



Co-designing the National Women's Justice Coalition's Voice and Advisory Panel of experts by experience

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1. INTRODUCTION

The National Women's Justice Coalition (NWJC), a coalition of 19 women's organisations each expert in delivering trauma-informed support services to women affected by the CJS, represents a new and unique resource through which to tap into and amplify the lived experience and expertise of the women supported through these specialist services.

The NWJC aims to champion and support the participation and leadership of women with lived experience in its work to drive systemic change and improve outcomes for women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS) through policy and services. Work of this kind carried out by individual NWJC organisational partners has already demonstrated the value and effectiveness of this approach¹.

This summary is co-authored by Michelle Wright and Hareem Hussain, two expert consultants with lived experience of the criminal justice system, and Abbi Ayers, the NWJC Development Manager. It sets out clear recommendations and guidelines to support the NWJC's approach to convening a Voice and Advisory Panel² of experts by experience and focuses on key learnings and recommendations, all of which are supported and substantiated by detailed appendices outlining the scope and depth of work we have undertaken together.

2. THE NWJC'S VISION FOR A NATIONAL PANEL OF EXPERTS BY EXPERIENCE

2.1 The purpose and remit of the National Panel

To participate in national work to share insights based on members' lived experience perspectives; to shape decision-making and policy reform; and to influence the wider systems change needed to improve outcomes for women in contact with the CJS. Ultimately, panel members will establish themselves as authoritative representatives for CJS involved women from across the UK and should expect and be afforded a valuable 'seat at the table' in strategic discussions with stakeholders.

¹ Over 80% of NWJC Organisational Partners currently involve women with lived experience of the CJS in focus groups, expert panels, discussion forums and partnership working – *data collected from NWJC Partner Survey: Feb 2023*

² Hereafter National Panel

The National Panel will also help to shape the strategic and practical work of the NWJC generally, and its work specifically to develop the work of the coalition and its partners with women with lived experience.

2.2 Priorities for the National Panel

General

- Give women a voice, a platform and more power.
- Highlight women's authentic experiences and the specific challenges they face through their contact with the CJS.
- Deconstruct the stigma often associated with women in contact with the CJS and help to address misconceptions and misinformation about female cycles of offending.
- Bring credibility and authenticity to the NWJC, its mission and work.

Internally focused work

- Work closely and collaboratively all NWJC partner organisations to scrutinise, evaluate and feedback on the coalition's work plans and hold all member organisations to account against the coalition's vision and commitments.
- Challenge NWJC decision-making, funding allocation and strategic decision-making when needed.
- Help to maintain an agreed direction of travel and realign partners who may bring their own agendas into play.
- Support the sharing and redistribution of power within NWJC partner organisations to increase diversity and representation.
- Help to ensure smaller organisations and specialist providers have equal weighting and influence as NWJC partner organisations.
- Support NWJC partner organisations to develop their engagement work and seek opportunities to centre women with lived experience in this work, collating expertise, knowledge and wisdom.
- Empower and inspire other experts by experience to get involved in wider reaching, strategic work.
- Share a lived experience perspective to inform the NWJC's decisions about priority funding asks and ensure that such perspectives are integral to the rationale for all NWJC's funding applications.

Externally focused work

- Consult with and influence local government, government and opposition MPs, policy makers, commissioners and decision makers.
- Support stakeholders to understand the issues women face – “*educate by experience*”.
- Participate in roundtable and parliamentary events.
- Share feedback, insight and recommendations with key criminal justice stakeholders including police, probation, prison services, commissioners, MoJ, HMPPS and other decision makers.
- Increase public and political awareness and understanding of the issues faced by women in contact with the criminal justice system.
- Support the wider work of the Friends of the NWJC by contributing to collaborative projects and joint campaigning and influencing work.
- Increase the profile and credibility of the NWJC

3. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT WORK AS PART OF A NATIONAL PANEL

3.1 Prioritise the safety of Panel Members and foster trust

Women joining the National Panel may be coming from organisations and project work where foundations of trust have already been established and/or where they have felt confident and 'in safe hands'. The NWJC must convene a National Panel in a trauma-informed and supportive way, recognising the different experiences and perspectives of each panel member, and find ways to offer tailored, ongoing and intensive support to meet women's individual needs.

Mechanisms for safeguarding and maintaining confidentiality should be developed prior to the establishment of the National Panel. The NWJC may wish to draft a Code of Conduct or Commitments Statement for initial panel members. This in turn could be further developed with direct input from panel members themselves.

Allowing time for relationship building, embedding trust, and developing an understanding of the NWJC's aims and vision is critical. Developing an induction programme and protecting time for panel members to get to know each other as well as key contacts from NWJC partner organisations will be essential.

3.2 Safeguard panel members' wellbeing

Supervision and support for panel members should be offered in recognition of the distinct and individual aspects that contribute to an individual's wellbeing:

1. Physical health (including health conditions and disabilities)
2. Mental health (including emotional wellbeing)
3. Additional bespoke support (including supporting those with learning difficulties, neurodivergence, English as a second language)
4. Cultural and personal identity (including faith, beliefs, traditions, cultural sensitivities, sexual orientation)
5. Personal safety (including ensuring panel members are supported in safe, inclusive and representative spaces)

Through the recruitment process, the NWJC must develop ways to identify women's specific needs and demonstrate a clear commitment and plan for addressing these by offering individualised support.

3.3 Recruit women with diverse skillsets and experiences

The National Panel will be enriched and effective if panel members have a variety of skills and experiences.

"My lived experience within the criminal justice system provides me with a nuanced understanding of the challenges women face, allowing me to advocate for meaningful and practical solutions." – HH

"Since witnessing firsthand the diabolical workings of the CJS against pregnant women, women with young children and the ways in which the system skims around important issues, I'm extremely keen to make a difference, use my experience to help others and support organisations to make a change." – MW

Panel members should include those with confident public speaking skills and some media training; strong communication capabilities (including verbal, written, visual and digital); experience of team working, group participation and facilitation; and good self-awareness, listening skills and personal empathy. The NWJC should also support panel members to increase their awareness and understanding of feminist leadership principles to help to empower individuals at all levels of their involvement and participation.

3.4 Be aware of and seek to address barriers to participation

The NWJC should remain aware of the considerable barriers and obstacles that exist when supporting panel members to participate. These may include (but are not limited to) panel members underestimating their credentials, authority and capability to participate in strategic work at a national level; panel members feeling poorly represented and understood ('not being seen'); panel members having a lived experienced racism, prejudice or discrimination; personal fears relating to being judged, stigmatised or disrespected; and barriers to effectively communicating and articulating personal perspectives and opinions. Furthermore, by regularly collecting feedback from panel members, the NWJC can reinforce its commitment to collaborative and responsive working practices with panel members, maintain clear oversight of women's experiences of participating in its work and respond to any additional barriers in a timely, trauma-informed and effective way.

3.5 Set realistic timeframes to maintain panel members' involvement

The NWJC should work with panel members to agree work plans, time commitment expectations and deadlines to retain and support their continued involvement. An induction period for all new panel members should include basic training and onboarding processes.

3.6 Remunerate panel members for their expertise

All panel members should be generously remunerated for their participation and with respect to the expertise they bring to the NWJC's work. Panel members may need support to declare their self-employed/freelance status and may need help to undertake self-assessment and tax declarations. Panel members may also benefit from being offered guidance on how their earnings may impact their entitlement to other benefits, payments and support grants.

3.7 Plan logistics

Panel members may not always be available, present or have capacity to contribute to the National Panel's activities due to other commitments and personal circumstances. The NWJC should therefore facilitate regular and flexible opportunities for panel members to regroup, reconnect and receive updates on the National Panel's specific projects and progress made.

Face to face work and opportunities to bring panel members together in-person will be beneficial for trust and relationship building. However, the NWJC should anticipate the associated challenges involved in delivering work with a national agenda. When panel members are recruited from different geographical areas, opportunities for in-person working will be impacted by travel time, expenses, convenience and accessibility. The NWJC will need to offer appropriate and reasonable support to address these challenges including an expense fund to cover travel and childcare costs; tech and digital access support; and varying the location, timings and type of meetings and events (in-person and virtual). The NWJC should factor any associated costs and resources required to offer this provision into all funding applications to support the development of the National Panel.

3.8 Recognise panel members' distance from their experiences

Engagement work will require women to reflect on and share their experiences of being involved in the CJS. This may be particularly triggering and traumatic for those who have had insufficient time and support between their personal experiences and their involvement in engagement work. The NWJC will need to be mindful of this when recruiting panel members and should develop mechanisms for onboarding new panel members regularly to mitigate the risk of the National Panel becoming unsustainable or ineffective as and when panel members step back from their involvement.

3.9 Embed clear expectations and governance structures

Panel members should have a clear and comprehensive understanding of what is expected of them prior to committing to a particular project or piece of work. The NWJC will need to assume responsibility for effectively communicating expectations to all panel members, project specific objectives and reasonable time frames and deadlines that will help to support women's understanding and involvement.

Determining how the National Panel will be governed and work collaboratively with NWJC partner organisations will be an important consideration for the NWJC and panel members to agree on. A provisional governance structure may need to be developed and evolved as the National Panel expands and undertakes a more substantial workload.

3.10 Identify commonalities and offer purposeful work

Women often feel connected by a common cause and/or shared experience (for example, being pregnant or mothering in prison, or sharing a particular culture or faith). The NWJC should identify any such commonalities sensitively and supportively and facilitate ways to unite panel members based on their shared experiences.

Furthermore, panel members should be supported to engage in purposeful and meaningful work that is attractive to them, and through which, they can contribute to meaningful outcomes and effective positive change.

"I'm extremely keen to make a difference, use my experience to help others and support organisations that want to make a change." - MW

"I am particularly drawn to the coalition's dedication to amplifying the voices of marginalised communities, ensuring that their experiences shape policies and practices." - HH

Roles for panel members should be clearly defined and routes for progression and direct benefits to panel members should be developed and promoted at every opportunity.

4. SUMMARY OF NEXT STEPS

In early 2024, with funding from The Goldsmiths' Company, the NWJC will begin working with a group of up to eight women with lived experience of the CJS on a series of different internally and externally focused projects. The NWJC's approach to recruiting these women has been fully informed by recommendations outlined in [Section 3](#).

This group of women will be foundational to the establishment of the National Panel and individuals (provisional panel members) will be invited to contribute to projects in different ways and will receive ongoing support from the NWJC Development Manager as well as a key contact from within the organisation they currently belong to or work with.

Provisional panel members will be supported to review and develop the NWJC's mission statement, core commitments, strategic objectives, public messaging strategy and communication tools (including the [NWJC](#) and [Women's Services Map](#) websites) and contribute directly to the coalition's campaigning, influencing and consultation efforts, working in collaboration with [Friends of the NWJC](#) and key stakeholders in MoJ, HMPPS and HMIP.