

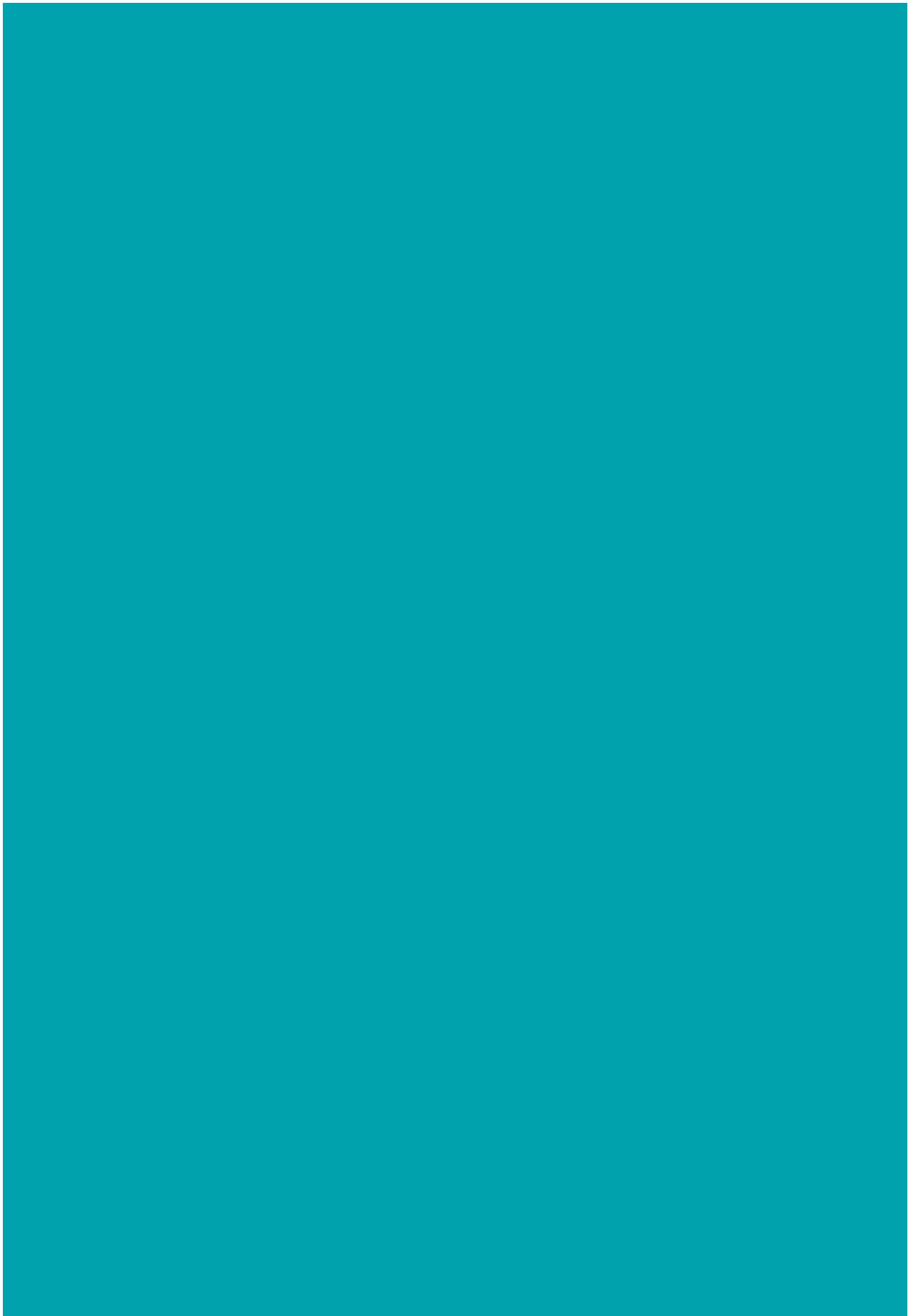


# Trauma is everyone's business:

An exploration of the challenges and opportunities for Trauma-Informed Practice amongst female populations within custodial settings

By Lisa Thomson, July 2018







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# Background

‘Trauma is everyone’s business.’ This is the viewpoint currently being posited by the Scottish Government, most notably within their recently published document ‘Transforming Psychological Trauma: A Knowledge and Skills Framework for the Scottish Workforce.’ Published in partnership with the NHS, this document outlines the essential knowledge and skills that all individuals within the Scottish workforce, regardless of role or seniority, should possess in order to improve the identification of trauma symptomatology amongst the wider population. In doing so it is hoped that this will support the provision of effective and timely interventions to individuals most in need.

Despite a perceptible shift in trauma awareness and understanding beginning to occur amongst the general population of Scotland, supported by an increased demand for trauma informed training amongst professionals, limitations to this progress seemingly persist most specifically when considering compound instances of trauma and bereavement which are often experienced as part of childhood development.

Research undertaken by Fauth et al. (2009) found that 3.5% of UK children aged 5-16 years had experienced the death of a parent or sibling while 6.3% reported experiencing the

death of a close friend. Within this research they highlighted the relationship between bereavement and other adverse childhood experiences with bereaved children found to be more likely to live in unmarried, economically inactive households with parents affected by serious mental or physical illnesses in comparison to children unaffected by bereavement. Additionally, “children who had experienced the death of a parent/sibling were almost three-and-a-half times as likely as children who experienced the death of a friend, and six times more likely than children who experienced neither to have been looked after at some point.” (Fauth et al., 2009:26).

Further differences were also highlighted, with the parents of bereaved children identified as more likely to have made contact with mental health professionals due to concerns about their child’s emotions, behaviours or concentration when compared to children unaffected by bereavement. Furthermore, children bereaved of a parent or sibling were reported as having lower social aptitudes and greater difficulty socialising in comparison to non-bereaved children while children who experienced the death of a friend were found to be more likely to display behavioural difficulties, engage in troublesome acts, use substances and experience exclusions from school.







In exploration of bereavement experiences amongst young men involved in offending behaviour research undertaken by Vaswani (2014) strikingly found that 90% of young males held within custodial settings have experienced bereavements with 77% found to have experienced traumatic bereavements and 67% found to have experienced four or more deaths prior to the age of 20.

In response to the publication of this research by Vaswani (2014), the Scottish Prison Service, in partnership with the Robertson's Trust, commissioned Barnardo's Scotland to develop a trauma, bereavement and loss service aimed at supporting young men within HMYOI Polmont explore childhood experiences, increase self-awareness and reduce trauma symptomatology through the provision of psychoeducational and therapeutic approaches. Additionally, a small sum of funding was allocated to support the delivery of trauma, bereavement and loss-informed training to staff employed across a range of roles and departments within HMYOI Polmont.

The impact and effectiveness of this intervention, latterly known as the Here and Now Service, was examined by the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice and the University of Strathclyde within the paper 'Our Lives with

Others: An evaluation of trauma, bereavement and loss developments at HMYOI Polmont' (Vaswani et al. 2016) which highlighted the presence of dissociation and negative emotions married with an abundance of avoidant coping strategies within the population of HMYOI Polmont.

Following engagement with the Here and Now Service, 95% of clients showed a reduction in trauma symptomatology with positive improvements being noted in terms of thinking styles, emotional awareness and management of violent thoughts and actions. During individual interviews with the researchers, clients overwhelming described positive experiences with the Here and Now Service with clients highlighting the benefits of gaining new knowledge, understanding or skills to help them begin to process or live with trauma/bereavement experiences. Participants frequently reporting feelings of happiness and relief at being able to unburden themselves of troubles and worries which they had been carrying for a number of years.' (Vaswani et al., 2016)

Following the successful implementation of the Here and Now Service amongst the male population of HMYOI Polmont further funding was obtained in 2017 to expand this service to the female population following their transfer to HMYOI Polmont from HMP Cornton Vale. Despite the success of this service amongst the male population, practitioners were conscious that this intervention was not directly transferrable to the female population due to differing needs specifically in respect of gender, age, experiences, impact and resilience. As such, significant consideration and planning, drawing on existing research and consultation with professionals and females within custodial estates, was undertaken by Here and Now practitioners in order to inform service development prior to implementation.

Limited research exploring trauma and bereavement experiences of females within custodial estates exists. However, community based research indicates that the prevalence of trauma and bereavement experiences is significant amongst female populations and in many cases is significantly higher when compared to experiences amongst male populations. Transforming Psychological Trauma: A Knowledge and Skills Framework for the Scottish Workforce, cites research that estimates that 20% of women experience domestic abuse (Scottish Partnership on Domestic Abuse, 2000) while 75% of women and men attending substance misuse services report abuse and trauma in their lives (WHO, 2002). Additionally, 60% of women and 50% of men within inpatient mental health services report being sexually or physically abused in childhood (Read et al., 2005) while studies within prisons have found that 94% of individuals report a history of trauma (Komarovskaya et al., 2011).

In order to explore the presence, prevalence and impact of trauma and bereavement experiences amongst female populations within custodial settings a small number of focus groups comprising females held within HMYOI Polmont and the staff responsible for their care were undertaken by Here and Now practitioners. In total four focus groups were undertaken: three groups comprising a total of 14 females aged between 23 and 63 from both the remand and convicted population and one focus group comprising eight members of staff from both HMYOI Polmont and those that had transferred from HMP Cornton Vale. A subsequent individual interview with a front line manager for the female population was also undertaken by Here and Now practitioners.

During focus group discussions service needs, experiences and aspirations were explored with group participants being viewed as experts of self and environment. Information gathered from these sessions was subsequently used to guide the design and delivery of the Here and Now Service ensuring it was targeted to the needs identified as significant within the female population and supported positive collaboration with SPS staff.

This paper provides an overview of the key themes emerging from these focus groups, as well as drawing upon professional experiences, in order to highlight some of the challenges and opportunities identified during the development phase of a trauma-informed intervention for the female custodial population. It is hoped that the experiences and opinions presented within this paper will be of relevance to and support other establishments, organisations and professionals in the implementation of trauma-informed care amongst vulnerable female populations.



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# Challenges Involved in the Implementation of Trauma-Informed Practice Amongst Female Populations Within Custodial Settings

## Prevalence of Trauma and Bereavement Experiences and Availability of Community Supports

The prevalence of trauma and bereavement experiences amongst females held within custodial settings was described as 'high' or 'significant' amongst all focus group participants with 30% of females interviewed disclosing personal experiences of multiple unexpected or traumatic bereavements. Additionally, exposure to further traumatic experiences were reported by individuals

within all focus groups with experiences of chaotic childhoods, mental and physical abuse; often in the form of domestic violence, exceptionally high levels of sexual abuse, post-natal depression and trauma experienced as a result of engagement in offending behaviour being identified as commonalities.

During focus group discussions individuals affected by experiences of trauma, bereavement or loss overwhelmingly described feeling unsupported within their communities predominantly due to a perceived lack of professional awareness or understanding coupled with a lack of appropriate trauma-informed services within community settings.





**In instances where trauma-informed community services were available, females overwhelming described negative experiences with a shared sense that trauma focused community services were unsympathetic to the needs and situations of their clients with recurrent accounts of support being withdrawn following failed attendance at a single appointment with no alternative support being identified. Additionally, extensive waiting lists, reportedly as long as nine months in some cases, were identified as a being a further significant barrier to engagement with support.**

Despite various statutory and voluntary services being available to individuals across Scotland nationwide discrepancies seemingly exist most significantly felt within rural areas or communities served by 3rd sector organisations where funding is often managed on an annual basis. Consequently, the provision of poor or inappropriate trauma-informed community support was widely identified by female focus group participants as being a significant driver for female offending

due to prison being viewed by individuals as providing a source of stability in which support services would be better and more readily available in comparison to community settings.

## **Population Needs and the Challenges of Mixed Populations**

The treatment of females within the Criminal Justice System appears to differ from that of males specifically in relation to sentencing. In comparison to males, females predominantly receive shorter custodial sentences in addition to facing an increased likelihood of being held on remand to avoid a failed court appearance.

This pattern of short term custodial sentencing, which often sees females being held in custody for as little as 7 days before being liberated from court, not only has a significant impact upon an individual's community standing, most notably with regards to housing, employment, childcare or benefits claims but additionally places significant strain upon the prison system and its ability to provide effective, appropriate and timely support to individual's within its care.



**During focus group discussions one female participant eloquently described her remand experience and the sense of fearfulness this evoked around liberation heightened by her inability to engage with necessary support services due to her limited period within custody. This situation was described as promoting not only feelings of helplessness and frustration in self but as permeating across the staff group who described feeling disheartened at being unable to provide adequate and effective support in such time-limited circumstances.**

Staff within HMYOI Polmont described the female population being 'very needy', expressing a belief that females frequently engage in manipulative behaviours in order to aid problem solving and obtain favourable outcomes within the establishment. Staff noted that this behaviour, often involving a wide range of professionals, puts significant strain not only on individual staff members and relationships but, by proxy, on all available support services and interventions due to the overwhelming demand for support.

Management noted that this strain is further influenced by polar trends frequently seen within the female population. Historically, staff described custodial estates such as HMP Cornton Vale predominantly housing young females under the age of 21 however noted that in recent years this trend appeared to have reversed with the majority of the female population within HMYOI Polmont currently

comprising individuals between the ages of 30 and 50 with fewer than 10 females under the age of 21 currently within the estate as of May 2018.

The challenges of engaging with mixed populations, specifically in relation to the identification of need, was highlighted by staff who described older females as very open with regards to disclosure and support seeking in comparison to females under the age of 21 who were described by staff as closed and avoidant of support. The prevalence of residential backgrounds amongst the younger population was highlighted by staff with consideration given to the potential impact of this upon behaviour, attachments and the ability to form trusting relationships; a component identified by staff as being vital for positive engagement with support.

Difficulties in respect of the provision of custodial and throughcare support to mixed populations was further identified as problematic with it being reported that Third Sector organisations are often prohibited from providing support to large proportions of the female population due to funding constraints influenced by gender, geography and age. It was noted that these constraints frequently result in widespread feelings of exclusion and marginalisation most often experienced amongst older females within custodial estates.

Whilst a number of trauma-informed services are available to all females within HMYOI Polmont, due to the level of need within the population, extensive waiting lists for these services exist.



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## A Medicalised Approach to Support

Following the arrival of female prisoners to HMYOI Polmont staff described struggling to manage the myriad of needs within the population noting that this, coupled with a lack of training around trauma, bereavement and loss, had resulted in staff becoming heavily reliant upon the NHS and mental health teams for direct intervention and the management of onward referrals.

As a result of this dependency, staff described the NHS becoming overwhelmed and expressed the belief that this demand, coupled with limited resources, often resulted in individuals most at need being missed or overlooked by medical professionals, in the midst of unsuitable or inappropriate requests for support by females hoping to gain attention or increased movement within the prison estate.

This challenge appeared most significant in relation to the diagnosis of post-natal depression (PND) which was identified by focus group participants as common amongst females in custody. Staff expressed a belief that the presence of PND was frequently missed, ignored or minimised by health care professionals resulting in challenges for both the females affected and the staff responsible for their care due to their needs going unmet and untreated.

**Another trend highlighted by female focus group participants as being significant was the tendency for individuals to be diagnosed as mentally ill and treated with medication as opposed to being recognised as traumatised or grieving. Females expressed significant frustrations at this perceived 'labelling', which was reported as occurring within both community and custodial settings. They also expressed the belief that this, coupled with insufficient access to therapeutic support or counselling, regularly resulted in females turning to the use of illicit substances as a means of emotional management and escape, in turn often resulting in dependency, addiction and a myriad of further difficulties.**

Staff described substance misuse as a significant challenge within the female population noting that peer relationships within custodial settings often appear to be influenced by substances and manipulated by those seeking access to substances. Staff further expressed a belief that some females actually develop drug dependencies within custodial settings due to the high prevalence of use amongst the population as a whole.

Female focus group participants agreed with staff perceptions, highlighting the challenges involved in exposure to individuals experiencing differing stages of detox and withdrawal. This was perceived as particularly problematic amongst convicted females who described themselves feeling static within an ever shifting population. It was noted that this constant shift promoted significant challenges and regularly acted as a hindrance to an individual's positive progress and state of mind with a number of females admitting that this often led to engagement in negative behaviours as a means of coping.

## The Employment of Self Harm as a Coping Strategy

The prominence of self-harm as a coping strategy for the management of trauma experiences was widely acknowledged amongst all focus group participants with instances of self-mutilation and cutting, refusal of food, drug seeking behaviour and the avoidance of contact with peers and professionals identified as the strategies most commonly employed by females during times of need or uncertainty.

Self-harming behaviour was generally viewed amongst staff as being problematic and time consuming, with younger females in particular perceived as challenging due to their tendency to engage in, what was described by staff as, 'attention seeking' and 'competitive self-harming.' Fire setting was described as increasingly common amongst this group with staff highlighting the risks of this behaviour, not only to the individual female involved, but also to staff responding and the prison estate as a whole.

Despite the frequency and intensity of self-harming behaviour amongst females within custodial estates, staff predominantly viewed self-harm as a coping strategy as opposed to a serious threat to life, noting that in many



instances self-harm was subsequently tolerated and allowed to continue within female custodial environments. Females expressed the feeling that their self-harming behaviour often went unnoticed or unchecked by staff, with a substantial number of individuals reporting a reliance upon negative coping strategies, including self-harm, due to a lack of knowledge and understanding about their own needs, an inability to identify or employ alternatives and a general feeling of uncertainty with regards to where, how and from whom to seek support.

## **Custodial Experiences of Support and Engagement with Staff**

Females in custody expressed the belief that there was little understanding of the myriad of difficulties experienced by individuals within the female population, and described the subsequent provision of support services within the custodial estate as poor. This sense of disappointment was further emphasised by females who widely described themselves feeling marginalised and 'like an afterthought' due to placement within establishments perceived as ill equipped to meet their needs due to a lack of recognition amongst professionals of the differing needs of females in comparison to males within custodial estates.

On the whole, females described staff responses within custody as poor, with individuals recanting experiences which made them feel irrelevant, unimportant, inconvenient or dismissed during times of need. As a result of these encounters, the majority of females interviewed described experiencing a sense of discomfort in seeking further support from staff often choosing instead to suffer in silence or engage in harmful behaviour as a means of coping.

A lack of positive relationships, coupled with the absence of trust, between staff and females within custodial estates was widely acknowledged amongst all focus group participants as creating barriers between the two populations, exacerbating feelings of discomfort amongst individuals and further hampering staff's ability to identify need and provide appropriate support where required.

In order to improve this the need for further training for all professionals, specifically

within the field of trauma, bereavement and loss, was identified consistently across all focus groups in addition to various changes to the way in which females are viewed and treated in general within Criminal Justice Systems and custodial estates.

**Trauma-informed training was previously provided by Here and Now practitioners to over 200 professionals across a range of roles within HMYOI Polmont during the initial stages of funding and intervention in 2015. This training was very positively received with 96% of attendees stating they would recommend the training to a colleague. Following attendance at the training there were statistically significant increases in participants' self-reported understanding of trauma, bereavement and loss; their ability to acknowledge and respond to trauma, bereavement and loss, and in understanding different attachment styles (Vaswani et al, 2016). In the months succeeding this training there was a notable increase in the number of referrals to the Here and Now service. This, coupled with requests to undertake consultancy from staff keen to put their new learning into practice supporting individuals within their care, further highlights the benefits of this training.**

Despite the success of this training, difficulties surrounding staff availability and attendance have hindered delivery of further training resulting in gaps within the workforce that most prominent amongst new recruits and professionals who have transferred to HMYOI Polmont from other estates. Staff interviewed as part of the focus groups described feeling unsupported with regards to trauma, bereavement and loss approaches with a cohort of staff expressing a desire to receive practical training on the effective support, guidance and management of females affected by challenging experiences highlighting that the appetite for further training within this cohort exists.

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# Opportunities for the Implementation of Trauma-Informed Practice Amongst Female Populations

In order to improve experiences for females involved in offending behaviour, and to provide greater opportunities for appropriate engagement with necessary support services, trauma, bereavement and loss should be included in assessments undertaken by community justice professionals prior to sentencing in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of individual's personal experiences and drivers for behaviour. This approach, if undertaken in a sensitive and structured fashion, will help to identify individuals who may offend as a consequence of unresolved bereavement or trauma symptomatology. Subsequently this will allow the use of tailored community disposals including counselling, substance misuse programmes, education and cognitive-behavioural techniques most commonly employed as part of diversionary work. During evaluations of diversionary work Barry (2000) found that individuals involved in diversion programmes almost unanimously agreed that the experience had been helpful in resolving their problems, reducing their risk of reoffending and accessing appropriate supports, further supporting this argument for greater consideration amongst female populations.

Whilst keeping larger numbers of females out of custody will require increased financial resources within community settings these costs should be matched by a fall in custodial costs subsequently allowing custodial estates to target their resources on more intensive services best tailored to addressing the needs of those within their population.

In cases where placement within a custodial estate is necessary for females, individuals involved in focus group discussions predominantly welcomed the introduction of smaller community based prisons recently proposed by the Scottish Government, expressing a belief that these facilities will

greatly support reintegration and reduce recidivism through greater provision of support and increased community access for individuals not currently available to females within custodial estates.

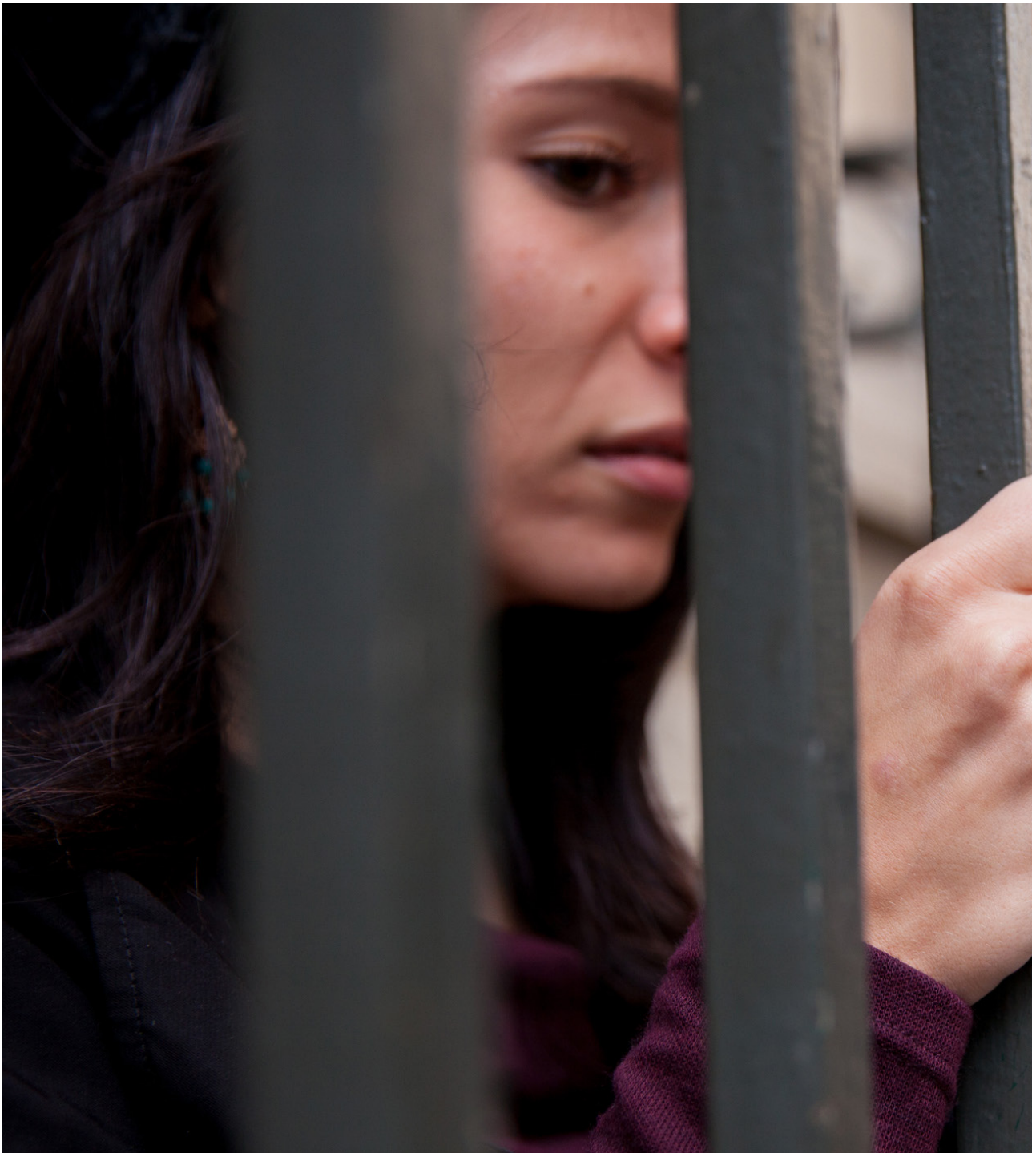
## Improvements to Training and Community Services

In order to further support the implementation of trauma informed practice amongst female populations further training, specifically focusing on raising professionals awareness and identification of bereavement and trauma symptomatology is paramount in order to promote change and support the implementation of early intervention amongst female populations involved in offending behaviour.

**Moving forward, services aimed at supporting females affected by experiences of trauma, bereavement or loss should be targeted and tailored with clients being viewed as individuals and the myriad of difficulties they may have experienced being noticed and acknowledged by professionals in order to explore how these experiences may impact the individuals and potentially hinder their engagement with services. This will subsequently allow clients and professionals to work collaboratively to minimise risk, increase engagement and support positive progression.**

Additionally, consideration should be given to the development of improved communication and information sharing practices between community and custodial estates specifically around significant events or interventions previously undertaken. Whilst it is paramount that information is shared securely and





confidentially, greater communication will allow for more effective case management and streamlining of services supporting a reduction in the number professionals in each individual case subsequently minimising the risk of re-traumatisation through the avoidance of repetitive re-telling of experience. Furthermore, this approach will provide a sense of stability, familiarity and progression for individuals through the continuum of work with a trusted professional.

Aspirationally, the need for interventions to be effective and available in a timely fashion was highlighted by females within HMYOI Polmont as being the optimum goal for trauma-informed services with the need for support to feel safe and comfortable as well as providing a sense of progression being identified as pivotal for success amongst female populations.

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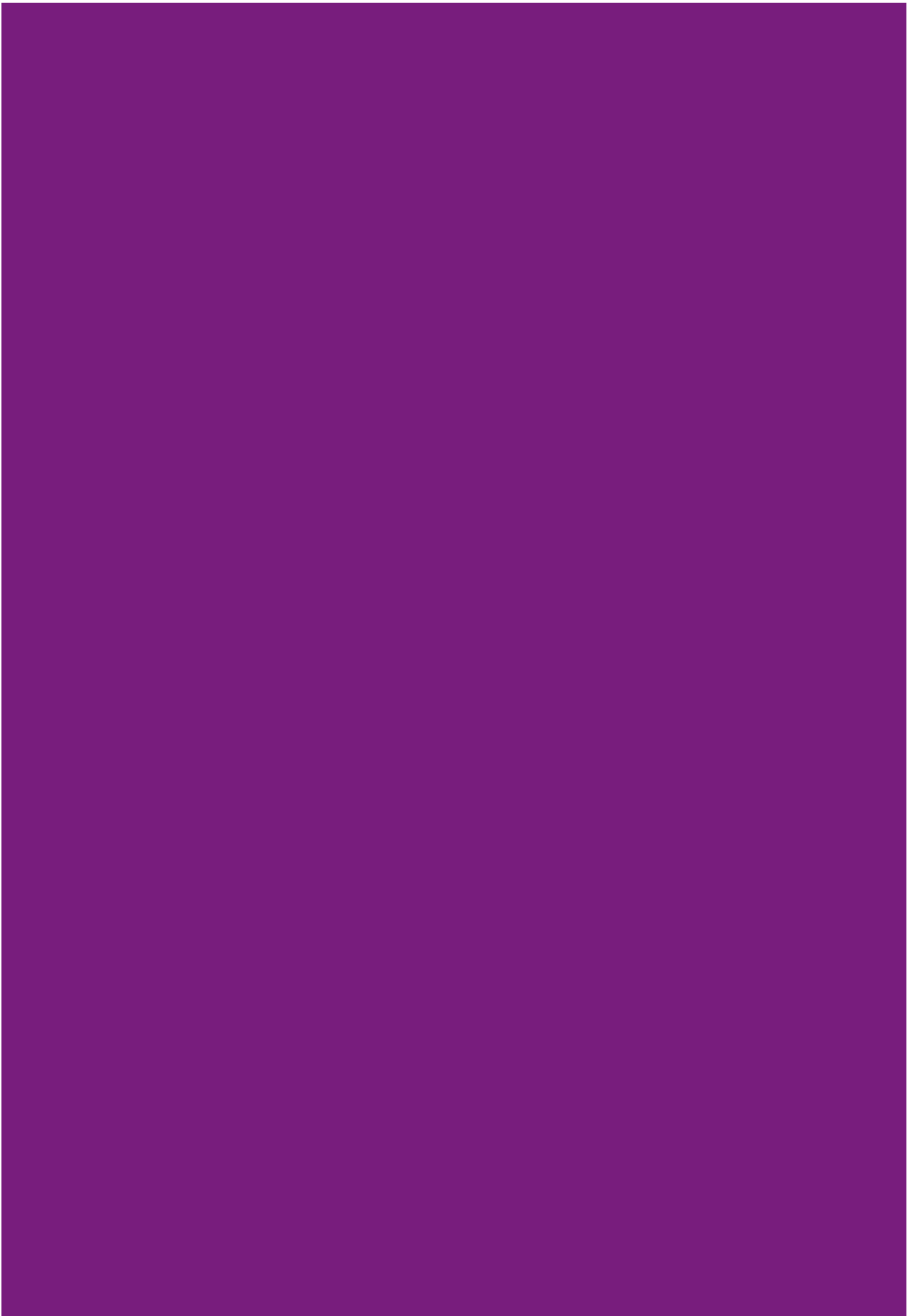
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