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Westminster Hall debate: Female Offender Strategy: One Year On
2.30-4 pm on Wednesday 24th July 2019

A briefing from Women in Prison (WIP) on the Whole Systems Approach and Women's Centres

Key recommendations from Women in Prison (WIP)

- Investment in the growth and sustainability of Women's Centres
- A Women's Centre in every local authority area
- Reinvestment of the £80M proceeds from the sale of HMP Holloway in women's community support services
- An end to the punishment and prosecution of debt and poverty (including non-payment of TV license or Council Tax)
- Investment in diversion services
- A presumption against the use of short custodial sentences
- Guaranteed women-specific provision in upcoming probation reforms which builds on current women's specialist provision and ensures sustainable funding
- Implementation of the key recommendations of the Farmer Review and Lammy Review, including explicitly addressing disproportionate impact of the criminal justice system on women from black and minority ethnic groups (BAME).

Key aspects of the Female Offender Strategy

The [Female Offender Strategy](#) was published on 27th June 2018. It was welcomed by the women's sectors and criminal justice sectors alike and has received cross-party support. The strategy sets out the Government's vision that custody should be a last resort, reserved for the most serious offences. It makes clear that women should be given the support they need to address the root causes of offending in community settings, and that early intervention is essential to reduce the number of women entering the justice system. The strategy commits to reduce the number of women in prison and to focus on community alternatives and recognises that community-based services like Women's Centres are the answer to reducing re-offending.



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Urgent investment is needed in addressing the root causes of women's offending and making the strategy a reality

The full implementation of the strategy is only possible through a 'Whole Systems Approach' – an holistic, multi-agency approach to addressing the needs of women, with investment in Women's Centres and other specialist community support for women, all of which are central to its success.

A key 'ask' of the #OPENUP Women's Futures campaign is for every local authority to have a specialist Women's Centre. With such investment and growth in services for women we have the potential to become global leaders in criminal justice solutions and set an international example of how to successfully reduce prison populations and create healthier, safer communities.

As outlined by Lord Farmer in his recent [review](#), Women's Centres face a "desperately precarious" funding position, jeopardising services "which are essential to the rehabilitation and rebuilding of the lives of so many women".¹ In many cases these services face a funding 'cliff edge' in 2020/21. In order for Women's Centres to be at the heart of addressing the serious challenges set out in the Government's Strategy this funding crisis must be addressed.

As the Justice Select Committee argued in its recent inquiry '[Prison population 2022: planning for the future](#)', "The Government should be more bold in investing in community alternatives for women cross-departmentally, not only via the justice system. Reallocating the £50 million from building women's community prisons had the potential to generate a step-change in the sustainability of community-based provision that is proven to reduce crime (...) That the issue of mainstream cross-Government funding for women's centres remains unresolved by consecutive Governments over the last 10 years is a grossly wasted opportunity to reduce the costly intergenerational impact of crime. This must be addressed in the 2019 Spending Review".³

The sale of HMP Holloway presents us with an opportunity

Since the launch of the strategy, the sale of HMP Holloway has freed up £80M to the Treasury - money that could be reinvested in community support services to enable implementation of the strategic recommendations. WIP and our partners in the criminal justice sector urge HM Treasury to invest the £80m from the sale of HMP Holloway in the Women's Centre network and other community support services for women. If the Treasury dedicated the £80 million to specialist support for women, including Women's Centres, domestic violence services and support for survivors of sexual violence, the results would be transformational - for women, children and communities, and for generations to come. It would also be the start of recognising the disproportionate impact which pressure on public services and the benefits system has had on women.⁴



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What Women's Centres do and why they are the best option for women in the criminal justice system

A Women's Centre is a space dedicated to specialist services for women facing multiple disadvantages, including those caught up in the criminal justice system. Women's Centres can offer support across a range of issues affecting women in the criminal justice system, including mental health, problematic substance use, domestic and sexual abuse, parenting, housing, finance and employment. They also provide a safe space to build confidence and self-esteem, and to develop trusting relationships.

Women's Centres are being used to provide early intervention services for girls and women at risk of entering the criminal justice system, supporting alternatives to custodial sentencing and enabling women to rebuild their lives after release from prison. Centres can play a key role in Liaison and Diversion schemes, diverting women at the point of arrest, as well as providing women with the support that helps them to complete community sentences whilst caring for their families. The UK is unique in having a network of around 40 specialist Women's Centres that are 'one-stop-shops' offering holistic and trauma-informed support to women affected by the criminal justice system.

Women's Centres are effective in reducing reoffending: The Government has acknowledged that the current system of passing prison sentences of weeks or months for non-violent low-level offences such as theft, shoplifting and linked to non-payment of Council Tax or TV licence is less effective than community solutions which enable women to access support to address the root causes of their offending. The Women's Centre model has been developed over decades and is proven to reduce offending more effectively than a prison sentence. Ministry of Justice Data Lab research in 2015 found that the support of Women's Centres had a statistically significant impact on reducing women's reoffending when compared to a control group.⁵

Women's Centres provide value for money: The average cost of imprisoning a woman for one year is £49,547.⁶ Women's Centres are a substantially cheaper way of providing preventative and rehabilitative support services compared to prison. A Cost Benefits Analysis of gmaWomenMATTER, a women's centre run by Women in Prison (WIP), found that £4.68 is saved for every £1 invested in the project with a payback period of just one year.⁷

Other key points of the Female Offender Strategy

Women are over-represented in prosecutions related to non-payment of TV licence: about 70% of prosecutions for non-payment of TV licence are against women.⁸ Women are also disproportionately affected by prosecutions related to children's truancy. In 2017, a total of 16,406 people were taken to court for the offence of truancy and 11,269 were convicted. Of those taken to court, 72% were women and of those convicted, 84% were women. In terms of sentencing, 83% of the 500 people given a community order were women, out of the 110 people given a suspended sentence 80% were women, and 9 women out of 10 people were given an immediate custodial sentence.⁹

We strongly urge an end to the punishment and prosecution of debt and poverty, and other complex disadvantages such as those which are often at the root of a parent being unable to get their child to school. We oppose the imposition of unreasonable fines on women, particularly when this leads to imprisonment – a punishment which has a completely disproportionate impact on women and their families.



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Other key points of the Female Offender Strategy (continued)

The strategy stated that diversion from prosecution to address causes of offending is a preferred option in certain cases. One year on from publication, we still need significant investment in diversion schemes for women, and the community support services that can make these a reality. Diversionary schemes and community alternatives to custody enable women to stay in their homes and communities, causing minimum disruption and trauma to dependants, whilst enabling root causes of offending to be tackled. However, diversion schemes are only possible if services exist into which women can be diverted.

As outlined in the Female Offender Strategy, there is persuasive evidence that short custodial sentences are less effective than community alternatives in reducing reoffending. The impact on women, who often receive short sentences for low-level, non-violent offences, is particularly significant. There has been cross-party support for the criminal justice sector call to introduce a presumption against the use of short custodial sentences of less than six months. For further information on short sentences, please see the [Revolving Doors short-sighted](#) campaign.

The Government states that the Female Offender Strategy takes a gender-informed approach to improve the outcomes for women at all points of the justice system. It is crucial that women's specialist provision is guaranteed in the current reforms to probation services, so that there is not a repeat of the disastrous impact that Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) had on the voluntary sector, particularly on small specialist charities, such as those providing many Women's Centres.

Key facts about women in the criminal justice system

- 3,838¹⁰ women are held in 12 prisons in England. Women make up around 5% of the prison population. 82% of women entering prison under sentence have committed a non-violent offence.¹¹ 62% of women in prison are serving sentences of less than 6 months.¹² The reoffending rate of women serving short prison sentences is 61%.¹³
- Root causes of women's offending are often linked to domestic abuse and trauma (including in childhood), which often result in mental ill health and problematic substance use. 57% of women in prison report having been victims of domestic violence¹⁴ and 31% of women in prison spent time in care as children.¹⁵
- The criminal justice system disproportionately impacts women who are black and minority ethnic (BAME). 18% of female prisoners are BAME compared to 14% of the general population. Within this, some groups of women are particularly overrepresented, most notably Black or Black British women who make up 8.8% of female prisoners, compared to 3.3% of the general population. Ministry of Justice analysis shows that black women are about 25% more likely than white women to be sentenced to custody at crown court. Disproportional outcomes are particularly noticeable for certain offences. For every 100 white women sentenced to custody at crown courts for drug offences, for example, 227 black women received custodial sentences.¹⁶
- Women are far more likely than men to be primary carers and only 5% of children remain in the family home when a mother is imprisoned.¹⁷ As the Farmer Review set out, the separation of children from their mothers is a life-altering event that causes profound damage to both mothers and children. It also increases the future risks of children entering the criminal justice system.



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References

- ¹ Ministry of Justice (2019) The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime by Lord Farmer
- ² ibid
- ³ House of Commons Justice Committee (2019) Prison population 2022: planning for the future, p111
- ⁴ See Women's Budget Group (2019) Triple whammy: the impact of local government cuts on women
- ⁵ Ministry of Justice (2017) Justice Data Lab statistics quarterly, England and Wales, April 2017
- ⁶ Ministry of Justice (2018) Costs per place and costs per prisoner by individual prison, HM Prison & Probation Service Annual Report and Accounts 2017-18 Management Information Addendum
- ⁷ Abbott, Katharine (2017) Women MATTA Cost Benefit Analysis
- ⁸ Ministry of Justice (2018). Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2017. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/criminal-justice-system-statistics-quarterly-december2017>
- ⁹ Epstein, Brown and O'Flynn (2018) Punishing for Truancy, Napo magazine <https://www.napomagazine.org.uk/2018/08/21/punishing-for-truancy/>
- ¹⁰ Ministry of Justice Population bulletin: weekly 12 July 2019
- ¹¹ Table 2.5b, Ministry of Justice (2019) Offender management statistics quarterly, October to December 2018, London: Ministry of Justice
- ¹² Ministry of Justice Offender management statistics, October to December 2018
- ¹³ Table 6.07,6.09, Ministry of Justice (2016) women and the criminal justice system 2015, London: MoJ
- ¹⁴ Data Extracted from OASYS, In Thinking differently about female offenders. Transforming rehabilitation, Guidance Document. MOJ/NOMS 2014
- ¹⁵ Ministry of Justice (2012) Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds, London: MoJ
- ¹⁶ Agenda and Women in Prison (WIP) (2017) Double disadvantage: the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women in the criminal justice system
- ¹⁷ Home Office (1997) Imprisoned Women and Mothers, Home Office Research Study 162, London

About Women in Prison (WIP) and #OPENUP women's futures

Women in Prison (WIP) is a charity founded 35 years ago. It provides support, advice and guidance to women affected by the criminal justice system (including in Women's Centres in Woking, Manchester and Lambeth) and campaigns to prevent the harm caused to women, their families and our communities by imprisonment. Our current campaign is called #OPENUP Women's Futures which aims reduce the women's prison population and to grow and support the vital work of community-based support services. Please see our #OPENUP [manifesto](#) for more information.

For more information about Women in Prison (WIP), please see follow us on [Twitter](#) or contact info@wipuk.org

