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Women's problem-
solving courts: a
financial analysis

Summary

- Women's problem-solving courts aim to provide a community sentence alternative to short prison sentences for women, who often have multiple, unmet needs related to mental health, substance use, and trauma. These courts differ from 'business as usual' community sentences by providing regular engagement with a specially trained judge and structured support through gender-responsive services delivered in women's centres.
- Our financial analysis estimates that the annual cost of one woman going through a women's problem-solving court is £11,325. In comparison, we estimate that the annual cost of one woman serving a short custodial sentence of 6 months (involving 2.4 months in prison, 3.6 months on licence, and 6 months on post-sentence supervision) is £13,386. Our analysis suggests that a women's problem-solving court sentence starts saving money (breaks-even) on the 78th day of a woman's imprisonment.
- Our research found that there is little financial data available on the costs of 'business as usual' community sentences. The Government only has an annual average unit cost of a community sentence (£3,150). There are currently no national unit costs for community sentences that distinguish, for example, between the cost of a community order or a suspended sentence order, nor unit costs that allow us to compare the annual cost of one woman going through a women's problem-solving court to a comparable 'high intensity' community sentence, such as community order with a drug rehabilitation requirement.

Summary

- We have compared the costs of a cohort of 55 women going through a women's problem-solving court (WPSC), compared to the cost of the same cohort being sentenced to three alternative scenarios:
 - WPSC scenario: 55 women are sentenced to a community sentence through the women's problem-solving court;
 - High scenario: 55 women are sentenced to a range of short prison sentences;
 - Central scenario: 55 women are sentenced to a mix of community and short prison sentences;
 - Low scenario: 55 women are sentenced to 'business as usual' community sentences.
- Our cohort estimates suggest that the financial costs of a cohort of 55 women going through a problem-solving court (£988,374) are less than both the costs of the high scenario (£1,358,239) and the central scenario (£1,173,078). As expected, the WPSC scenario is more expensive than the low scenario. This analysis suggests that, so long as women's problem-solving courts are targeting and diverting a significant proportion of women who would otherwise go to prison, they will cost less than the most likely alternatives.
- This analysis does not examine whether these savings are cashable, nor does it include the potential costs and savings that may accrue if the outcomes delivered by women's problem-solving courts are substantially better than the alternatives (which existing evidence suggests may be the case).

Summary

- Our analysis suggests that the existence of a women's problem-solving court reduces the number of women who go to prison (though it does not avoid prison for every woman in the cohort). Our estimates suggest that, over a period of nearly three years, only 12 women of the 55 within the WPSC cohort will be sent to prison, compared to 40 of the 55 in the central scenario.
- Our analysis also suggests that the existence of a women's problem-solving court is likely to reduce the total number of prison days women in the cohort receive. The WPSC scenario estimates the use of 1,643 prison bed days, compared to 6,253 in our central scenario, a reduction of 70%.
- Finally, we have considered the impact if the women's problem-solving court approach was rolled out from the two courts which currently exist to ten by the end of 2028/29. If this roll out occurred between 2025/26 to 2028/29, we estimate:
 - Over 1,300 women would have their cases heard in a problem-solving court, meaning a significant reduction in the number of women going to prison;
 - Roll-out to ten courts could avoid a total of 60,617 prison days for women.



- Background
- Understanding costs
- Comparing costs
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Background

- Women's problem-solving courts aim to provide an alternative to short prison sentences for women, who often have multiple, unmet needs related to mental health, substance use, and trauma. These courts differ from 'standard' community sentences by providing regular engagement with a specially trained judge and structured support through gender-responsive services, to address the root causes of offending, delivered in women's centres.
- There are currently two women's problem-solving courts in England and Wales. Greater Manchester Women's Court began operating in 2014 as part of the city's 'Whole Systems Approach' to women in the justice system. Central to the approach was the establishment of women's centres across Greater Manchester, as well as a problem-solving court focused on women, which aims to deliver gender-responsive joined-up support to women at the key stages of arrest, sentence and release from custody.
- The second court is in Birmingham, one of four 'Intensive Supervision Courts; set up by the Ministry of Justice in 2023, is designed to be used by women whose offence would normally meet the custody threshold, and who may need intensive support from a range of partner agencies to address multiple and complex unmet needs such as abuse and trauma, mental health and substance use. All appointments take place at the women's centre, and the women work with a dedicated caseworker and judge throughout the duration of their sentence.

Background

- Women's problem-solving courts remain a relatively new innovation. While there has been an interim evaluation report of 'intensive supervision courts' (of which the Birmingham women's court is one) and an evaluation (including a socio-economic analysis) of the Manchester Whole Systems Approach to Women Offenders (which includes the Manchester problem-solving court), there has not been a close examination of the financial costs of women's problem-solving courts.
- We commissioned Alma Economics to construct a model for analysing costs of women's problem-solving courts. This model has helped us to:
 - develop a credible estimate of the annual unit cost of a women's problem-solving court;
 - compare this unit cost to the unit costs of 'business as usual' sentencing options;
 - estimate the total financial cost of processing a cohort of women through a problem-solving court, compared to alternative sentencing scenarios.
- The analysis uses a range of cost estimates including: (i) official Government unit cost estimates; (ii) unit cost estimates from existing women's problem-solving court; (iii) wider published unit cost estimates. As far as possible, we have also grounded modelling assumptions in official data and research. However, the contents of this report are solely the responsibility of the Centre for Justice Innovation.



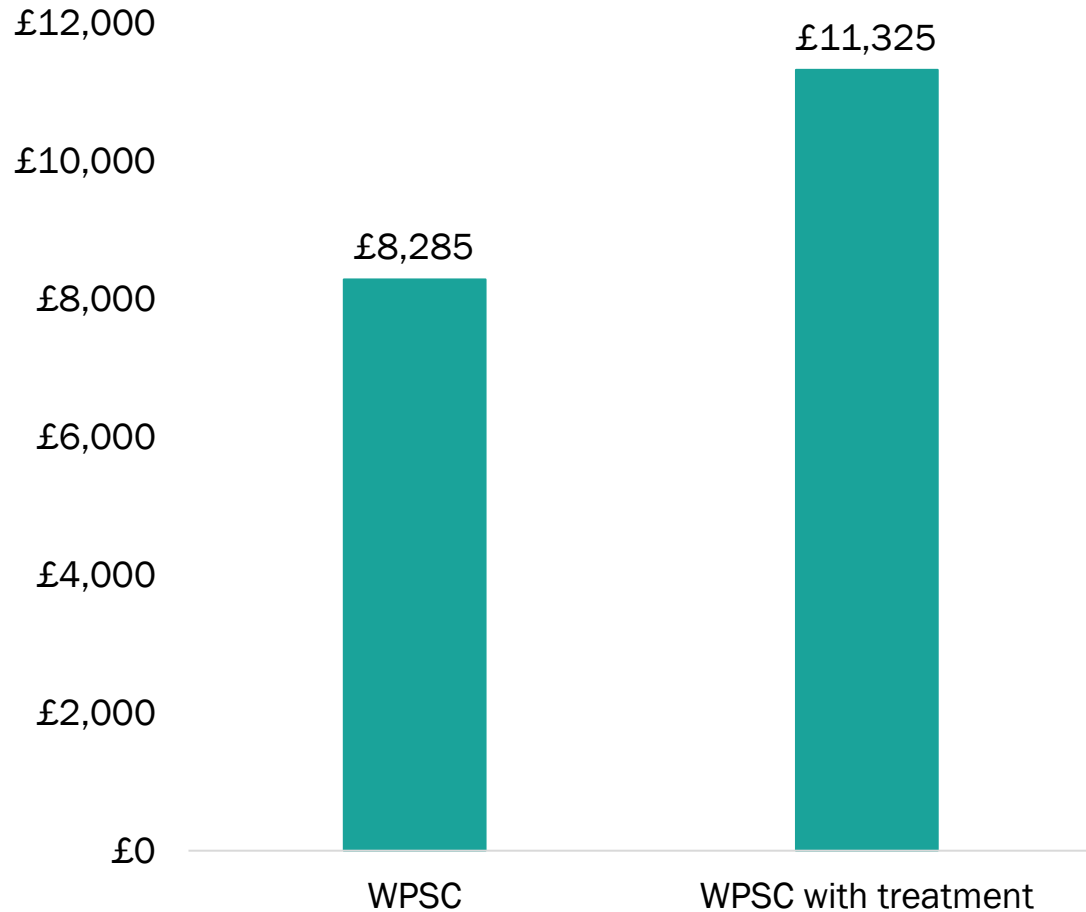
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Understanding costs: Developing cost estimates

- As part of their work, Alma Economics assessed the costs of running a women's problem-solving court by designing a hypothetical model based on data from existing courts and women's centres, alongside expert insights.
- They built this model on the basis that 'business as usual' community sentences and women's problem-solving courts share some common services, resulting in overlapping elements and some shared costs.
- They developed estimates of the additional costs that occur when a woman is participating in a women's problem-solving court. These are:
 - More intensive probation supervision;
 - For women receiving drug treatment, more frequent drug testing (twice per week);
 - Additional court and probation costs associated with additional post-sentence reviews, including the cost of a court coordinator and judicial costs;
 - Additional women's centre costs, including an additional support worker;
 - Non-staffing costs, such as training, including team training in trauma-informed care and motivational interviewing.

Understanding costs: Annual unit costs of women's problem-solving courts

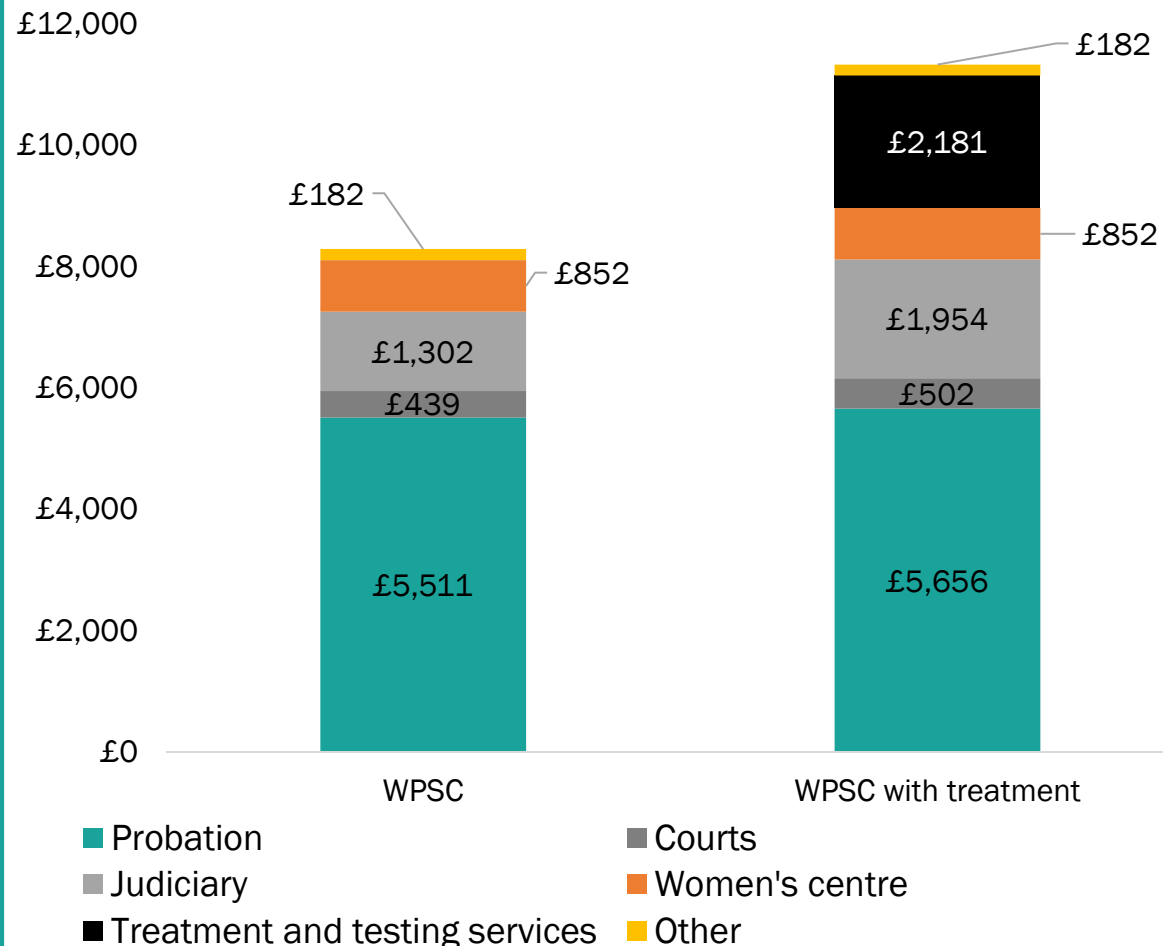
Figure 1: Estimates of the annual unit cost of women's problem-solving courts (25/26 prices)



- They developed two annual unit cost estimates for a woman going through a woman's problem-solving court (WPSC). The main variable between the two is the inclusion of treatment and testing.
- Adjusting for current prices, Alma estimate that the annual cost of one woman going through a women's problem-solving court is either £8,285 or, if they are in receipt of treatment and testing as part of their community sentence, £11,325. Answers to recent Parliamentary questions indicate that the majority of women receive some form of treatment requirement.

Understanding costs: Annual unit costs

Figure 2: Estimates of the annual unit cost of women's problem-solving courts (25/26 prices), by agency



- From the two annual unit cost estimates, we are able to identify which agencies incur the most significant costs.
- For both unit costs, probation incurs the highest costs (comprised of a 'business as usual' cost plus the costs of additional supervision plus the additional cost of attending court reviews), with 67% of the cost in WPSC and 50% of the cost in WPSC with treatment.
- It is also worth noting that court and judicial costs differ between the two estimates, representing an assumed increased intensity of work for women with treatment needs.



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Comparing costs: Women's problem-solving courts versus prison

- Women's problem-solving courts aim to provide an alternative to short prison sentences for women. They, and many other 'alternative to custody' options, are often compared to the cost of holding someone in prison for a year.
- However, women's problem-solving courts are primarily an option for women facing much shorter prison sentences of less than one year. We know, for example, that 51% (2,785) of women sentenced to prison in 23/24 received sentences of less than three months. Moreover, the cost need to reflect that these sentences involve release from prison half way through their sentence. Therefore, it is important to compare the costs of a women's problem-solving court to the reality of the prison sentences that are likely avoided. Since September 2024, due to the capacity problems in the adult male estate, most prison sentences have involved prisoners being released not at the 50% mark but at 40%. In our analysis, we have assumed release points at 40%.
- We also need to compare the cost of a woman engaging with a women's problem-solving court versus not only the avoided cost of the actual time in prison but also the avoided cost of the probation supervision following prison (both the 'licence' period and the 'post-sentence supervision' (PSS) period). For example, a six month custodial sentence actually comprises of (i) 2.4 months in prison with release at 40% point; (ii) 3.6 months on licence; (iii) 6 months on PSS.

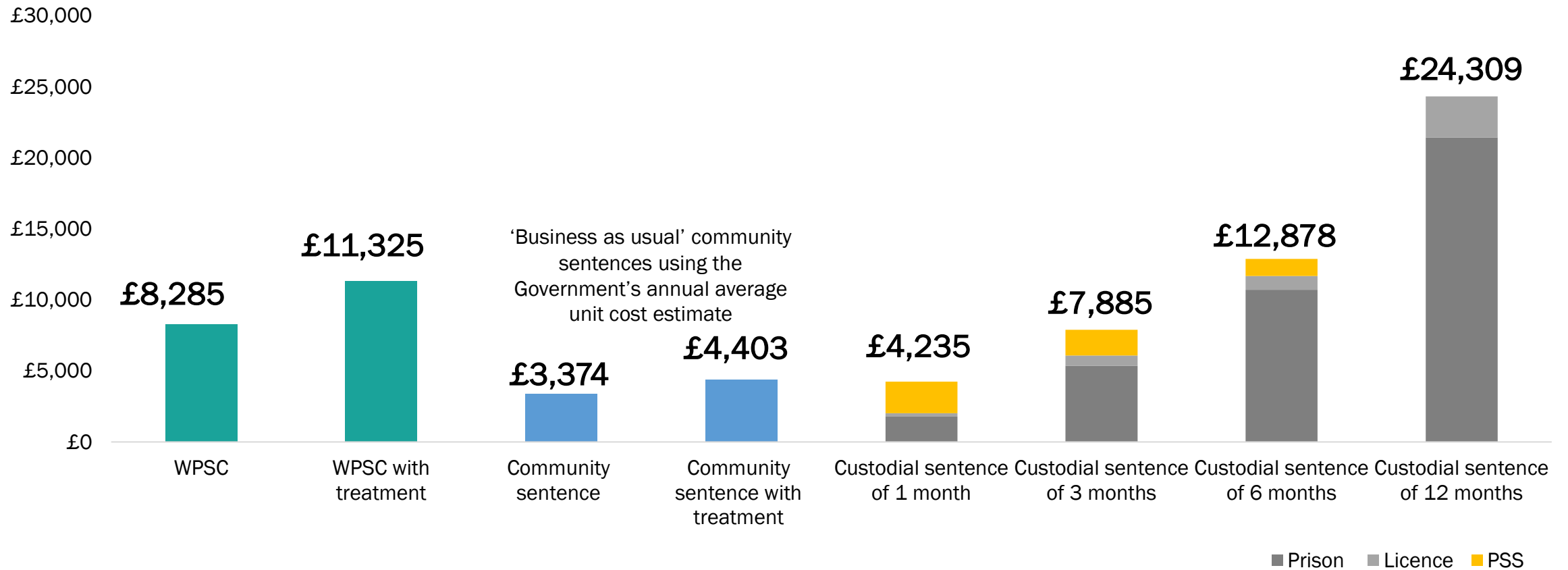
Comparing costs: Women's problem-solving courts versus community sentences

- It is also important to compare the cost of a women's problem-solving court to the costs of other community sentences. It is a commonly observed phenomena that new alternative to custody options often run the risk of 'up-tariffing' individuals i.e. drawing in people who would otherwise have received a lower intensity option in the community had the alternative not been present.
- However, as noted above, there is little cost data available to compare 'problem-solving' court community sentences to what individuals would otherwise have received. The annual unit cost estimate of a community sentence provided by the Government is only an average. But it is obvious that the annual cost, for example, of a short, 6 month standalone unpaid work requirement will be different to a 'high intensity' multi-requirement suspended sentence order. Where individuals are likely to be facing prison sentences, and judges are considering alternative community sentences, they are much more likely to be considering imposing this kind of high intensity community sentences.
- However, we have been unable to find any further costs data that allows us to estimate these annual costs. Therefore, we have, throughout this analysis, compared women's problem-solving court costs with 'business as usual' community sentences using the Government's annual average unit cost estimate (adjusted for inflation and, where needed, adjusted to include an estimate of the additional costs of treatment and testing). This should be borne in mind when comparing women's problem-solving court costs with community sentences.

Comparing costs: Our estimates

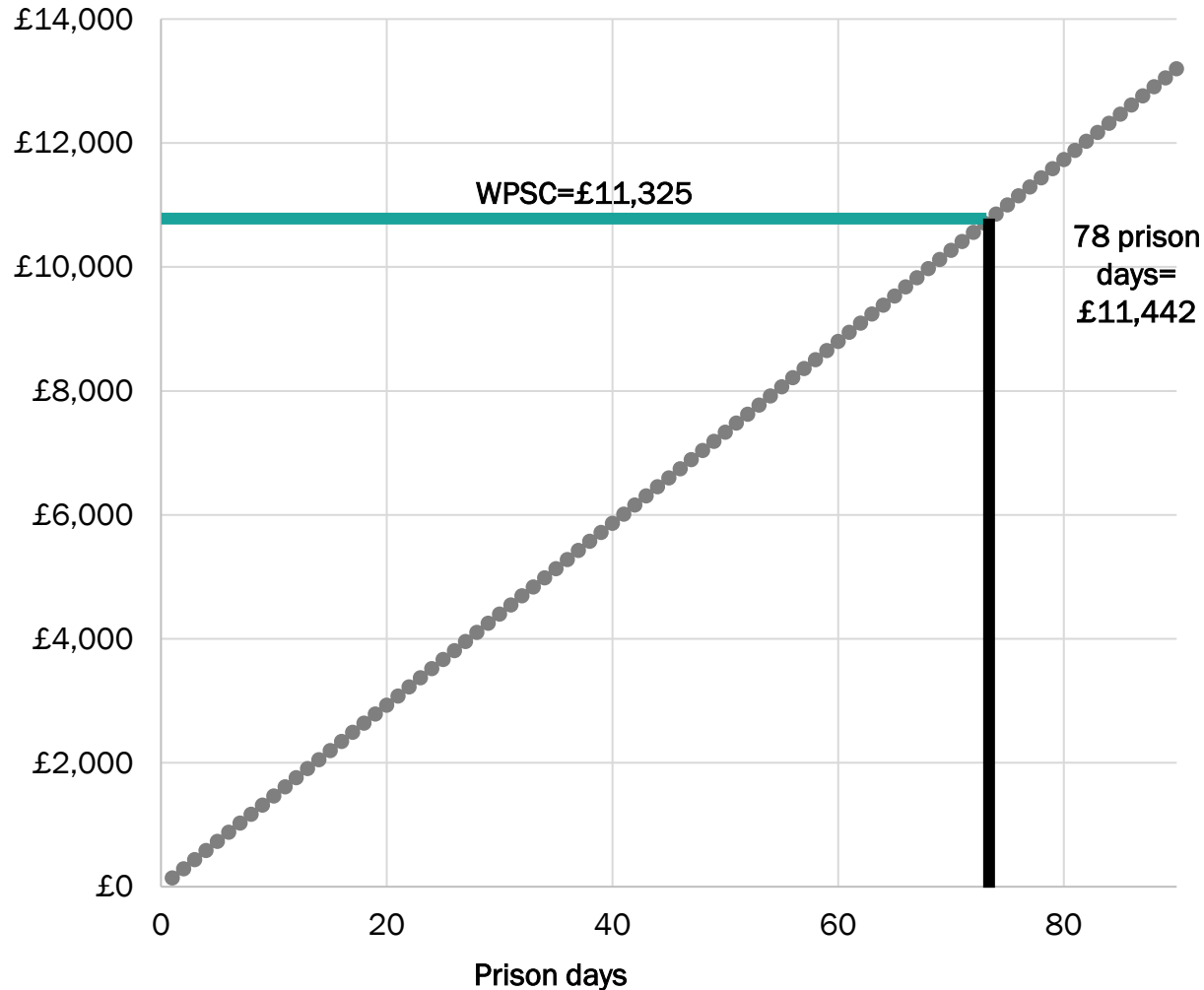
- Where women's problem-solving courts use treatment, they are less expensive than custodial sentences of more than 6 months and over. The higher the number of days spent in prison after this point, the more the savings.

Figure 3: Comparing annual unit costs of WPSC with other sentences



Comparing costs: The break-even point

Figure 4: The costs of women's imprisonment in days compared to cost of a woman's problem-solving court community sentence



- Using these estimates, we have looked at the costs of women having their case heard in the WPSC and the costs of holding a women in prison to determine the point at which the cost of the WPSC equals the costs on imprisonment. This is called the break-even point.
- As figure 4 suggests, our analysis suggests that a women's problem-solving court sentence with treatment breaks-even (starts saving money) on the 78th day of a women's imprisonment.



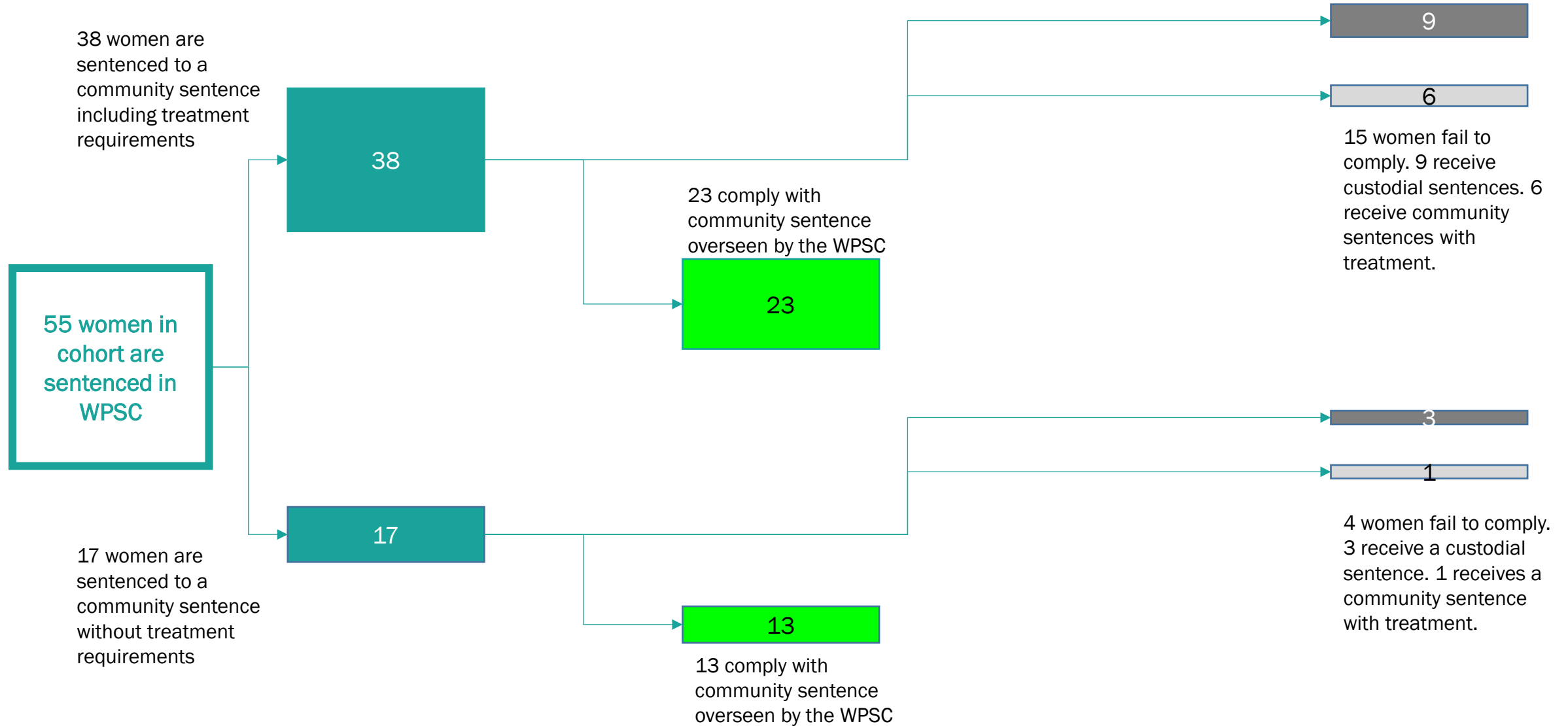
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Cohort analysis: Estimating the financial impact of women's problem-solving courts

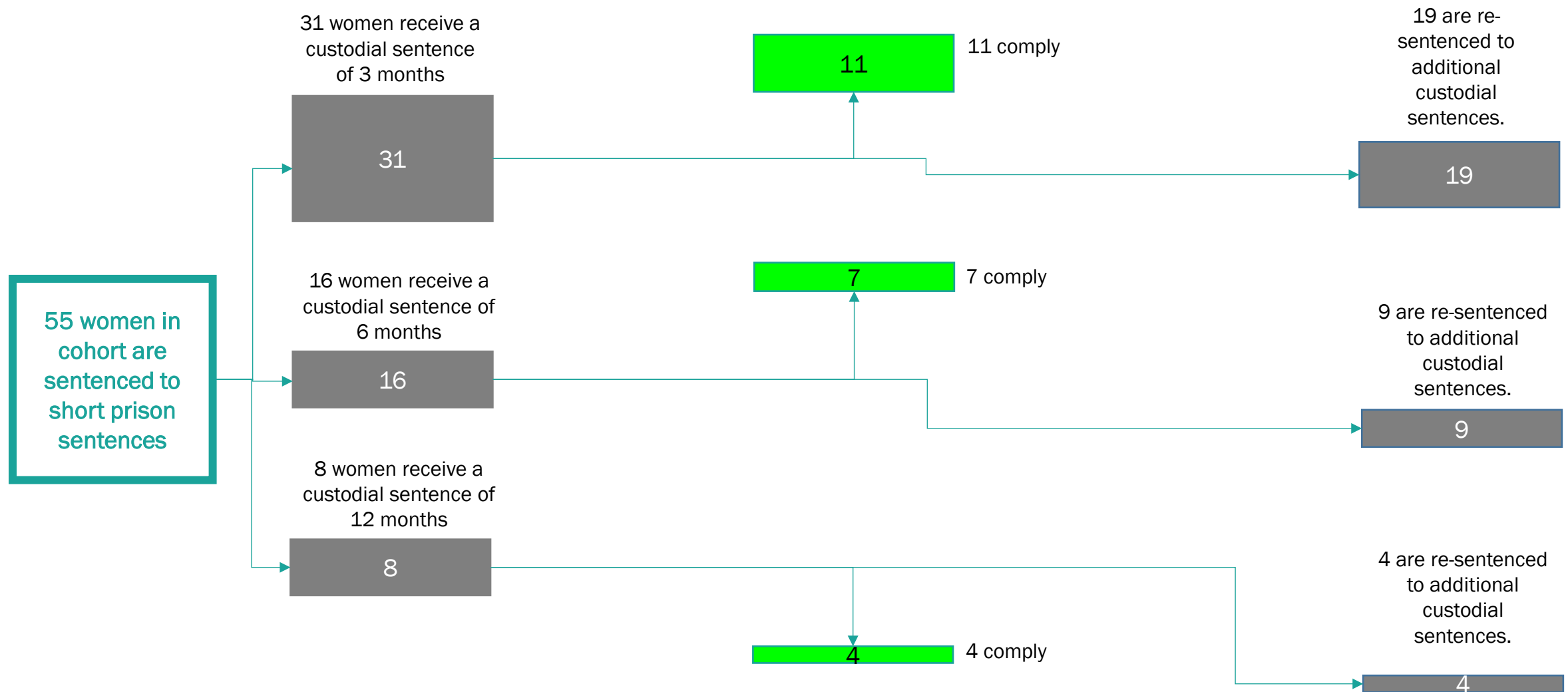
- Building on our estimates of cost, and using Government unit cost and volumetric data where possible, we have compared the costs of processing a cohort of 55 women through a women's problem-solving court, compared to three 'alternative sentencing' scenarios. We used 55 cases, as this is approximately how many women went through the Birmingham court in the first 12 months of operations. The scenarios are:
- **Women's problem-solving court (WPSC)**— 55 women sentenced through a problem-solving court, modelling for a mixture with or without treatment requirements.
- **High:** Only short prison sentences—55 women receive short prison sentences of varying lengths.
- **Central:** Mix of community and short prison sentences— 55 women receive a mix of community sentences (with or without treatment requirements) and custodial sentences.
- **Low:** Only community sentences— All 55 women receive only community sentences, modelling for a mixture with or without treatment requirements.

We also account for a degree of non-compliance in all scenarios. These breaches of sentences lead to either additional community sentences or custodial sentences.

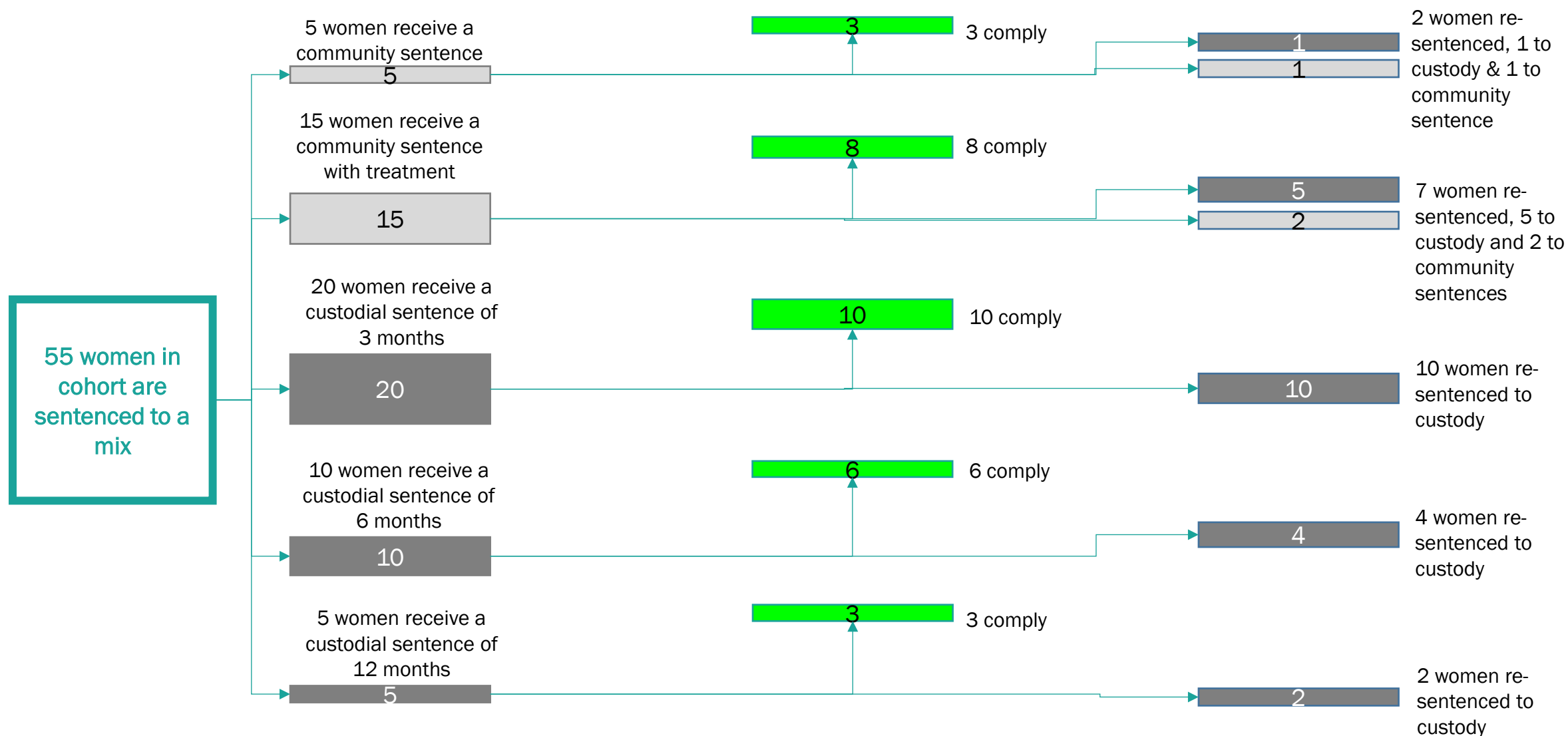
Women's problem-solving court scenario



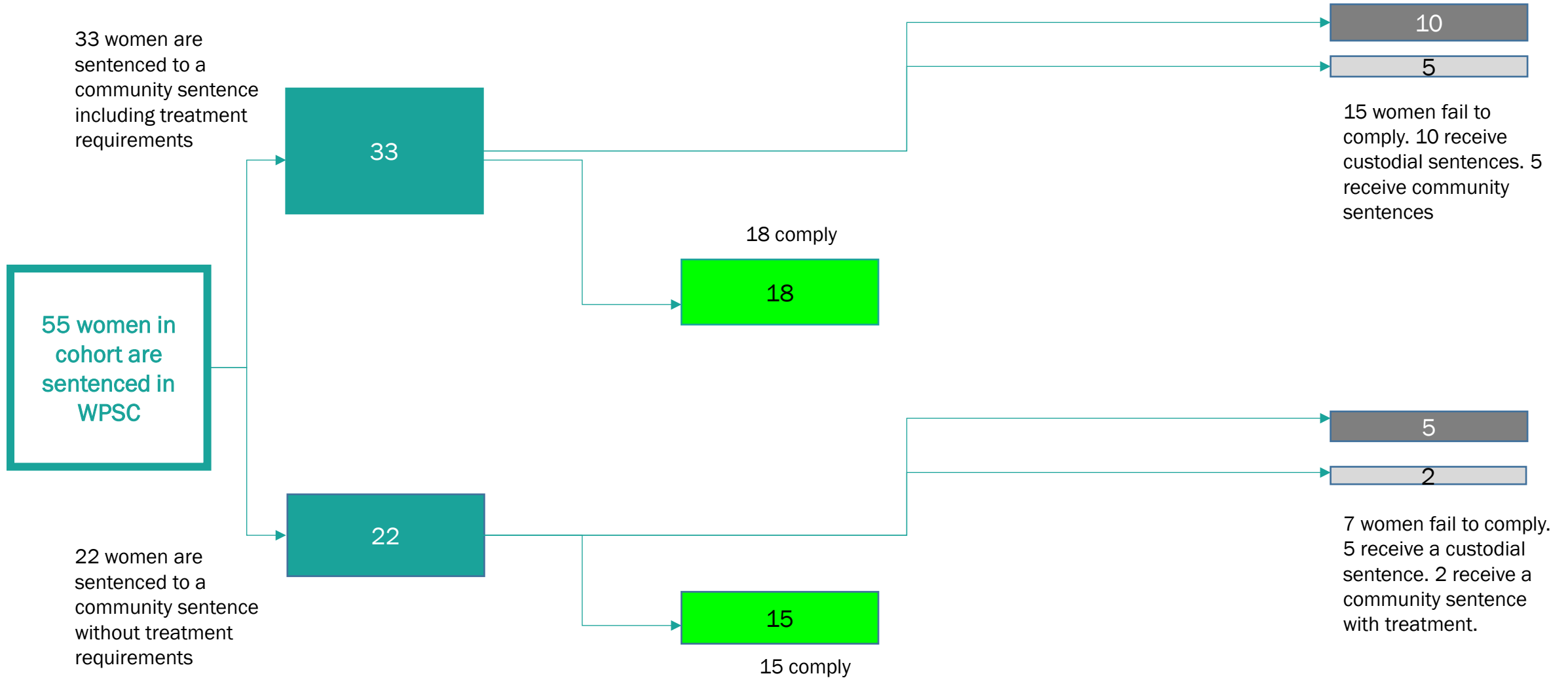
High scenario: Only short prison sentences



Central scenario: Mix of community sentences and short prison sentences



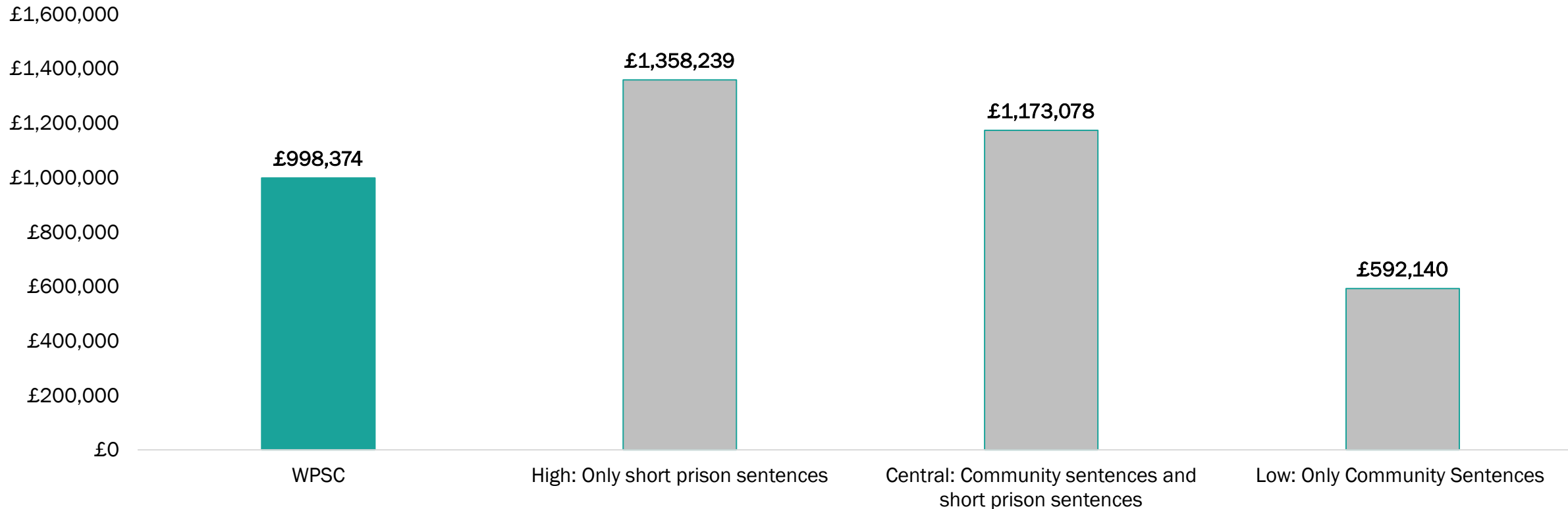
Low scenario: Community sentences only



Cohort analysis: The financial impact of women's problem-solving courts

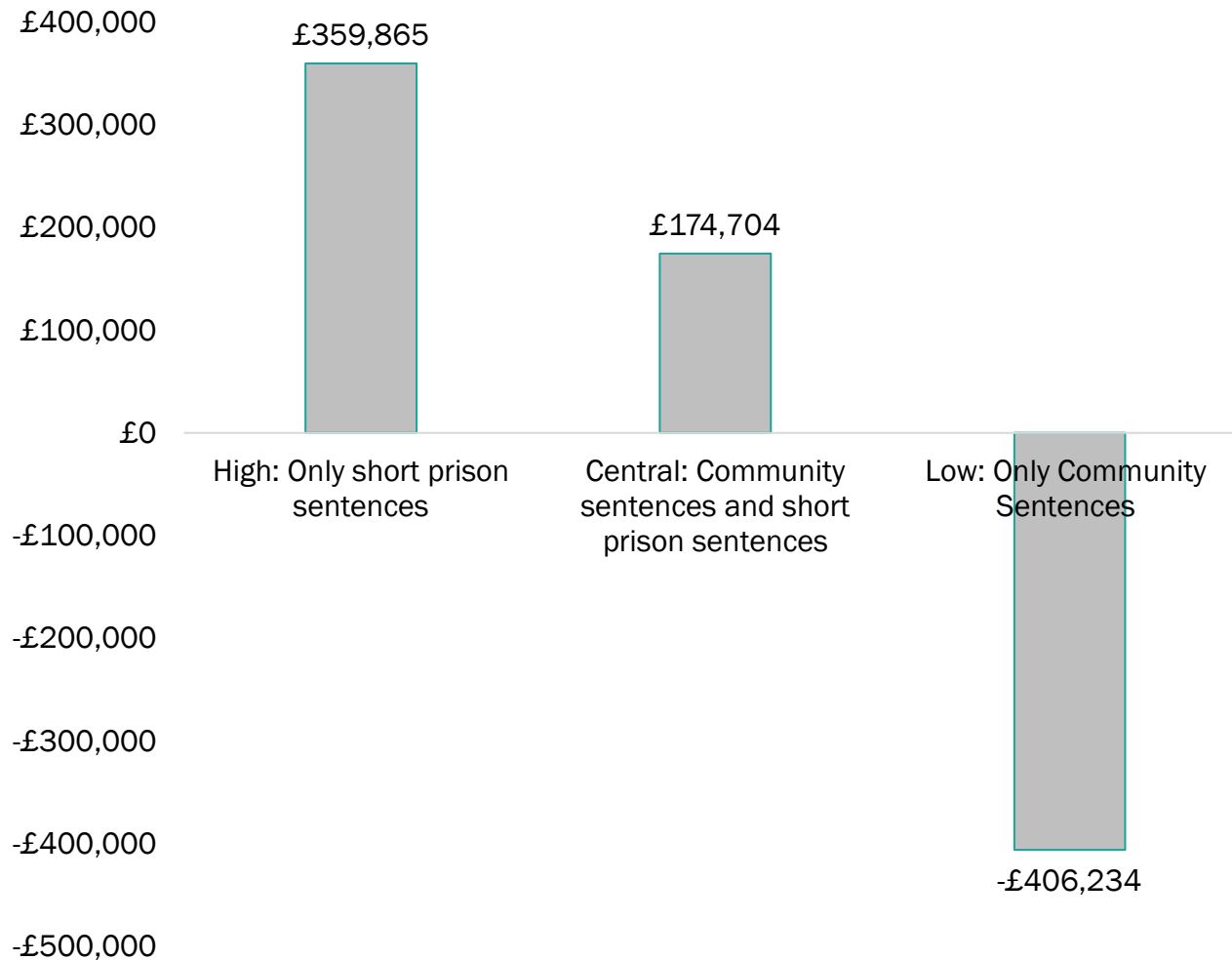
Our cohort estimates suggest that the total financial costs of women's problem-solving courts scenario are less than the high cost scenario and the central scenario. This suggests that, so long as women's problem-solving courts are targeting and diverting a significant proportion of women who would otherwise go to prison, they will generate savings.

Figure 5: Total financial cost of the 4 scenarios



Cohort analysis: The financial impact of women's problem-solving courts

Figure 6: Savings/costs compared to WPSC scenario



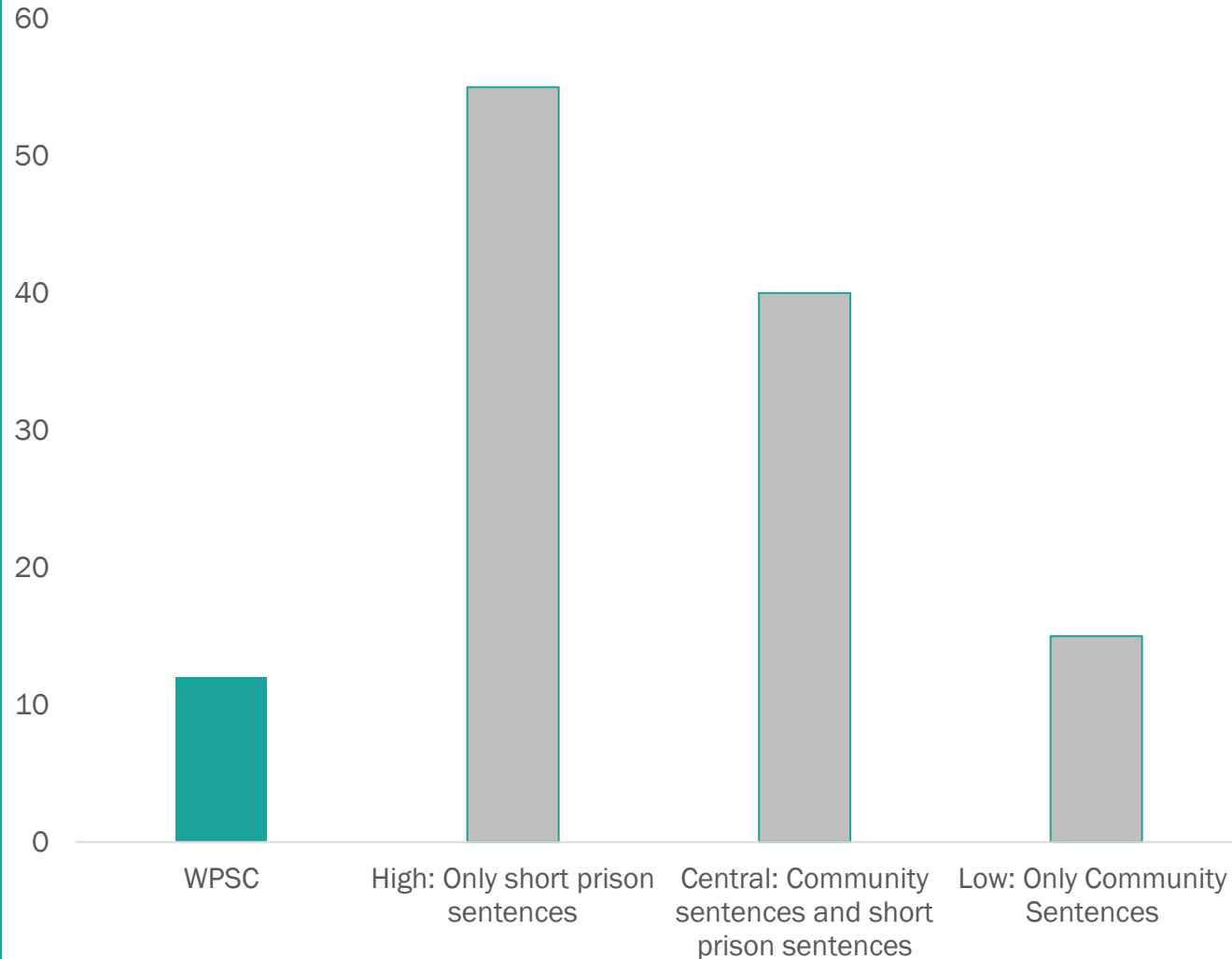
- The analysis reveals that the women's problem-solving court saves approximately £174,704 compared to the central scenario.
- If all 55 women had otherwise received short custodial sentences (High cost), the savings increase to approximately £359,865.
- Conversely, if all 55 women had otherwise received community sentences (Low cost), the problem-solving court model would be more expensive, with additional costs of approximately £406,234.

Cohort analysis: Estimating the financial impact of women's problem-solving courts

- Aside from looking at the overall estimated cost of each scenario, we have also looked at the following issues:
 - **The number of women going to prison:** Each scenario envisages different paths for women including, in all scenarios, the assumption that some women will be sentenced to prison either as their original sentence or following a breach of a previous order. We have been able to estimate, among the 55 women, how many will have been sent to prison over the period of each scenario. For example, 1 women going to prison once counts as one. One women going to prison three times counts as one.
 - **The impact on 'prison bed' days:** As above, each scenario envisages different paths for women. We have been able to estimate the number of days these imprisoned women spend in prison to identify, for each scenario, the total prison bed days each scenario envisages. This can involve counting the individual bed days that one woman serves when they go to prison on more than one sentencing occasion.
 - **The financial costs by different type of supervision:** Finally, we have also been able to estimate the costs that each scenario envisages by the type of supervision the women in the cohort experience. For example, we have been able to isolate how much of the total cost of each scenario is incurred when serving a community sentence, or by being in prison or being supervised on licence.

Cohort analysis: Women going to prison

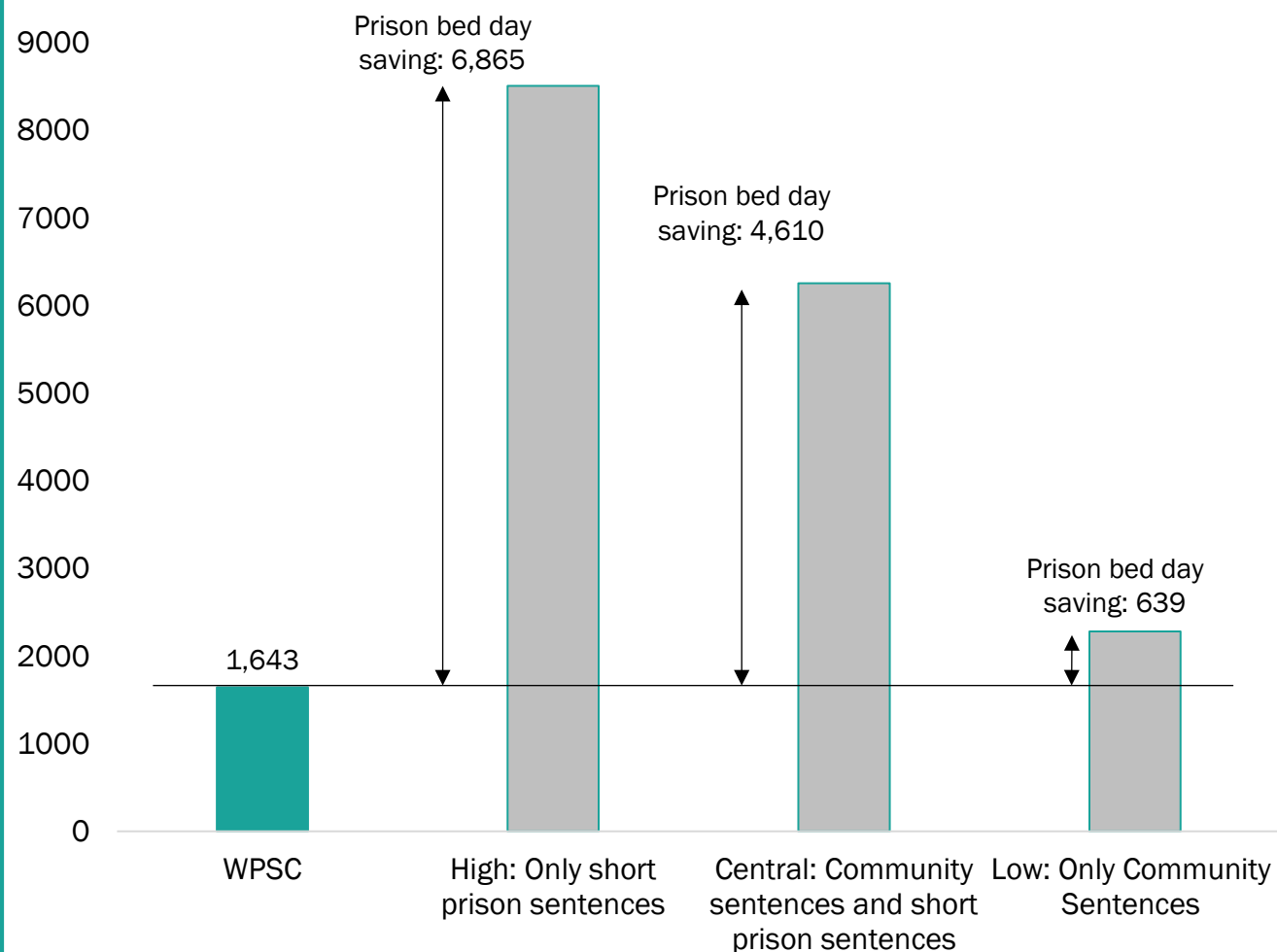
Figure 7: Number of women going to prison, by scenario



- None of the scenarios avoid some women going to prison.
- However, based on our assumptions, the baseline scenario of a women's problem-solving court is likely to see the fewest individual women going to prison within the cohort.
- This is based on the current data on the compliance and progress of women currently going through women's problem-solving courts.

Cohort analysis: Prison bed days

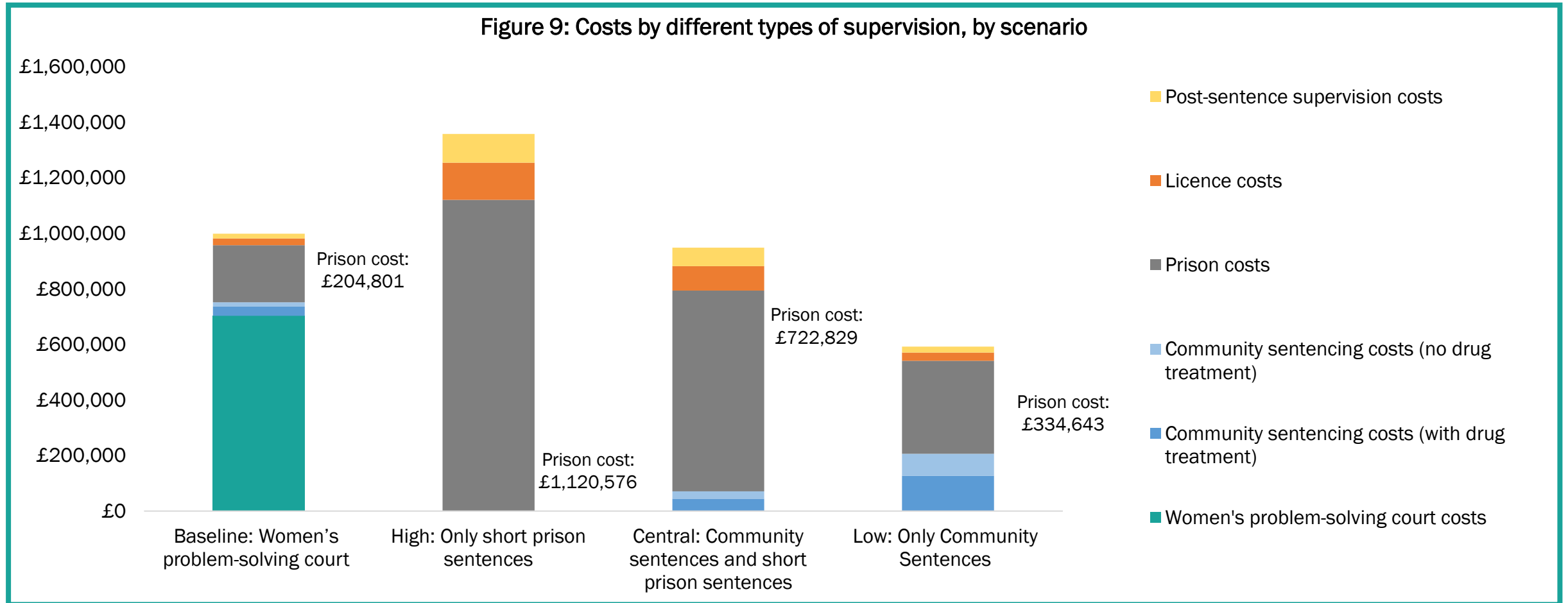
Figure 8: Prison bed days, by scenario



- While all scenarios envisage some women going to prison, the baseline scenario uses the least amount of prison bed days. Our estimates suggests it reduces the number prison bed days by 181% compared to the central scenario.
- However, due to the lack of granularity about when these bed day savings would accrue, it is hard to convert these bed days into annual prison place savings.

Cohort analysis: Different types of supervision

- As we have seen, in our WPSC scenario, processing a cohort of women through a problem-solving court incurs lower total the financial costs than in the high and central scenarios. When it comes to prison costs specifically, WPSC also incurs lower cost than all the other scenarios including the low scenario.





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Going to scale: New problem-solving courts

We have looked at what scaling women's problem-solving courts could look like over the next three years, operating from the current year of 2025/26. We have used the WPSC and central scenarios as the two comparators.

Figure 10: Roll-out of WPSCs, by number of courts

We have assumed a tapered growth of women's problem-solving courts, moving from the two in existence in 2025/26 to 10 by the end of 2028/29.

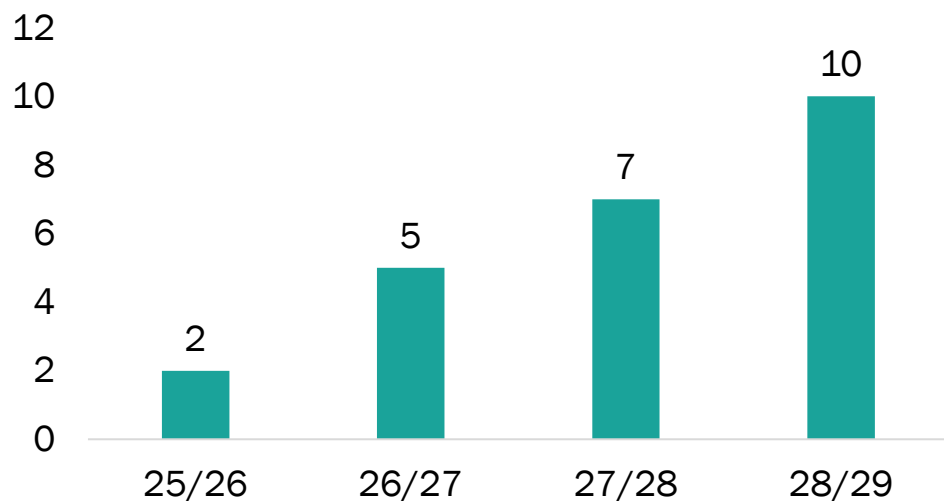
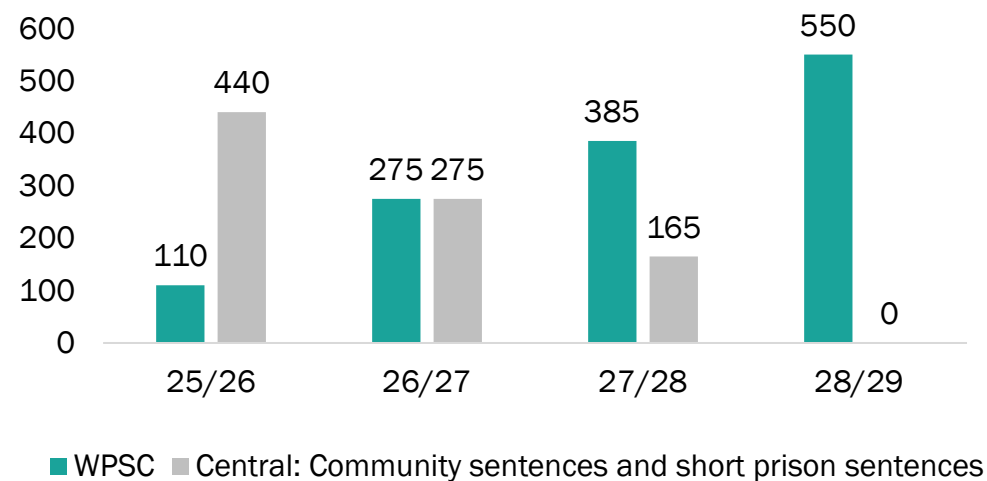


Figure 11: Roll-out of WPSCs, by number of cases

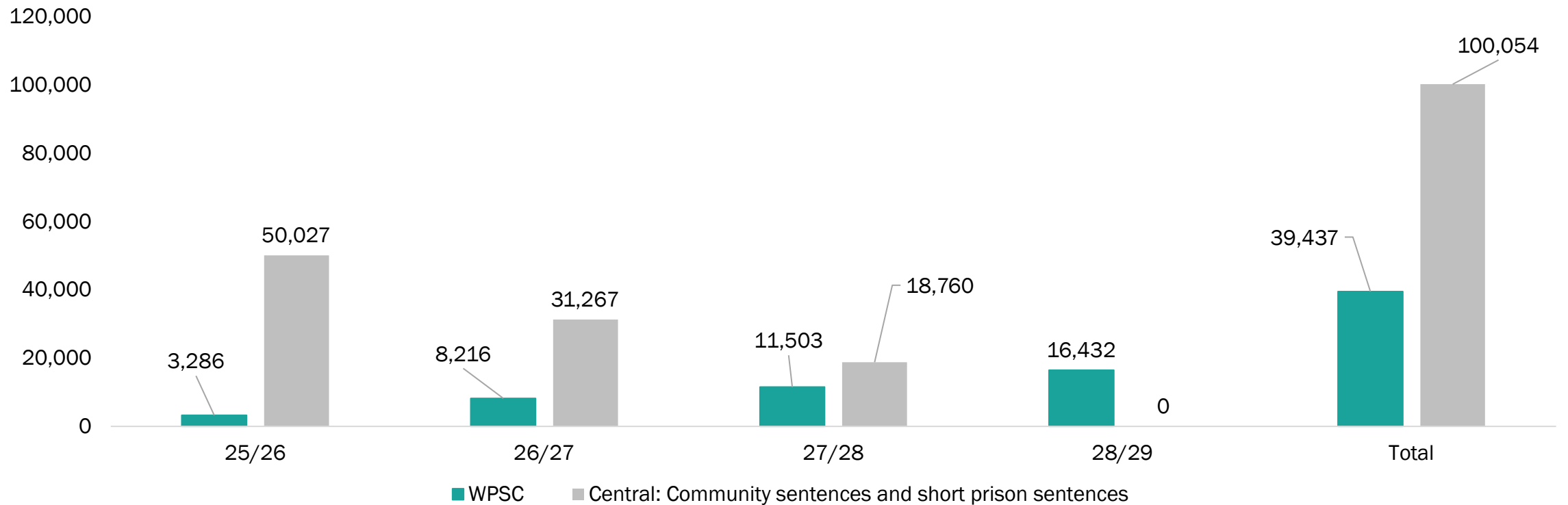
We have assumed that each new court will be able to accept 55 women onto the court each year, moving women in each court area from sentencing patterns drawn from our central scenario to the patterns in our WPSC scenario.



Going to scale: Prison bed day savings

- With these assumptions, we have been able to look at the impact of this scale up on 'prison bed' days. We have used the average prison bed day saving per women in the WPSC scenario and central cohorts and multiplied that by the number of women entering these scenarios each year.

Figure 12: Roll-out of WPSCs, estimated prison bed day savings



The prison bed day totals represents the total prison bed days that cohort will accrue over time, rather than the number of prison bed days saved each year.

Going to scale: Eligible areas

- We have also looked at local police force level data to identify those areas with the largest volume of women who are potentially eligible for a women's problem-solving court approach. This analysis is, at this stage, very crude, using sentencing data from the past five years and making educated guesses about the proportion of the cohort of women sentenced to community and suspended sentences and short prison sentences who may be eligible. We have NOT had data to look at the profile of these women's offences, their risks, needs and assets.
- Using this analysis, we have conducted initial geo-spatial analysis to locate those courts closest to extant women's centres in those top ten police forces. We are in contact with many of these areas to gauge their interest in developing such an approach.

Sentencing of women (2019/20 to 2023/24)	Problem-solving eligible cases (estimate)	Custody rate (% all sentences are prison)	Short custody rate (% all sentences are short prison sentences)	Short custody rate 2 (% all prison sentences are short)
Metropolitan	4057	2.8%	2.1%	75.7%
West Yorkshire	1862	2.7%	2.2%	81.4%
West Midlands	1598	3.5%	2.7%	77.4%
Greater Manchester	1560	2.1%	1.5%	71.2%
Merseyside	1524	2.8%	2.0%	70.9%
South Wales	1479	2.8%	2.1%	75.5%
Lancashire	1036	2.0%	1.4%	67.0%
Kent	1031	3.2%	2.3%	71.8%
Avon and Somerset	1011	1.9%	1.5%	80.2%
Essex	964	3.2%	2.5%	77.6%

Green denotes a women's problem-solving court already in existence

Next steps

The Centre for Justice Innovation, with the funding of the JABBS foundation, is creating and convening new national networks to create, support and spread effective evidence-based gender-responsive approaches for women and girls involved in the criminal justice system. These convene practitioners, commissioners and policymakers working and interested in women's problem-solving courts and community diversion. These networks will:

- Support the expansion of evidence-based practices, including within communities through action-orientated and operational workshops.
- Provide forums to share best and promising practice between practitioners and others working in and interested in these areas.
- Establish common practice principles.
- Build the evidence-base.
- Identify opportunities to strengthen whole systems, place-based commissioning and other approaches to strengthen local partnership working.
- Influence national government and other decision-makers to change operational and strategic policy to transform community justice for women and girls.