



All Party Parliamentary Group
Women in the Penal System
C/o The Howard League for Penal Reform
1, Ardleigh Road
London
N1 4HS

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17 November 2020

REDUCING THE ENTRY OF WOMEN INTO THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Thank you for your letter of 19 October to my colleague Kit Malthouse MP, regarding the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Women in the Penal System's inquiry into reducing the number of women arrested. I am responding in my capacity as the prisons and probation Minister, with responsibility for women in the justice system.

I read the APPG's briefing paper, *Arresting the entry of women into the criminal justice system with interest*, and note that many of the issues highlighted by the review reflect those outlined in the Female Offender Strategy, including that women's offending often stems from abuse and trauma, and other complex needs around mental health, substance misuse, suitable accommodation and unemployment.

As you will know, our Female Offender Strategy set out our vision of fewer women offending and reoffending; fewer women in custody, particularly on short sentences, with more managed in the community; and better conditions for those women for whom custody is necessary. The strategy launched a programme of work to improve outcomes for female offenders and make society safer by tackling the underlying causes of offending and reoffending, and this will take some years to deliver.

Amongst our achievements so far are the publication of a new Women's Policy Framework; roll-out of new training for staff working with women in custody and the community; and improvements to the preparation of pre-sentence reports through the introduction of a new aide memoire prompting authors to consider all factors relating to a woman's offending and make a robust proposal for a community sentence where possible. We have also published Lord Farmer's independent review into family ties for female offenders and a summary of our review of the operational policy on Pregnancy, Mother and Baby Units, and Mothers separated from children under the age of two in prison.

We have piloted a new offender management model for women under supervision in the community. Learning from the pilot is being taken forward into the probation reform programme as part of a tiering framework and will ensure that resources will be allocated according to need as well as risk.

We know that we will only turn around women's lives if there is effective partnership working across Government and in local areas, including statutory and non statutory service providers, the voluntary sector, and a range of criminal justice agencies. I recognise that third sector community services, such as women's centres, play a key role in supporting women in contact with the justice system, or at risk of offending. We will shortly be announcing the outcome of a £2.5m funding process, offering support for core costs to bring financial stability to this sector.

This builds on the £5.1 million already invested in women's community services since 2018, which has helped to sustain and enhance services, as well as enabling the acquisition of buildings for new women's centres.

The APPG's report noted the good examples of early intervention and diversion (Liaison & Diversion (L & D)) schemes. These services place clinical staff at police stations and courts, so to provide assessments and referrals to treatment and support, providing critical information to decision-makers in the justice system. This is so that decisions on charging and sentencing vulnerable people can be tailored to meet their needs, including diversion away from the criminal justice system where appropriate. NHS England are currently enhancing 'women's pathways' across all L&D services, to address the specific needs of women in the criminal justice system. A specific women's lead has been appointed in each service, to develop the pathway, and appropriately address the needs of female offenders.

I was pleased to see the APPG's reference to our police guidance pack, *Managing Vulnerability: Women*, which was published alongside the Female Offender Strategy in 2018. As you may know, we followed this up in 2019 with a stocktake to assess the impact of our guidance and the current policing response to vulnerable women across forces, including identifying examples of good practice and shortfalls in provision. A report of the findings was shared with all police forces and Police and Crime Commissioners earlier this year in order to inform and support planning and next steps towards positive developments.

Since then, the Ministry of Justice has been working in partnership with the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) and Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC), to further develop the policing response to women. I am delighted that, as a result, an NPCC Female Offenders Working Group is being established to commence before the end of the year. In addition, a series of regional webinars are planned bringing together the police, key officials and other statutory and third sector organisations to consider partnership working to support vulnerable women. This will similarly be the focus of our forthcoming Concordat on female offenders, which will be a cross-government statement of intent, explaining how public services should work together more effectively in national and local partnerships to identify and respond to the needs of female offenders.

The APPG's report also set out the role of domestic abuse in women's lives and offending. We are committed to tackling domestic abuse and to supporting vulnerable individuals, including female offenders, to ensure they can rebuild their lives. Our earlier community services funding of £5.1m announced with the Strategy, included £2.1m from the Government's £20m funding pot for domestic abuse, and was invested in services supporting female offenders who have experienced domestic abuse. Throughout the pandemic we have been working closely with local partners, nationally commissioned services, and criminal justice agencies on contingency arrangements via our Covid-19 Victims and Witnesses Silver Group. Also, working across government, we have announced £76 million to support the most vulnerable - £25 million of this is being provided by the Ministry of Justice to charities supporting victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse.

Finally, the report mentions the higher rates of arrest for black and minority ethnic women, and the importance of police officers understanding of the experiences of women from this cohort. There is much we need to learn from the specific user experience in order to develop policy options to take forward. This includes, for example, user centred research, currently underway, focussed on identifying how we might reduce barriers ethnic minority women face in understanding the legal processes they experience from arrest to pre-sentencing.

The findings from this research are expected to be available in the new year.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lucy Frazer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'L' and 'F'.

LUCY FRAZER QC MP