



Interventions
Alliance

Holding Care and Balancing Risk: The Emotional and Organisational Demands of Working in a Women's Approved Premises

Executive Summary

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Approved Premises

Approved Premises (APs) are residential facilities mainly housing people who have been released from prison on license, and who are assessed as posing a higher risk of serious harm. APs manage risk, monitor behaviour and support rehabilitation as part of resettlement into the community. There are 106 APs in England and Wales; eight of which are dedicated to women (HMIP, 2026).

Women's APs are resourced and governed in the same way as men's, but this does not fully take account of and attend to women's different profiles and needs ([Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2024](#)). Women's offending is often linked to trauma, and this means more time and more engagement for AP practitioners, yet the staffing model is the same as in men's facilities (ibid). Also, due to limited numbers of women's APs, residents are often placed far from their home area, meaning contact with probation officers and other vital support services is harder to establish and maintain, creating further pressure on AP staff to meet residents' needs (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2024).

About this research

Previous research ([Ellis Devitt, 2020](#)) explored female probation practitioners' experiences of supervising women serving community sentences. Findings identified gender-specific needs of justice-involved women, which require specific ways of working for probation practitioners. These included allowing more time for women to talk and offload, adapting offence-focused objectives to account for trauma-informed practice, and the requirement to manage the heightened emotional impact of concerns about the women's safety and wellbeing. Practitioners also experienced greater professional isolation due to probation services being largely focused on men. The work highlighted the emotional labour involved and the associated risk of vicarious trauma.

However, though this work offered much in terms of better understanding the gender specific ways needed to work with women in community justice contexts, the distinct challenges facing justice practitioners who work with women in Approved Premises remain under-researched. This project addresses that gap in the evidence.

Aim and Research Questions (RQs)

The aim of this project was to explore the emotional and organisational demands of working in a women's AP. The research questions were:

- RQ1: What are the emotional demands of working with residents in women's APs?
- RQ2: What are the system pressures and organisational demands facing women's APs?
- RQ3: How do women's APs build and sustain their workforce?

Methodology

(Approval for this project was sought from the HMPPS National Research Committee in November 2026. It was granted in January 2026).

Sample and methods: This study included 25 participants from four women's APs. The participants comprised two Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), seven managers, and 16 frontline staff. Data was mainly collected between January and March 2026, using 23 individual interviews and one paired interview. Interviews were conducted by one of two researchers either online, using MS Teams (in the case of 9 participants) or face-to-face in participants' respective APs (in the case of 16 participants). Each interview lasted roughly between 60-90 minutes. An inductive thematic analysis was used to explore the data, similar to that identified in [Braun & Clarke \(2006\)](#).

Ethics: The usual ethical commitments were observed, including voluntary participation, right to withdraw, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. However, particular focus was given to transparency, empowerment and participant ownership. This was of particular importance given the positionality of the report authors, who conducted the research as employees of Interventions Alliance (IA), one of the organisations operating a women's AP in England and Wales, and significantly, one of the participating APs. To address this positionality, the authors maintained communication with participants and participating APs throughout the project. All participants were also given two opportunities to review, correct or amend the findings through the circulation of a first draft of the report.

Findings

RQ1: What are the emotional demands of working with residents in women's APs?

RQ1 drew on the responses of just the 16 frontline staff participants, recognising that direct work with residents was the primary focus of their role. These participants said:

- *Working with complexity and trauma:* Women's AP residents typically have a broad range of compounding needs. Staff, therefore, spoke of the importance of building trusting relationships and placing trauma-informed approaches as central to their work.
- *Balancing care with authority, empathy with enforcement, and support with risk management:* Staff were often faced with competing professional demands, creating significant internal tension.
- *Emotional labour:* Relational practice created significant emotional labour requiring staff to listen, contain distress, avoid judgement, remain patient and regulate their own emotional responses.
- *Managing the disappointment of relapse, breach or recall:* the reality of AP work means that while some residents thrive and move on successfully, others struggle. To protect themselves from the emotional impact of this, staff endeavoured to frame events such

as relapse and recall as part of residents' expected journeys of change, rather than any personal or organisational failure.

- *Forging and maintaining professional boundaries:* Boundaries were necessary to protect against residents becoming reliant on certain staff members or to avoid being pulled into parent-child dynamics. Significantly, the 24-hour residential environment made these boundaries more difficult, as staff were constantly visible and often expected to be available.
- *Intersectionality and relational practice:* Staff shared how their identities and experiences affected their practice. Younger staff sometimes had to establish authority with older residents. Neurodivergent staff faced challenges in busy and unpredictable environments. Black staff carried additional emotional burdens when racism or racially charged offending histories entered the professional relationship while white staff needed to recognise the limits of their own perspective and avoid making assumptions about the experiences of residents of colour. And staff who were also parents sometimes found residents' childhoods and histories especially difficult to process.

RQ2: What are the system pressures and organisational demands facing women's APs?

Women's APs operate within HMPPS frameworks, where expectations around risk management, accountability, referrals, performance monitoring and partnership working generate additional pressures and uncertainty. Of this second analytic area, participants said:

- *Navigating professional relationships:* Despite understanding the pressures facing the Probation Service, there were sometimes challenges. This was often around APs feeling they were viewed by probation as a catch-all for high-risk complex cases.
- *The burden of admin:* The administrative and contractual demands of AP work weighed heavily. KPIs, reporting requirements and repetitive recording practices were often experienced as disconnected from the realities of frontline work.
- *Loss of autonomy with referrals:* Following the implementation of the Central Referral Unit, AP staff talked of their concerns about managing repeated inappropriate referrals e.g., individuals with serious, complex and multiple needs, residents living far out of area; and expedited referrals, where little time was available for pre-release work.
- *Competing demands and negotiating conflicts:* Though frontline staff highly valued colleagues, close-proximity working sometimes created tensions, e.g., workload, role expectations, staffing, and perceived standards of care. For managers, these dynamics generated subsequent emotional demands, requiring them to absorb emotions, respond to distress, and manage conflict within their teams.
- *Team psychological safety:* For frontline staff, issues with psychological safety were linked to not always feeling able to speak openly, not feeling heard, or, for a minority, fearing making decisions or even mistakes which may lead to judgement or blame. For managers, it was around interactions with the wider probation service, particularly where professional judgement was felt to be questioned or where local knowledge appeared to be disregarded.

RQ3: How do women's APs build and sustain their workforce?

The third analytic area explored what works in building and sustaining the AP workforce. Participants said:

- *The central role of the team:* Colleagues were a vital source of emotional support, practical help and shared understanding. In a context where confidentiality limits what can be discussed with family and friends, colleagues provided an important space for processing difficult experiences, seeking reassurance and maintaining morale.
- *The importance of managers:* Staff valued managers who were approachable, compassionate, flexible and willing to listen. Examples included: open-door policies, collaborative decision-making, and responsiveness to individual needs. Managers noted supportive senior relationships, particularly where they were trusted and afforded flexibility in how they carried out their roles.
- *Self-care and self-preservation:* Staff described a range of strategies to help manage the emotional intensity of AP work, e.g., exercise, mindfulness, counselling, socialising. Staff also spoke of self-preservation, represented by conscious efforts to separate work and home identities; a necessary part of sustaining compassionate practice.
- *Organisational support structures:* Supervision, reflective practice, case consultations, post-incident debriefs, clinical input and OPD pathway psychology support, all offered opportunities for staff to process experiences and strengthen practice. Training was also viewed positively, although staff recognised the nature of AP work meant learning was often most effective through lived professional experience.
- *Characteristics of an AP staff member:* Staff identified qualities thought to make women's AP work possible e.g., resilience, empathy, confidence, good judgement, strong boundaries, adaptability and a belief in residents' capacity for change. Managers described recruitment as often being less about experience and more about values and core skills.
- *AP work is part of a career pathway:* AP work was often framed as part of wider career trajectories, understanding that the demanding nature of the work often saw a need for people to move on to other things. However, while retention challenges were recognised, managers saw staff progression positively, with the AP as a place where people might grow and develop professionally.
- *Strengthening the women's AP model:* More broadly, participants called for additional women's AP places, longer placements, better move-on housing, improved mental health provision and more Psychologically Informed Planned Environment (PIPE) APs. They also stressed that women's APs should be recognised as distinct from men's provision, with stronger partnership working and policies, referrals, risk management and services designed around women's specific needs.
- *Retaining the workforce:* Finally, participant accounts spoke of the deeply positive accounts of what keeps them in the work. Most powerfully, participants described being sustained by the residents themselves, by the belief that justice-involved women can and do change and that even small acts of care can have lasting significance.

Conclusion

Approved Premises (APs) are something of a hidden world; the women's estate, even more so. They are among the least discussed and least understood parts of the justice system, and are rarely researched ([HMIP, 2026](#); [Reeves & Marston, 2023](#)). The research that does exist focuses largely on the male estate (e.g., [Irwin-Rogers, 2017](#)), and where women's APs are explored, it appears to be led exclusively by HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP), either alongside provisions for women in the wider justice system (e.g. Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2024), or as part of the Approved Premises inspection programme. As such, this study fills a crucial gap in the literature base, shining a light on this vital area of justice provision that is all too often overlooked. Furthermore, the themes explored in this work add significantly to understanding the gender-specific requirements of working with women in community justice contexts.

As more attention is drawn to the women's AP estate through the continued Approved Premises inspection programme, we welcome more research exploring this essential part of the justice system; in particular, the impact on its staff. Future research might examine emotional labour, psychological safety and workforce sustainability in women's PIPE APs, where mental health support is more explicitly embedded in the model. It might look comparatively at HMPPS APs and independent APs, mapping differences between the state-run services rather than those contracted out to third-sector organisations (though in the women's estate, the comparisons might be rather limited given there is just one solely state-run women's AP). Or it might consider these findings across the male AP estate, distinguishing the pressures common to APs from those produced specifically by gender-responsive, relational and trauma-informed practice in women's settings.

Whatever the focus, the more knowledge we have about the AP estate, the better equipped we are to protect and sustain it. And perhaps most pressingly, the more equipped we are to retain the invaluable staff who keep these residential establishments running.

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