

Steve O'Connell AM  
Police and Crime Committee  
Scrutiny and Investigations team  
London Assembly  
City Hall  
The Queens Walk  
London  
SE1 2AA

4 October 2017

Dear Steve O'Connell

The Howard League for Penal Reform (hereafter the Howard League) welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the London Assembly Police and Crime Committee investigation: Women Offenders.

### **About the Howard League**

The Howard League is the oldest penal reform charity in the world. We conduct research, campaign and, through our legal team, represent children and young adults in custody. We work towards less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison. For more information about the Howard League please visit [www.howardleague.org](http://www.howardleague.org).

### **Key points**

It is ten years since the publication of the *Corston Report: a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system*. Baroness Corston's report provided a blueprint for the treatment of women in the justice system. Since its publication there has been limited positive change, but momentum has been lost and provision for women is starting to go backwards. London should lead the way in reducing imprisonment of women, investing in quality services, largely outside of the justice system and ensuring every woman in London has access to a local women's centre.

The closure of Holloway has been largely negative for women from London and their families. This is because of the failure to do something innovative and better for women. Placing most women from London in Downview prison, rather than Holloway, only ruptures family ties further and has disrupted a very high quality network of women's services in London. MOPAC should remedy this by building a small custodial unit in London (as set out in the Corston report), working with the Ministry of Justice to close Downview and focusing on reducing the number of women remanded, sentenced and

recalled to prison. This would create a better system for women, their families and communities in London.

London should lead the way by investing in existing women's centres in the community and funding new ones. This is the real opportunity to reduce offending by women and help women and their families lead happier, healthier lives.

### **Change over the last decade**

Ten years ago Baroness Corston's seminal report on women in the criminal justice system was published. It's recommendations centred on closing women's prisons and replacing them with a small number of small custodial units in urban centres; reducing the number of women sent to prison; and developing a network of women's centres which are 'one-stop-shops' for women who need help (including, but not limited to, women who have offended).

In the ten years following the Corston Report, limited progress has been made. There are more women's centres than there once were and the number of women in prison has fallen slightly. Liaison and diversion services in police stations are a welcome step, but are too often undermined by poor community mental health services. However, we are starting to go backwards. The Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) reforms which split and partially-privatised the probation service and introduced supervision for a year after a short prison sentence has had a negative impact on services for women in the criminal justice system with women being recalled to prison in large numbers.

### **Barriers to tackling women's offending**

In 2016, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System (APPG) conducted an inquiry into the treatment of women in the criminal justice system. It found that women's centres had been successful in reducing reoffending, but they were under threat following the break-up of the probation service under the government's Transforming Rehabilitation programme. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (2016) found that community services for women were under-valued and under threat.

The APPG on women and the penal system found that many of the services provided by community rehabilitation companies (CRCs) were watered down versions of what went before. There is a real risk that high quality services for women, particularly women's centres, will become a thing of the past. This will have a hugely detrimental impact on the women that use these services and their communities.

The inquiry by the APPG on women in the penal system found TR and the establishment of privately run CRCs had had a detrimental impact on the services women's centres were able to provide. Several women's centres told the APPG inquiry they received no funding from CRCs, some were providing services temporarily but felt unable to continue long-term, and others had entered into contracts with CRCs but this involved providing services of a much lower quality than they were doing previously or would like. Many CRCs were not funding one to one casework for women, which is central to the success of the women's centre model.

The introduction of 12 months' supervision under the TR programme has had a significant impact on women in the justice system, dramatically and disproportionately extending the restrictions on their liberty and subjecting them to the possibility of recall during the 12 months. Under TR, recalls are for short periods, usually 14 days. Data provided by the Ministry of Justice found that between February 2015, when TR was implemented, and March 2016 there were 797 recalls of women released from short sentences. None of these recalls would have been possible under the old system with the result that women are experiencing repeated spells in prison not for committing a crime but for administrative failures.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons and Independent Monitoring Boards have noted the disproportionate number of women being recalled into custody. Most incidents of recall involved different women recalled on one occasion; however, in the first nine months of the programme alone, 46 women were recalled at least twice (House of Commons 2016).

### **Opportunities to reduce women's offending**

London should lead the way in keeping women out of the criminal justice system. The majority of women who end up in the criminal justice system have been convicted of non-violent offences. Many women who come into contact with the criminal justice system are vulnerable and have complex needs.

Women should be kept out of the formal criminal justice process wherever possible. The Howard League has worked with police services across the country to reduce the number of arrests of girls and boys under the age of 18. In the last six years, arrests of children have fallen by 64 per cent. Contact with the criminal justice system can blight lives and lead to a downward spiral of crime and custody. Similar work to reduce the arrests of women by the Met police could reduce offending and make communities safer. For some women, doing nothing will have the best outcome.

For women with specific vulnerabilities, diversion to appropriate services of support can reduce further contact with the criminal justice system. The North and North East London liaison and diversion trial site won a Howard League community award for its work to ensure that vulnerable people in contact with the criminal justice system had access to mental health practitioners at the earliest opportunity. Specific services for women in London, such as mental health services, women's centres and substance misuse services, need investment if they are to meet the needs of vulnerable women.

The Howard League welcomes MOPAC's commitment to the provision of gender appropriate specialist services for women and the expansion of access to women's centres. Women's centres have a proven track record of reducing re-offending. A study by the Ministry of Justice in 2015 found that women's centres had a statistically significant impact on reducing reoffending, with the difference estimated to be as high as 9 per cent. However, MOPAC must support women's centres to ensure they have adequate funding to deliver high quality services for women, including one to one work.

MOPAC has stated that it aims to have greater influence and oversight over CRCs in London. MOPAC must ensure that CRCs are meeting their legal obligations to address

and identify the needs of women and are funding high quality services with a proven track record of success.

MOPAC must take action to ensure that women's centres in London thrive and do not become a thing of the past.

Yours sincerely,



Frances Crook