

Women, Peers and Prisons

Increasing HCV testing and treatment uptake among women in the criminal justice system



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Background

Women in the criminal justice system (CJS) face high rates of hepatitis C.

Often this exists alongside complex, intersecting needs and experiences of hepatitis C-related stigma.

Although universal opt-out testing is in place in the UK CJS there are significant levels of HCV testing and treatment refusal.

This is linked to low knowledge of HCV transmission and misinformation about treatment.

Model

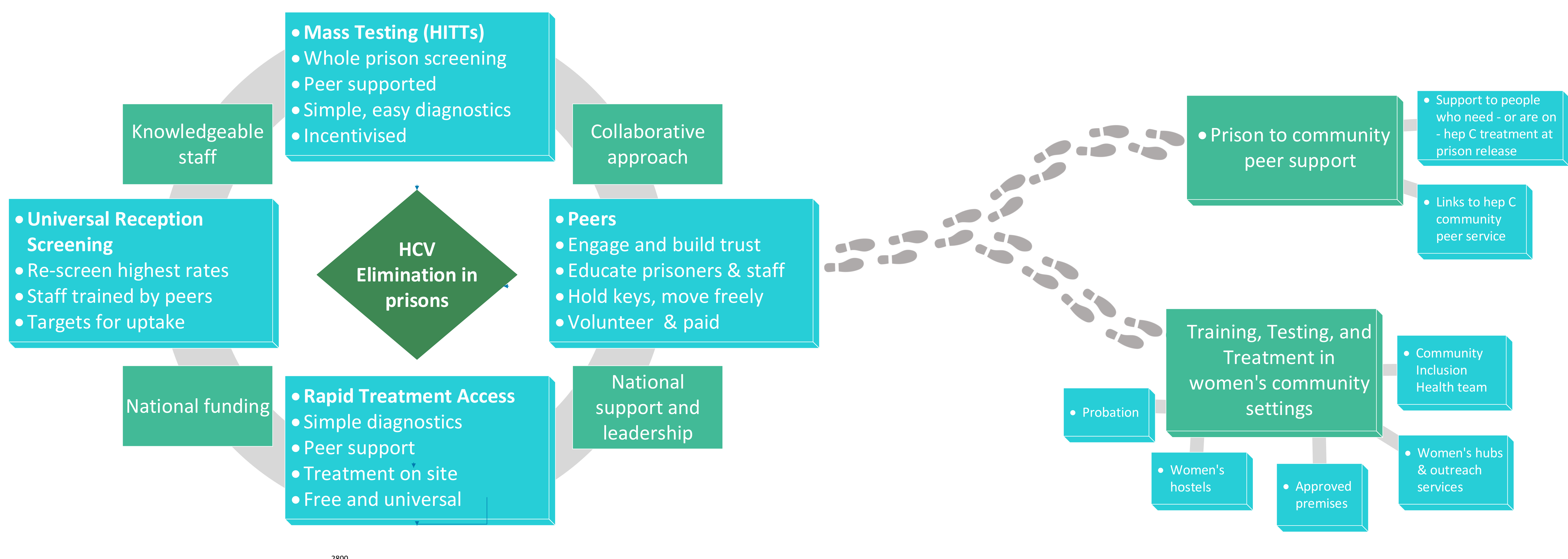
Since 2018, specialist workers with lived experience of HCV and the CJS (peers) have been embedded in England's women's prison estate. Their primary role is to find women with HCV and support them through treatment.

Peer teams educate staff and prisoners, deliver whole-prison testing, test individuals as needed and support people through treatment when required. They also recruit and train volunteer HCV champions, building a consistent presence within each prison.

Peer staff hold keys, enabling them to move around prisons as needed and without the accompaniment of prison officers. This allows a range of interventions – outreach on landings, contact tracing, engaging people refusing testing – to discretely take place.

In 2021 the role was expanded to work approved premises – linking into the probation system for women outside prisons.

Women's Criminal Justice System: HCV Peer Model



Impact

Peer staff work closely with prison healthcare teams and build trusting relationships with many women within their prisons.

1 in 3 women in English prisons were tested under this programme in 2022/3

16% of tests identified current hepatitis C infections

In 2022/23 they tested 878 women; England's female prison population is c. 3,000.

Through this, they identified 142 women with HCV RNA.

All 142 were supported to start treatment.

Conclusions

This programme offers wrap-around care to women in the CJS, utilising peers' lived experience to build trust and engagement.

Ensuring peers have full clearance and freedom to work, as well as excellent healthcare partnerships and support at every level of the prison system, is critical to success.

As well as relatively high HCV rates, the team has seen significant HCV reinfection; they are now trialling community-linked contact tracing, and hope to pilot needle exchange on release soon.

Developing the model

