



# Alternative Paths: Diversion, Prevention, and Police Discretion Handout

**ADVANCE**TALK

Unpacking the  
Intersection of  
Domestic Abuse and  
the Criminal System

## Introduction

The challenges facing the criminal justice system are numerous and complex, but they can each be mitigated through early intervention and support from expert services such as Advance. The prison capacity crisis warranted a quick response; we now have an opportunity to implement long-term change.

## The Challenges

### Women in contact with the criminal justice system

Women entering custody disproportionately experience issues with their accommodation, their relationships with their children, decline in mental health, substance use, suicidal ideation and experience of domestic abuse.

→ **Over 70% of women supported by Advance's Criminal Justice services experience domestic abuse and we know that experiences of abuse and control can influence a woman's offending.**

Women are likely to receive short custodial sentences. This, coupled with capacity crises within our prison and probation services, means that they are left without adequate support and become trapped in a cycle of offending.

Further disparities exist when looking at the ethnicity of women in contact with the criminal justice system. Black women are twice as likely to be arrested as white women and are disproportionately represented in the prison population compared to the UK population.

Early intervention and prevention models must be a key priority for the government as they are designed to ultimately reduce the likelihood of offending. This should be done at the earliest opportunity, at the point of arrest or through community resolutions, delivered in tandem with targeted support which meets women's varying needs.



## Young Women and Girls

Young women and girls under the age of 25 are disproportionately affected by abuse and violence. There is a lack of specialist support which meets their unique needs, meaning they can be left traumatised by their experiences and may go on to experience further harm, including being caught up in the criminal justice system.

Young women and girls who are at risk of domestic abuse and/or contact with the criminal justice system deserve specialist support which is designed to meet their needs.

Advance's report 'A Place to Learn About Relationships' looked at the early relationships of the women supported by our Criminal Justice services.

There was wide consensus amongst the women who participated in the report, that they had all experienced physical abuse from previous partners, and **91% believe their previous relationships have had an impact on their mental health**. This was often attributed to controlling and unhealthy relationships.

For many young women, early relationships which are unhealthy, and abusive can have a devastating impact on their lives. This can include contact with the criminal justice system.

- ➔ **73% of women began their first committed relationship before the age of 16**
- ➔ **73% also had 'consensual' sex before the age of 16, with the average age of their partners being 23.**
- ➔ **61% entered the criminal justice system between 10-20 years old.**

## The Solutions

### Advance Diversion Services

Advance's Diversion services divert women who have committed low-harm offences away from the criminal justice system at the point of arrest, and into dedicated support. This support is based on our Minerva model and is tailored to their needs.

This approach is an operational and strategic partnership with the police, with the aim to break the cycle of criminalisation by addressing underlying drivers of offending behaviour. As well as offering vital help for women, the service also reduces overall demand on the police and criminal justice system.

The relationship with a trusted professional, who stands in a woman's corner when she needs it, can fundamentally change how she engages with various services in the future. This builds women's trust in the system and is so essential to empowering women to help them address underlying, driving factors of offending.

Advance supported 165 women in London between September 2019 and December 2023, with an engagement rate of 92%.

- Nearly half were mothers
- Over 70% had a mental health diagnosis or unmet mental health need
- 64% reported substance misuse issues
- 44% disclosed some experience of abuse, assault or trauma, and 13% disclosed Adverse Childhood Experiences

We know that disclosures of abuse are likely to be underreported.

Advance's Diversion services can be effective in empowering women, and enables them to advance their personal circumstances. For women supported in London:

- **99% of women receiving support felt more confident to make alternative choices and engage with their community,**
- **97% felt that the support received through LWDS had helped reduce their offending.**

**“ The Metropolitan Police is pleased to support the diversion of women who have committed low-harm offences away from the formal criminal justice system. We know that the drivers of women's offending are different to men's, as a result a different approach is needed to support women. A gender-specific and trauma-informed approach recognises the multiple, and often complex, needs of women and helps them break the cycle of reoffending whilst staying within their own communities. I am proud to work with Advance in delivering the service and hope that the ability to divert women continues for years to come. -MPS ”**

In March we were thrilled to partner with Kent Police to deliver a short diversion pilot. In this limited period, we were able to support women who were offered conditional cautions with positive effect:

- **100% felt more confident in managing their own wellbeing**
- **100% felt safer**
- **100% felt more confident in accessing support services**
- **86% knew what to do or how to reach out if they experienced violence or abuse**
- **86% felt more confident to manage their needs independently**

The women supported also cited that the service was “friendly and helpful”, and that it “would be nice to have more sessions”.

## Darlia's Story

Darlia served 10 weeks in prison for a drunk and disorderly charge. Darlia had a difficult relationship with her family as they were very strict and, on her imprisonment, refused to communicate with her. Her imprisonment resulted in loss of employment and accommodation. During her time in prison, she was seen by a mental health nurse and was on a waiting list to join a substance misuse support group. She was also about to start an education course.

However, due to the short prison sentence, she was unable to engage in the rehabilitative courses. On release, she was unemployed, homeless and without support networks. Darlia was arrested again 4 months later.

This time she was offered a conditional caution which required her to attend a minimum of 2 appointments with an Advance Diversion service keyworker.

During her first appointment, Darlia and her keyworker worked together to identify multiple areas of need including domestic abuse, problematic substance use, and mental health, in addition to finance and benefits, education, and employment.

Darlia was given emotional support to reduce her drinking and was also referred onto a substance misuse service. She received Domestic Abuse specialist counselling and an online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) course. She was also supported to access Universal Credit and an education course.

Darlia was supported through Diversion for 6 months and completed her conditional caution, and then was transferred to long-term support for an additional 18 months. She was able to find secure accommodation and through the substance misuse service, she began to take control of her alcohol consumption. She attended counselling regularly and engaged with her GP regarding her mental health.

She is now in part-time employment while studying and is beginning to have contact with her family.



## Young Women and Girls services

Advance lead on a number of services dedicated to the support of young women and girls affected by domestic abuse and the criminal justice system. We intervene at the **earliest opportunity to help them escape harm and fulfil their aspirations.**

**Maia and Lift** is an early intervention service led by Advance, in partnership with Chance UK, Women's Trust and Working Chance, which provides vital support for young women and girls who have experienced or who are at risk of domestic abuse.

One-to-one sessions, mentoring and group activities for girls and young women aged 13 to 25 in women-only spaces and in the community, aimed to explore identity, safety, healthy relationships, feminism, empowerment, and aspirations, to build confidence, self-esteem and resilience, promote health and wellbeing, and support engagement with services.

### → **Employability service delivered by Working Chance**

Employability focused coaching for young women aged 18 to 25 was designed to explore aspirations and build confidence with employability goals such as CV writing, careers options, job applications and interviewing skills.

### → **Therapeutic service delivered by Woman's Trust**

Self-development workshops were set up for girls and young women aged 16 to 25 to discover strategies to manage their wellbeing, anxiety, mindfulness, confidence, resilience, and trauma.

### → **Lift delivered by Chance UK**

Supports girls aged 9-13 who are vulnerable to domestic abuse or have been affected by it. With a strong focus on peer-to-peer support, this programme looks at healthy relationships, consent and building self confidence

In the year ending March 2024, young women and girls supported within our Maia service told us:

→ **80% felt that has an increased awareness and understanding of healthy relationships and consent, including self-agency in relationships**

→ **80% felt they had a better understanding of their relationships with others and improved relationship skills including with trusted adults**

→ **100% reported improved confidence to assert their rights and empowerment to make choices about future goals**

## Louise's Story

My domestic abuse situation was family – both of my parents, my sister. I lived with them and they were all abusive. There was all kinds of abuse except for sexual abuse. A lot of psychological torture. There was physical abuse, which was quite severe, quite frequent. Eventually that became less after a few years because of reporting it to the police; they were more cautious of being caught.

I started reporting it when I was 14 to social services. They didn't do anything – closed my case without investigating. Then the police, doctors, school, children's services. I tried to do a homeless shelter, refuge, things like that. I didn't get rejected, but basically got longlisted and was never contacted. Nothing came of any of that and then at 18 I got a job in London, moved there and very recently I've managed to secure a non-molestation order against both of them [parents]. I didn't try and pursue that before – I was just trying to keep myself to myself.

I moved out nearly two years ago, since then the incidents have still been ongoing. That hasn't stopped them from harassing me – they turned up at my last apartment but I wasn't there, I'd moved out the day before. Then they actually got into my house recently. I went up to my bedroom and I have a lock on my door so that was good. I waited for the police to get there. They haven't done anything, even though I've reported more incidents.

I started getting resources from Advance through the university – I couldn't get access to any of these things before. The significance with Advance is that it was the first time I was immediately believed and listened to. People were actually trauma-informed, they weren't asking inappropriate questions, they weren't saying, "if you're not going to give us the full level of detail of abuse then I'm not going to see you." [Advance] were very educated on these topics, understanding so many different complicated things. It was a completely new experience – a great experience from the start and my first experience like that with an organisation of any kind.



## Recommendations

- Introduce a statutory duty on police forces to refer all women arrested for low-harm offending to specialist early intervention and Diversion services, with sufficient scrutiny and monitoring.
- Invest in Women's Centres as safe spaces to offer wraparound, holistic support to women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system.
- Increase the flexibility around conditional cautions and provide sufficient funding to specialist Diversion services to enable the successful national delivery of the reformed Out-of-Court Resolution two-tier framework..
- Mandate training to police on the dynamics of abuse and impact of trauma on women, delivered by specialist services.
- Mandate training for social care teams on the dynamics of domestic abuse, including familial and intimate partners abuse, and the effects on the well-being of young women and girls, under the age of 25.
- Introduce a statutory duty on local authorities to commission specialist support to girls and young women under the age of 25 affected by or at risk of domestic abuse, or other forms of exploitation.
- Deliver the promised Young Women's Strategy, prioritising early intervention and diversion to enable young women in contact with the criminal justice system to receive the support they need.

## About Advance

We help women and girls who have experienced trauma through domestic abuse, exploitation and the criminal justice system to rebuild their lives. We do this by providing practical and emotional support, wherever and whenever a woman or girl wants it.

Through our network of Women's Centres across London and the Southeast, women can access one-to-one, group, and peer support, as well as practical help and essentials.

We work alongside criminal justice agencies like Probation teams to support women in contact with the criminal justice system. Read more>>

<https://www.advancecharity.org.uk/what-we-do/criminal-justice-services/>

We support young women and girls, from the age of 13 who are experiencing domestic abuse and exploitation throughout domestic abuse services. We support young women and girls who are in contact, or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system through our specialist young persons Minerva keyworker. Read more >> <https://www.advancecharity.org.uk/what-we-do/young-women-girls-services/>