women who have experienced sexual violence and abuse. The outlier is the 'The Freedom Programme', an intensive group-based programme for women who have experienced domestic violence and abuse, designed to inform and help women makes sense of what has happened to them. It was evident throughout our time conducting research at HMP Low Newton that this is a forward-looking establishment that actively seeks out opportunities and specialist initiatives to support women. This observation is corroborated in a recent HM Inspectorate of Prison Report (2022) and cited two innovative family support projects running inside the prison¹⁶.

13. HMP Low Newton data.

14. HMP Low Newton data.

15. ISVAs have been trained by RSACC but they are not yet operating in the prison.

16. Early Days in Custody and the Parental Rights Project <https://www.nepacs.co.uk>

Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling and its Role in Women's Prisons

RSACC is a specialist sexual violence charity supporting women across county Durham and Darlington. Like Rape Crisis, England and Wales (RCEW), the charity is founded upon a feminist approach which places women's lives and experiences within an understanding of the structural framework of gender/patriarchal society (see Vera-Gray, 2020). The essence of this feminist approach is recognition of the collective experiences of women. Thus, within their (often therapeutic) spaces, including counselling and groupwork, the aim is to create equality in the counselling room – to empathise and build trust – however slow this may be, no matter how long this might take. RSACC's counselling uses a person-centred approach which has its roots in counselling techniques associated with the psychotherapy method used in 'client-centred therapy' advanced by Carl Rogers (1977). The client can reveal as much or as little as they want – the counsellor gives them control of the process, including the speed in which the process develops. The essence of a person-centred approach is to engage in true empathy with the client, unlike in other approaches, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (which can help people manage problems by changing the way they think and behave). The person-centred approach to counselling is very similar to a trauma-informed approach.

The feminist therapeutic approach used by RSACC's counsellors is underpinned by an understanding that being 'believed' and being validated is key. Consciousness-raising is also integral to the counselling relationship alongside providing women with tools and strategies to manage and cope with their trauma. Educating women and 'opening up new ways of seeing for them' is key. As a result, women often experience new understandings about themselves and their victimhood. This can facilitate an understanding that the abuse they have experienced is not their fault. RSACC counsellors are women, a feature of the counselling experience that the women we interviewed found very important. Where appropriate, 'self-disclosure' by the counsellors is used but only if deemed appropriate and helpful to support clients.

RCEW have been involved in delivering counselling to women in prison in the past, but this has been minimal and sporadic. For example, RCEW delivered support in HMP Bronzfield and in HMP Low Newton in the early 2010's but interventions were offered on an ad hoc basis, or one day a week for a limited period. Lack of funding and a shortage of space were the key factors preventing programmes being embedded for longer periods in these prisons. *The Believed Project* is the first to provide an intensive counselling service delivered by three RSACC counsellors based in the prison over a two-year period¹⁷.

With three decades of experience supporting women within community settings, the transition for RSACC to delivery in a prison setting brought with it a range of complex challenges. How can equality within the counselling room be established in a space designed to control, monitor and remove an individual's freedom? How can trust be built with women who have continually been let down by the state and society? How can anonymity be guaranteed in an environment where 'everybody knows your business'? How can a space be created in prison where women can feel safe and able to open up? The co-ordinator of *The Believe Report* consulted with a group of women, the Low Newton Think Tank (outlined overleaf), to think through some of these challenges and seek advice about how to adjust the intervention to suit the prison environment. This first event helped ensure the voices of incarcerated women were embedded from the outset.

17. Another noteworthy project is the excellent 'Healing Trauma Project' (*One Small Thing* (<https://onesmallthing.org.uk>) delivered at HMPs Bronzfield, Drake Hall, East Sutton Park, Foston Hall, New Hall, Peterborough, and Send. The charity uses cognitive behavioural approaches, and various other

interventions such as 'expressive arts', mindfulness and emotional freedom technique to support women. See evaluation by Petrillo et al (2019).

Methods

The evaluation research used a mixed-methods approach and included quantitative data collected by RSACC (using impact questionnaires with counselling clients) and qualitative interviews and participatory research sessions carried out by the researchers with women who had engaged with the *Believed Project*. The evaluation took place over two stages. *Stage One* ran from October 2018 – November 2019 and involved undertaking interviews with 10 women and facilitating two participatory workshops with 6 women in total. *Stage Two* ran from January 2020 – March 2020 and involved conducting follow-up interviews with participants from *Stage 1*; with the aim of exploring the long-term impacts of the programme and identifying barriers, if any, to women's ability to sustain improved wellbeing and mental health on her transfer/release/ completing sentence. Qualitative data was coded and then analysed using qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO.

i) Quantitative Data

RSACC has developed several robust measurement tools that the organisation uses nationally to collect quantitative data on the impact of their various interventions on participants, and evaluation questionnaires to measure the effectiveness of sexual violence and domestic abuse disclosure training. The data from these were drawn upon for this report and are presented in relevant sections throughout. 106 survivors completed baseline questionnaires before engaging with *The Believed Project*. Of these, 48 completed a follow-up questionnaire after the intervention.

ii) Qualitative Data

A total of 16 women participated in the qualitative part of the research. Interviews and participatory workshops were recorded using a Dictaphone. Follow up interviews were carried out with 4 women who had completed the counselling programme. Two of these women had remained in custody at HMP Low Newton; one woman had moved on to another prison; and the other released from HMP Low Newton and residing in an approved premises at the time of interview. Their stories highlight the varied journeys women take in and out of prison and emphasise the importance of providing ongoing and individualised specialist support for women once they move on from *The Believed Project*.

Participatory research methods were used in combination with semi-structured interviews, which were designed to explore the impact of the programme of work on participants, and the impact of the programme of work on prison staff's ability to support women and respond appropriately to disclosures of sexual violence and abuse. Two participatory workshops involving 5 women who had engaged with *The Recovery Toolkit* Programme were completed.

iii) Ethics and Data Management

The project was approved by the National Research Council, HMPS and ethical approval was secured through Durham University. The research evaluation was underpinned by HMP Low Newton prison rules and regulations¹⁸ and conducted in accordance with RSACC robust ethical practices and processes in relation to protecting client identities and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. The women who took part in the research are not identified in this report and, in some cases, details have been changed to ensure anonymity and protect their identities. Questions were not asked about their offence(s). Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and given verbal and written information about how the data would be used. Interviews were recorded using an encrypted Dictaphone but women were given the option to not be recorded. Women were also given the opportunity to opt out at any stage of the interview process. All interviews were transcribed and files were stored on password protected folders and saved as encrypted files. Women were informed at the beginning of an interview that they were not being asked to talk about their experiences of sexual violence and abuse. Women were advised at the end of the interview that they could arrange to speak to their counsellor if they felt that this would be helpful. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes and both researchers took part in most of the interviews. Some of the women were interviewed on two or three occasions. Interviews often took place in rooms where they had counselling sessions, and tea and snacks were provided as a way to help women feel relaxed and make the interview feel informal and more like a conversation. Some of the women were already known to the researchers. Both the researchers have previous experience of working with, and carrying out research, with women victims of sexual violence and

abuse, including with women detained in prison, women sex workers, and women with histories of dependent drug use in community settings. Both researchers have undertaken specialist training delivered by RSACC around sexual violence disclosures.

iv) Sampling

A small sample engaged in the qualitative element of the evaluation research, all of whom were white working-class women and ranged in age from 21 to 58 years old. Alongside the relatively small sample size, another limitation of the research design was the sampling technique used. The researchers were reliant on counsellors referring women for interviews which meant that the sampling procedure was purposeful, rather than random. However, one of the benefits of this referral process was that counsellors were able to provide basic information in advance which was invaluable in helping set the right tone at the outset of the interview. Unfortunately, there were no racially minoritised women in the sample, or women who were foreign nationals.

v) Project Advisory Group

The Low Newton Think Tank¹⁹ were invited to act as a research advisory group for *The Believed Project* and played an important role in the research. Low Newton Think Tank is made up of people in prison who have completed a 10-week prison education programme delivered by Durham University called the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme²⁰. Since 2016 the Think Tank has met monthly to engage in a range of criminal justice related projects as well as designing workshops, teaching activities and supporting the delivery of Inside-Out classes. Think Tank members provided valuable input at key stages of *The Believed Project*; helping with the funding bid through letters of support;

feedback on designing and setting up the programme; advising on the methodological tools, including refining the semi-structured interview questions and language used; and designing the participatory workshops.

Throughout the life of the project, the researchers attended meetings with RSACC staff. The purpose was to share learning and refine the design and delivery of the research evaluation through the two stages of data collection.

vi) Impact of COVID-19

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, *The Believed Project* had to finish in mid-March 2020, ahead of schedule. In line with government guidelines at the time the prison was forced to lockdown and significant restrictions were placed on the number of outside agencies entering the prison. This meant that the counselling team had to end counselling support and group work in mid-March. In the weeks prior to the lockdown, counsellors were able to work with the clients they were supporting, to prepare them for the likely ending of counselling and explore other support options with them. The pandemic meant that the planned staff training was also not able to take place. It had already been significantly delayed due to pressure on prison staff capacity and the restrictions put in place due to the pandemic meant there was no opportunity to run the training in March 2020. In terms of the evaluation, further planned follow-up interviews with 2 women who had completed the counselling programme, been released and had returned to their communities, were cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions. We had planned to consult with the Think Tank again in April 2020 to discuss dissemination plans and impact events. Unfortunately, these plans are on hold due to COVID-19 restrictions²¹.

18. HM Prison Service.gov.uk

19. See footnote 5.

20. insideoutcenter.org

21. An original aim of *The Believed Project* was for RSACC to deliver two sexual violence and domestic abuse disclosure training sessions aimed at staff and prison mentors between October 2018 and October 2019, however, due to the many challenges of working within the prison setting and the impacts of the

COVID-19 pandemic, these sessions did not take place. The original plan was for a steering group to be set up at the beginning of the project. The steering group was to be made up of key prison staff, residents, RSACC staff and the Durham University research team. One of the intended roles of the steering group was to advise on the development of the evaluation research and dissemination of the findings. However, for various reasons beyond the control of RSACC a steering group was not established.

Impact data

Women were asked by their counsellor to complete a questionnaire before their first and last counselling session as a way to measure the impact of the intervention from the women's perspective. The broad areas covered were on; women feelings about self and others; 'feeling more in control of their lives'; 'better health and wellbeing'; and outcomes focused on; 'feeling

more able to access further support'; and 'feeling more able to develop and maintain positive relationships'. A total of 106 completed the 'before questionnaire' and 48 completed the 'after questionnaire'. The questionnaire allowed women to assess each criterion from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

The Believed Recovery Toolkit (Participatory Research Sessions)

The Recovery Toolkit is a 12-week group programme for women who have experienced sexual violence and/or domestic abuse²². It is a closed group programme that is delivered by RCEW, and indeed other organisations in the UK, and is ordinarily run in a community setting. Participants are expected to attend sessions every week. The programme is based on a psycho-educational model, which aims to provide women who have experienced sexual violence and/or domestic abuse with the resources to maximise their own potential. Women who attend the group have to have left their abusive relationship. It is common for women to have completed *The Freedom Programme* before participating in *The Recovery Toolkit* programme, but this is not always the case. It ran twice during the two years of the project.

Six women who had engaged in *The Recovery Toolkit* (but not necessarily completed it) engaged in the participatory research sessions. The participatory research sessions lasted approximately 80 minutes and were voluntary. Women were approached by counselling staff and asked if they would be willing to participate in a research workshop. The first session included

two women and took place at the end of the 12-week programme. The second session took place at the beginning of a 12-week programme and included four women. The sessions involved women being invited to work collectively to complete three participatory tools aimed at evaluating the extent to which they felt the programme had met its goals in relation to:

- helping women build self-confidence
- better managing their emotions
- developing assertiveness skills
- setting boundaries and building trust

Women were also asked about the positive and negative aspects of 'working on their recovery' in groups and invited to reflect on what sources of support they felt they would need in the future (after the completion of the programme and/or release from prison/transfer to another prison). The women were guided by the researchers through a series of visual tools using large sheets of flip chart paper, felt tip pens and post-it notes. However, the planned participatory research sessions did not work as effectively as envisaged, primarily due to the groups being too small.

Believed Counselling Programme - Semi-structured interviews with counselling clients

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 women who had completed the 20-week counselling programme. The interviews were voluntary, and women were invited to take part in the evaluation by the counsellors. Interviews were conducted in a range of settings, including in activity rooms, association areas and rooms used for counselling. In two cases interviews were conducted over two sessions, one interview over three sessions. Women were asked a range of questions designed to explore their assessment of the impacts of the counselling intervention on the following:

- Better able to make everyday decisions
- Feel more confident
- More in control of emotions
- Learned any coping skills
- Taking better care of yourself
- Feelings of being more in control of your life
- Develop more positive relationships
- Feel that completing the programme will help you stay out of prison
- Practical issues (when/how/where of counselling)
- Moving on - what support you think you will need now and in the future.

During the introductory stage of each interview participants were asked some background information, for example, the duration of their sentence and previous custodial sentences. Participants were not asked about their offences and were also reminded that the purpose of the interview was not to ask direct questions about their experiences of sexual violence and abuse.

22. This programme was developed by Rockpool but delivered by RSACC (see <https://rockpool.life/the-recovery-toolkit/> and <https://rockpool.life/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Final-Sexual-Violence-Recovery-Toolkit-Evaluation-August-2017.pdf>)

Findings and Recommendations

"I'm a lot more stable and I'm not as depressed as I was... I think I'm more in control of myself and know what I want to do, I'm a lot calmer as well...it was eating away at me, it was rotting me. I didn't tell anybody about it til' I come in here. I've probably spoken more to my counsellor in here than I've ever spoken to me own mother... now it's found somewhere to come out. It was like poisoning me, it really was, it was doing me in. I'm glad it's dealt with, it can be just left now and, you know, I don't have to keep thinking about it constantly"
(Vanessa)

Whilst recognising that the sample of women who participated in in-depth interviews with us was relatively small, this evaluation has revealed that there is significant demand for specialist support for women in prison who have experienced sexual violence and domestic abuse. The women we interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of the counselling programme on their sense of self-worth, feeling in control, confidence, feeling better able to make decisions, and feeling hopeful for the future. Vanessa's account is illustrative of these findings. A number of women told us that, as a consequence of engaging with the *Believed Project*, they had rebuilt relationships with family members and loved ones on the outside. These findings are supported by the impact data collected by the counsellors. In summary, based on women's own reflections of the intervention using this questionnaire, the general picture to emerge from the impact data is extremely positive.

All the women showed positive change in one or more indicators relating to **'feeling more in control of their lives'**; for example, 83% of women strongly agreed that they felt confident after the intervention. This compares with 17% before the counselling commenced. Furthermore, 91% reported that they strongly agreed that they were better able to decide what to do about the sexual violence they had experienced.

All the women showed a positive change in one or more indicators relating to **'better health and wellbeing'**; for example, 66% of women strongly agreed that they felt in control of their emotions after the intervention. This compares with 25% before the counselling commenced. Furthermore, 70% reported that they had coping skills and strategies after the counselling, compared with 38% before. Importantly, 93% of women strongly agreed that they better understood how sexual violence had affected them.

All the women showed a positive change in one or more indicators relating to **'feeling more able to access further support'**; for example, all women agreed that they knew much more about what resources were available to them following the counselling intervention, and 98% felt better able to access these resources.

More than half of women, 61% showed a positive change in one or more indicators relating to **'feeling more able to develop and maintain positive relationships'**. For example, 48% of women agreed that they felt more able to trust people.

Nearly all the women, 98% showed a positive change in one or more indicators relating to **'feeling more able to assert their rights'**. For example, 95% of women felt that they knew what their rights were and what they were entitled to.

Disclosure

As outlined earlier, women in prison are significantly more likely than women in the community to have endured prolonged and multiple experiences of severe sexual violence and abuse throughout their lives. Our interview data revealed that some women don't disclose their experiences of sexual violence and abuse until they are in prison, away from perpetrators and abusive relationships. And perhaps unsurprisingly, there are women in prison who opt not to disclose at all, as one of our participants, Molly put it;

'You'd be surprised how many women in here are like myself and some of them won't even speak up but you hear them like talk, but they won't go to anyone'

Molly told us that she disclosed to a nurse that she had been sexually assaulted on several occasions, prior to coming into prison. Molly felt re-traumatised having to recount the events to two male police officers during a two-hour interview. Describing the event as 'horrific', Molly told us that she was unprepared and felt 'horrible' being asked to go into more and more detail. She was informed by one of the police officers to expect to wait for up to two years to hear anything. She recalled feeling very upset at the time. Molly told us she received no support before or after she gave her statement to the police.

Levels of sexual violence and abuse are much higher in the women's prison population than they are in the community and, like Molly, some women decide to disclose when in custody. We would argue that it is crucial that an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) is located in every women's prison with the purpose of providing women with specialist support and guidance that is tailored to their specific needs. Secondly, and relatedly, it is critical that a trauma-informed approach is embedded within the women's prison estate and that staff training is resourced and a range of sexual violence and domestic abuse related interventions are available to suit individual needs. A key finding of the evaluation is that delivering a trauma-informed counselling intervention comes with a unique set of opportunities and challenges, the details of which we outline overleaf.

Trauma-informed counselling: the importance of a feminist approach

All the women we interviewed spoke at length about the importance of the relationship they had with their counsellor and many drew comparisons with negative experiences they had had with GPs, nurses, mental health and psychology staff in the past and present, both within prison settings and within their communities. Consistency was important – women valued having the same counsellor throughout their programme. They stressed the importance of *‘feeling comfortable’*, being able *‘to connect’* with their counsellor, to develop a *‘human relationship’*, to *‘feel safe’* and feel able to *‘open up’*. Daisy put it this way:

“At first I just broke down, but then like I don’t know, I just jelled with [my counsellor], it just like felt like I was talking to me’ mam...”

Bella explained *“Being able to talk and open up about things without feeling judged”* and Eva expressed, *“I felt really comfortable and started being myself and trusted my worker a lot”*.

Being *‘understood’* and *‘believed’* was highlighted by most of the women we interviewed as key to them feeling positive about the programme. Some women emphasised that this was the first time in their lives that they had felt believed, that their accounts of sexual violence and abuse were accepted and validated. Being believed was a crucial first step towards healing, as Rachel says here.

“Being believed and listened to was something I’ve never had. It helped me to face past demons and move forward.”

And similarly, in this extract here from Kelly:

“It’s the first time in my life that I’ve been believed and it’s the first time I had support for my abuse.”

Women also emphasised that the gender of their counsellor was critical. All the women we interviewed commented in various ways, why it was important to them that their counsellor was a woman. For example, Molly, who had engaged in counselling in the past, suggested that it didn’t work for her because her counsellor was male. Referring to *The Believed Project* having a positive impact, she said that:

“I think because it’s a woman I felt like more relaxed and that, I could open up, we were on the same level, she could see into my eyes, properly.”

Eva talked about the importance to her of engaging with a counsellor *‘who doesn’t just listen’*, but where appropriate and in some cases, will share their own experiences of sexual violence and abuse. Disclosure on the part of counsellors is an important feature of RSACC’s approach and is a unique feature of feminist therapeutic models of counselling²³. For some women, the educational and consciousness-raising aspect of the counselling experience had a powerful impact on their sense of self (Vera-Gray, 2020). We found that for some women this was the first time they had understood their victimhood, that their past relationships were abusive and defined by coercive control. This realisation was significant and hard work for women to work through, but crucial for their healing journeys. Eva illustrates these findings well in the following extract:

“My mum had been in relationships that weren’t healthy... you only know what you see and that’s how I felt, like maybe that’s how relationships should be. Having gone through sexual abuse and having people be like that to you, you don’t value yourself, you don’t think anything of yourself, so when somebody treats you a certain way you think, ‘Oh that’s how it should be’ like. When I started to realise it wasn’t normal it was like a kick to the stomach. It was so breath-taking realising what I’d been through. I’d not realised it and it took somebody like a professional to tell me that it wasn’t normal and then I had to go away and had to sit there and think, you know, how it wasn’t normal, how did I not recognise it?... I let somebody treat me like that and so naïve, so stupid, and that’s why it got me angry because nobody wants to believe that somebody’s really treating them like that. Or to recognise that, you know, to have... to have sex with somebody just because they’re your boyfriend that that’s supposed to happen when no, you can say no. You don’t have to do something... there’s been so many times when I can’t believe that I just allowed stuff to happen because they were my boyfriend... every time I had a session with Believed Project I would go away and I would think and think, and I’d like deeply think into everything... you need to do that to be able to move forwards, because if you can’t do that, analyse yourself and recognise stuff in yourself, then how are you ever going to notice stuff to change?”

Recommendations:

1. Specialist women-centred sexual violence services should be commissioned in prisons across the women’s estate. This should include a specialist counselling service, designed to be long-term and flexible and delivered by experienced counselling staff (who should receive adequate training and ongoing support).

The Believed Project provides a clear and workable model for such a specialist service.

2. i) A specialist women-centred sexual violence service model should be scaled up to include a full-time ISVA based in each women’s prison.

23. It is important to note that RSACC’s counsellors have specialist experience and training in supporting women and use self-disclosure in an ethical and limited ways.

Designated space for counselling

The lack of suitable spaces for counselling sessions within the prison was highlighted by women as a significant problem. For example, like other women we interviewed, Nina had her counselling sessions in an association room which had a shared kitchen;

"it isn't private, people kept walking in and out... it puts you off what you want to say."

Notwithstanding the fact that there is a shortage of suitable meeting rooms on site, it is important to emphasise that RSACC staff and clients would benefit hugely from having a dedicated room for counselling sessions designed in a trauma informed way (see Jewkes, 2018; 2019). Often counselling would take place in a space where prison staff would come and go, or with windows where people could look in. Women who engage in counselling in the prison need privacy, and time, they need to hold their thoughts, some need to learn to cry. Eva talked about her fear of coming out of a counselling session and being seen crying – for her this was showing weakness.

Recommendations:

2. ii) A specialist women-centred sexual violence service model should be scaled up to include **a designated counselling room** designed in a trauma informed way.

Confidentiality and anonymity and the challenges of group work

RSACC uphold privacy, confidentiality and anonymity as cornerstones of their practice. Delivering a counselling intervention in the prison setting poses challenges in this respect. Prison culture, *'where everyone knows your business'*, made it very difficult for some women to engage with *The Believed Project* in privacy and with anonymity. One woman told us that she felt that other women on her wing didn't like to see anyone *'trying to do well'* and *'they would always try and bring you down'*. Daisy describes prison culture in Low Newton in this way,

"there's a lot of bitchiness, there's a lot of fights, do you know what I mean? You can't really have 5 minutes to think."

Eva commented on the fact that it was impossible to participate in the *Believed* counselling programme anonymously. According to Eva, fellow prisoners would;

'see you walking down the wing with a counsellor', or 'have a nose in the room' when they were walking past.

Rose completed the *Recovery Toolkit* programme and explained that hierarchies and conflicts between women sometimes had a negative impact on group dynamics. She also commented that:

"in the agreement that we do at the beginning we say 'everything that is said in the room stays in the room', but you know there are always characters which you think, 'no way, they're not going to do that - they like to gossip and they will gossip'. So that's what makes it quite difficult about a prison environment, you know that whatever you say is going to be broadcasted."

The low retention rate on the *Recovery Toolkit* programme is an indicator of these findings²⁴. It is important to emphasise that some women who completed the counselling programme, and the *Recovery Toolkit* Programme, benefited enormously from the support they received from close friends and mentors. For example, Kelly speaks here about how important it was for her to have support from another woman who was also undertaking group work:

'It's the support that you have from one another...when you go back to your wing and you're left there it's hard because we have so much time to reflect on things, it goes over and over in your head, I mean these sessions were hard and they were exhausting but we supported each other'.

There is an important role for group work in women's prisons as some women find it useful. However, in its current form, the *Recovery Toolkit* does not effectively translate from the community to prison setting. Women's prisons should facilitate peer-led support groups, similar to the peer-support groups that have been set up by women in the community. Women who have completed a counselling programme could be supported to meet at regular intervals if they wish, to explore their collective and individual experiences through, for example, creative writing or craft groups.

Recommendations:

2. iii) A specialist women-centred sexual violence service model should be scaled up to include peer-led support groups established by women who have engaged with the service and;

2. iv) a range of additional alternative and complimentary support, such as creative writing and craft groups.

24. Content that covers the impacts of sexual violence and abuse on children can be too traumatic for women who have had their children removed from them or are dual status prisoners.

Supporting women young women (18-21 years of age) and women on short sentences

It was evident from our research, and from feedback from counsellors, that there is a section of the prison population at HMP Low Newton who are not accessing the *Believed Project* or being referred to the *Believed Project* by prison staff. This is a population that tends to be located in one of two wings, that include predominantly younger women who are accessing few if any programmes or interventions in the prison. They tend to be in and out of prison serving short sentences for low-level offences such as shoplifting²⁵, recalled because of a breach of the conditions of their license, or serving a short sentence for a breach of a court order or on remand. These are women who tend to have limited opportunities to earn enhancements and privileges. They are women considered by prison staff to be more chaotic and often embedded in prison-based drug subcultures. As we know from a small but growing number of studies, short sentences do not reduce re-offending, they actually cause significant harms to women; often leading to a loss of housing and employment, and if mothers, custody of children (see Baldwin and

Epstein, 2017). And yet it is very likely that the majority of these women are victims of sexual violence and abuse and have not received appropriate help or support. It is important, therefore, that the *Believed Project* extend its reach and adapt its approach to reach these women.

Recommendations:

2. v) A specialist women-centred sexual violence service model should be scaled up to include an outreach worker to work with women on short sentences to raise awareness of sexual violence and abuse and make these women aware of the support available through the *Believed Project* and:

2. vi) A specialist women-centred sexual violence service model should be scaled up to develop tailored support for young women during their transition through YOI into adult services.

Moving on

A key aim of *The Believed Project* is to provide women with better signposting on release, for example, through working closely with organisations such as *Through the Gate* and *Changing Lives*, to ensure women are appropriately linked into specialist sexual violence and abuse support in the community when they are released. Based on our follow-up interviews with women who had engaged in the project we found significant gaps in the way women felt supported once released from HMP Low Newton. Of the women we were able to re-interview, one woman had been transferred to another prison, one had been released and was residing in an approved premises, and two women were still in HMP Low Newton²⁶. Our findings reveal that it is vital to support women beyond dealing only with the trauma, and that a broader package of ongoing practical and emotional support is required (see also MoJ, 2018 and Rini and Roth-Katz, 2020). We found that when women are transferred to other prisons, their needs are not being adequately met.

For example, Eva found the transition from a closed prison to an open prison very difficult to cope with emotionally. She described this period as *'overwhelming and it knocked me back'*. Eva said that she would have benefited from being able to contact her *Believed* Counsellor during this period, to feel supported, to feel connected and to not *'backtrack on all the work I'd done'*. She went on to say:

"coming here [open prison] just felt everybody and everything that was in place before had gone and it felt like restarting the whole process again."

There are significant barriers in place for women once they have been released back into the community (see Carlton and Segrave, 2013). For many women, immediate issues take over once they are released, for example, prioritising housing, managing and connecting with family and loved ones, and dealing with financial issues.

25. Just over half of women entering prison in 2021 had received a sentence of less than six months (PRT 2022).

26. Due to COVID and the national local down and the restrictions that followed from March 2020 onwards we were unable to complete our planned follow-up research with women who had been released and had returned.

This feeling of being overwhelmed and feeling lost and unsupported in Eva's account is also echoed by Kelly who was transferred to approved premises in an area many miles away from her hometown. For example, Kelly commented that:

"I'm finding it hard to practice decision making now that I have been released. Inside I was going good, but now that I'm out the reality hits you. I can't make decisions. I'm struggling to be in crowds, never mind make decisions."

A key concern that counselling staff raised during de-briefing meeting was the impact of unexpected transfer or being released part way through a 20-week counselling programme. Women in this situation are especially vulnerable as they have started the process of 'opening up'²⁷. Our data reveals that women in this situation are left with little, if any support.

Both of the women who remained in HMP Low Newton talked positively about the lasting impact of *The Believed Project* on their sense of self and their confidence. Women who remained in the prison felt better supported than women who had been released or transferred. Chloe has remained drug free and progressed in the prison in terms of securing a job she wanted and was looking forward to an impending transfer to an open prison. She had also reconnected with her

Connecting up support

For women who are dependent on drugs and/or alcohol, and/or with histories of self-harm, being able to access prison-based drug treatment programmes or a mental health specialist, in tandem with accessing an intensive sexual violence and abuse counselling programme, was crucial for a positive outcome. On the outside, access to drug treatment programmes and specialist mental health services is extremely difficult for women whose lives are chaotic (and given the chronic cuts to services under austerity). For some women, going into prison means that they can access this much needed support. Some of the women we interviewed had a long history of self-harming and referred to this behaviour as a way to cope with the violence and abuse they had endured over many years (see Walker and Towl, 2016). We found that for these women, engaging in *The Believed Project* had a positive impact on their self-harming behaviours. Stacey told us that she had

family and saw them regularly, which for Chloe was the most important development for her. She considered these positive steps could only have been made because of her engagement with *The Believed Project*. Reflecting back on the counselling programme a year on, Chloe said;

"I was going to the Believed Project every fortnight and I was that little bit stronger each time. I can't go back to how I was. I have learned how to cope with what's happened. Obviously, it's a thing of my past, it's something that I can't change but I need to move on from it and I am."

This is an area of work that would benefit from further research (including following up the journeys of a larger sample of women who have completed *The Believed* counselling intervention.

Recommendations:

2. vii) A specialist women-centred sexual violence service model should be scaled up to include an **outreach worker to engage in pathway planning to support women who are transferred to approved premises and other prisons**. Additionally, their role should be to **support the transition of women upon release back into the community and into community-based VAWG services**.

always blamed herself for what had happened but that the counselling sessions had helped her believe for the first time that it wasn't her fault. She explained that, as a direct consequence of engaging with the counselling programme, she had stopped self-harming, in her words:

"I have stopped blaming myself, I've stopped self-harming, you know what I mean, I've stopped taking overdoses, I've stopped trying to hang myself... I've like turned my life around, you know what I mean... It's like I've grown up a lot because of [the counsellor] and the Believed Counselling, I've grown up a lot, you know what I mean."

27. In year two- a booklet was produced for women in this situation with details of support etc.

Vanessa explained that while she continued to self-harm after most counselling sessions, she didn't cut 'as often', 'as deep' or 'as hard'. She also explained that for her, self-harm was no longer about punishing herself, it was more about 'taking control'.

For some women, drugs such as crack cocaine and heroin are used as a way to numb the trauma caused by sexual violence and abuse, in the words of Daisy;

"drugs are used for a head change, you don't address the problem, you're not ready to address the problem or strong enough to address the problem, so you keep using drugs."

In this longer extract Chloe provides more context and highlights how crucial it was for her to address her dependency on heroin and engage in sexual violence and abuse counselling simultaneously:

"Before I came into prison, I was a bad drug taker, so when I started the Believed Project I was just focused on wanting to get out on bail, wanting to get back to drugs. But then each

week as my counselling progressed, I sort of was talking about what happened to me more and opening up and thinking, if I get out I won't take drugs. Then I didn't get out and I was like... I wouldn't go back to drugs if I had got out like... whatever I do now. And then by the end of the counselling I was like, 'Do you know, I am such a changed person, I'd never, ever touch drugs again'. I've got all me family back, I've worked hard to get them back, I've worked hard to get on the best wing in the prison, get the best jobs, being so trusted to go out and be a 'listener', be a PID worker, so I have worked hard in my 9 months in here."

Recommendation:

3. The service (and team) should be embedded within a multi-agency partnership structure alongside Drug, Alcohol and Recovery Team (DART), mental health and family support workers. Within this framework:

3. i) where appropriate, a hold should be placed on women engaging with the service until they have completed their counselling programme.

"I don't think anybody's ever ready for it, but I knew I needed to do it. I had to do it to be able to move forward because I don't want to get out of prison and then have to keep re-living that and thinking, 'Oh I should have done this, I should have done that'. I would rather have took the chance of doing it, go through the emotion and whatever else came with it, you know, to then not do it at all. Because at least now I know that I have done it and I think no matter whatever I do in life, like courses, I know it's going to bring something to me to... to maybe see things differently, you know, and that's what the Believed Project has done."

Women feeling ready and in control

All the women we interviewed talked about the importance of 'feeling ready' as a crucial starting point on their recovery journey with *The Believed Project*. Many talked about their desire to 'get myself sorted out before leaving'. Most of the women we interviewed talked about their experience of RSACC counselling as representing the first time in their lives that they had 'ever opened up their wounds' and had spoken about their experiences of sexual violence and abuse. All the women described the counselling they received as being incredibly 'difficult', 'challenging', and at times, 'a very painful process' because of engaging with such deep-seated trauma. However, when women were asked to reflect back on their experience of counselling, they spoke in highly positive ways about the various positive impacts on them. This extract from Eva is illustrative of this latter point:

Daisy, who has been in and out of prison for nearly two decades recalled that, 'every time a judge sent me to jail he said, 'she'll benefit from counselling'. Daisy had never been able to access counselling prior to 2018. When she returned to HMP Low Newton she was told about *The Believed Project* by a mental health worker. She went on to say, "I was up for it. I was ready, I didn't know what I'd get out of it, no, but I was up for it definitely." Daisy went on to complete the 20-week *Believed* counselling programme and described its impact on her in this way:

"It's helped me let go of a lot of anger, I had no self-confidence... Now I think that I can work, like get a job and give that a go, I can do that just as good as anybody else. Where before I used to think 'Oh, what's the point?' Yeah, I'm not blaming anyone anymore. I've just come to realise that if I let that eat me up I'm never going to get further in life, so no, this is why I want to go to Askham [open conditions], so I can get a job, get my own place and not going out to hostels. I have to work for it myself. [...] I think you'll find if I had it (counselling) in my early 20s I wouldn't have been coming back. I'm not coming back to this place."

All the women we interviewed talked positively, at length, and in various ways about the impact the counselling programme had had on their sense of self worth. Some women referred to feeling more confident and stronger as a result of completing the counselling programme, for example, one woman talked about volunteering for PID (Prison Information Desk) work, something she would not have felt confident doing in the past. Some women talked about feeling better able to make everyday decisions, for example, writing letters to solicitors and deciding to make contact with family members. Bella explained that she had recently been involved in a court case relating to contact with her children. She explained that she felt more in control of the process than she had ever done before. She had also learned to 'open up' with social workers for the first time which, according to Bella, meant that access to on-going support on the outside would be vastly improved.

However, some women told us that they found it difficult to put into practice some of the skills and techniques they had learned, especially those that had been covered during group work. For instance, Kelly told us that she was unable to develop a sense of 'feeling in control' in an environment designed to control them. Kelly found it difficult to practice assertive skills, especially with prison officers, for fear of reprimands or withdrawal of privileges. In this sense, relationships in prison can be experienced as replicating experiences of coercive control in previous relationships.

The prison regime is highly structured, and all the women we interviewed found this to be an important factor when it came to their commitment to the counselling programme. The high completion rates for the counselling programme are testament to this finding. Some women told us that they had 'failed' at counselling on the outside whilst in their communities, because they couldn't stick to a weekly programme (often not being in the right emotional space or practically able to), or they were prevented from doing so because of problem drug and alcohol use, or by violent and controlling partners. Women benefited from being able to select the day and time of their counselling sessions. Many women we interviewed opted for a morning session on a Monday or Tuesday. This was so that they would avoid having to process very difficult issues over the weekend during which there is less support available and they spend more time in their cells, as opposed to preoccupied with work commitments or education. Women receiving specialist sexual violence counselling must feel in control of the intervention they receive if it is to work. It is vital that participation in the *Believed Project* is voluntary.

Recommendation:

3. ii) engagement in a specialist sexual violence service by women should be **voluntary and not mandated as part of their sentence planning**.

Supporting racially minoritised women

Despite the evident success of the *Believed Project*, there remains important developmental work to undertake. In particular, extending its reach, including through adapting its approach, to women who predominantly did not engage with the project; notably, racially minoritised women, including women who belong to Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities. Of the 201 women who engaged with the *Believed Project*, just three women identified as Black, Asian, or minority ethnic. This represents just over 1% of the prison population at HMP Low Newton. However, although lower than the national average of racially minoritised women in the prison population in England, which is just under 20% (PRT 2019), the percentage in Low Newton is just over 8%²⁸. A significant number are foreign nationals, many are known to have been coerced or trafficked into offending, and the majority do not speak or read English. Supporting women in prison whose first language is not English and are from culturally diverse backgrounds present challenges for prison-based interventions such as the *Believed Project*. For example, we know from research on Muslim women in prison that cultural codes about family 'honour' and shame can prevent them from speaking up about sexual and domestic violence and seeking help (See Muslim Hands, 2018; Bunsy and Ahmed, 2014). Furthermore, a small but growing body of research focusing on racially minoritised women's experiences of prisons in England²⁹ highlight how racism and discrimination is endemic within the prison system (IMB and Criminal Justice Alliance report, *Towards Race Equality* report, 2022; see also Lammy Review, 2007).

Moving forward, it is important for interventions like the *Believed Project*, to develop proactive approaches that take account of different cultural, faith and religious backgrounds and the structural inequalities that racially minoritised women experience in prison. The counsellors who facilitated the project are white British and reported both language and cultural barriers. A positive step forward might be to learn from black-centred services for women in the area of sexual violence and domestic abuse within community settings. For example, the Angelou Centre³⁰, based in Newcastle, could provide an invaluable source of training, expertise, and advice (see also Sistah Space³¹, Southall Black Sisters³² Imkaan³³).

Recommendations:

4. Commissioning of further research and service development work into the needs of racially minoritised women detained in prison who have experienced sexual violence and abuse. This should include:

4. i) Meaningful consultation with specialist VAWG organisations that work with racially minoritised women to ensure that the establishment of prison specialist sexual violence support is attuned to, and meets the needs of racially minoritised women.

4. ii) actively employing counsellors and support workers from diverse backgrounds, particularly racially minoritised groups.

4. iii) legal and culturally specific training for the sexual violence service counsellors and support workers to be delivered by specialist organisations that support racially minoritised women.

4. iv) providing more accessible information about sexual violence and abuse and the specialist service that reflect cultural diversity and overcome language barriers.

Lock-up and support for women outside of the counselling room

Some women found it very difficult to be locked up at night following a counselling session that they had found especially painful. Some found it difficult at night because they were sharing a cell with someone they didn't know very well. One woman told us that the hardest times for her were during the night after a counselling session because she was not allowed to have a light on and had flashbacks. However, it is also important to recognise that some women found being locked up alone at night a positive feature in that it provided them with space and privacy to reflect and process, however hard this might be, as Bella reveals here:

"I like having my own space, especially doing stuff like this... my counsellor actually arranged it, so I didn't have to share, which was really a big thing for me. Early on I was sharing a cell and going back and processing it and stuff. It was quite hard. Because like obviously like you've got someone else in there doing what they're doing and you're trying to like figure things out in your head... the counselling for me brought flashbacks and stuff on. So, it was quite awkward at first."

Women commented at length and in various ways about the need for support beyond the counselling room. Women talked about how important it was for *all* prison staff to have knowledge and understanding of trauma and how it can impact on women who have experienced sexual violence and abuse. This is revealed here in this extract from an interview with Stacey:

"When I was having hard counselling session, my counsellor would feed back to my Offender Supervisor and the wing staff to give me some extra support and that, which was like massive. But then you had like different staff who come on the wing and they don't understand about trauma work and everything about counselling and the severity of what we've been through. The prison side they don't understand what trauma is because they've never dealt with it before."

Referring to (some) prison staff, Stacey went on to say:

"Prison staff, officers, they've had no training, they have no awareness training on trauma work or anything. And that was like... like a kick in the teeth in a way because they didn't understand our coping mechanisms. And that was a downfall of it..."

Women need various forms of emotional and practical support following their counselling sessions that is currently not being met. It is important, therefore, to deliver trauma-informed training (with an emphasis on sexual violence and abuse) to *all* prison staff and women detained in prison in peer-support roles. This would provide women who are undertaking *The Believed Project*, with a more appropriate response and referral system, and a network of support outside of the counselling room. It would also better support women who disclose sexual violence and abuse while inside prison.

Recommendations:

5. Roll out of trauma-informed training (with an emphasis on sexual violence and abuse) to all prison staff (especially personal officers) and women detained in prison in peer-support roles, such as mentors, Prison Information Desk workers and listeners to be delivered by specialist VAWG workers.

28. In February 2022, out of a total population of 248 women, 227 identified as white British. The remaining 21 women belonged to Black, Asian or other racially minoritised groups; 8 were foreign nationals.

29. See Angela Charles (OU) work on Black women's experiences of prison and Monica Thomas' (Cardiff) research on the black mothers in prison. See Sinem Bozkurt's (Westminster) work on the psychological and emotional experiences of racially minoritised mothers in prison and post-release.

30. <https://angelou-centre.org.uk>

31. <https://www.sistahspace.org>

32. <https://southallblack SISTERS.org.uk/>

33. <https://www.imkaan.org.uk>

Concluding Remarks

This evaluation has found that there is a pressing need for specialist women-centred sexual violence services to be located in prisons across the women's estate. This should include a specialist counselling service, like *The Believed Project*, designed to be long-term, flexible and delivered by experienced counselling staff. However, it is important to stress that interventions like counselling do not address systemic gender inequalities and power arrangements that define the prison system (Davies, 2003). Nor do they tackle the deficit in our communities brought about by

austerity measures and public spending cuts which have created an increasingly precarious VAWG sector. What is needed, we would argue, is a commitment to supporting vulnerable women in their own communities, to keep them safe and prevent them from entering prison in the first place. To this end, we fully support the MOJ Female Offender Strategy 2018 in its recommendation to redirect resources to Women's Centres and other specialist women-centered services. Specialist sexual violence support is crucial in women's prisons, but it is also crucial in our communities.

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The Believed Project

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