



Ministry of  
**JUSTICE**

# **Strategic objectives for female offenders**

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## Foreword



As a new ministerial team within the Ministry of Justice, we have already started work on reforming the rehabilitation of offenders and addressing the failings in our youth custodial estate to break the depressing cycle of reoffending.

We must now look more carefully at how we deal with female offenders. The issue of women in prisons is a deeply emotive one, in which there is very genuine interest from Parliamentary colleagues, campaigners, the voluntary and charitable sector and the general public alike.

We have a duty to ensure that the criminal justice system is responsive to the needs of these offenders, where they differ from those of men. Progress must continue in how we help female offenders address the factors associated with their offending. We must make sure this work doesn't become quagmired, neither because, at 5 per cent, women make up only a small proportion of the prison population, nor because there are no easy answers.

Many female offenders have a background of abuse, and first-hand experience of the care system. The proportion of women prisoners that report abuse in their lifetime is double that of males. In 2011 self harm was 10 times higher than for men, and females in custody are twice as likely to suffer from anxiety and depression. Many of them will have problems with drugs and alcohol misuse, and nearly two-thirds leave behind dependent children when entering prison.

We simply cannot afford – either financially or morally – to ignore these issues. It costs £45, 000 to keep a woman in prison for one year, while almost 45 per cent of all women released from custody in 2010 reoffended within 12 months, committing further offences and creating countless more victims. Where women commit crimes, they must be punished appropriately and properly. But we must not forget that many will have been themselves victims too.

This is not about advocating preferential treatment of women within the criminal justice system or setting arbitrary targets for the number of women in prisons. Yes, it is my mission to see fewer women incarcerated. But this must be done by taking proper account of the realities of the lives of female offenders, and ensuring resources are best targeted to help more women turn their lives around.

## Strategic objectives for female offenders

I am absolutely committed to driving this forward across Government, and today have set out our strategic priorities. Together with the new expert Advisory Board I will convene, I want to develop policies to tackle female re-offending, to help women into gainful employment and safe environments, and off the 'conveyor belt to crime'. This can only be the right thing to do for women in the criminal justice system – and the right thing for their children, for their families and for society.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Helen Grant', with a stylized, cursive script.

HELEN GRANT

## Key Priorities

Our key priorities, which we will take forward within the Government's far reaching agenda for transforming the rehabilitation of offenders, are:

1. **Ensuring the provision of credible, robust sentencing options in the community that will enable female offenders to be punished and rehabilitated in the community where appropriate. We are committed to ensuring all community orders include a punitive element. Other options such as tagging and curfews can also be used to provide greater monitoring and structure to offenders' lives.**
2. **Ensuring the provision of services in the community that recognise and address the specific needs of female offenders, where these are different from those of male offenders.**
3. **Tailoring the women's custodial estate and regimes so that they reform and rehabilitate offenders effectively, punish properly, protect the public fully, and meet gender specific standards, and locate women in prisons as near to their families as possible; and**
4. **Through the transforming rehabilitation programme, supporting better life management by female offenders ensuring all criminal justice system partners work together to enable women to stop reoffending**

I will provide strong leadership on the implementation of these priorities. To support me in this work, I will chair a new **Advisory Board** for female offenders. The Board will provide expert advice, working across Government and with our key stakeholders on the following work streams.

## **1. Enhanced provision in the community for female offenders**

We want the Board to take a creative, innovative look at the scope, within existing financial constraints, for improved sentencing options that combine a sufficiently punitive element with rehabilitative support that would give sentencers robust community sentencing options as an alternative to the use of short custodial sentences. Linking in with work streams 2 and 3, we will also explore with the Advisory Board, how we could use current community options, such as Approved Premises, more effectively.

## **2. Transforming Rehabilitation for female offenders**

The Transforming Rehabilitation consultation document sought specific views on how we can ensure the new rehabilitation commissioning model, including payment by results and the provision of post-release supervision for those sentenced to custody for less than 12 months, recognises and addresses the specific needs of female offenders, to enable better outcomes for these women. We will publish our response to the consultation shortly. However, we recognise that the relatively small number of female offenders presents particular challenges. We intend that the Advisory Board should support us in designing the system to ensure that women's needs and priorities are recognised in the provision of services in the community and through-the-gate of prison.

## **3. Review of women's prison estate**

On 10 January, we announced a review of the women's prison estate, to report by the summer. The review is expected to examine current capacity, distances from home, and the future composition of the estate so as to improve women's access to relevant opportunities and regimes for their rehabilitation needs. It is crucially important that we have appropriate accommodation that meets the needs of female prisoners, and that we have the right design, location and facilities, which are affordable and deliverable. There may be different views on what the new estate should look like, and the Advisory Board will provide external, practitioner focussed input to this complex work. As the review progresses, Board members may be asked to consider and provide advice on specific issues arising from this work.

#### 4. Whole system approach

Our plans to strengthen the community order framework will ensure that community orders are punitive as well as rehabilitative, and it is crucial that sentencers are aware of the gender-specific options available to support this. The Advisory Board will have a role:

- (a) Working with partners within the criminal justice system – to ensure that the needs and profile of female offenders are recognised and understood by those working with them at all points of the criminal justice system. We will work with sentencers and CJS partners to promote the community sentencing options for women. The Board may also decide to work with partners to identify whether there are gaps in current provision, or whether guidance for staff and processes could be improved for identifying and supporting vulnerable female offenders on their journey through the system.
- (b) Working with partners outside the criminal justice system – to raise the profile of female offenders and factors associated with their offending, such as domestic violence and sexual abuse, mental health needs, and substance misuse problems. The Board will work with Government departments and other partners to ensure effective joint working, both nationally and locally, to address these factors. This will include, for example working with the Home Office on work strands within their Action Plan for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. The Board will also have a role in ensuring that links are made, as appropriate, with work being taken forward for girls in the criminal justice system.

I want to take a fresh, creative look at how we might achieve better outcomes for female offenders, whether in custody or the community, that are affordable and deliverable. Delivering our strategic priorities will be one of my key aims. In doing so, we will take into account the Government's response to the Transforming Rehabilitation consultation, to be published this spring, and the recommendations of the women's custodial estate review when it reports in the summer. Our work will also be informed by the findings and recommendations of the current Justice Select Committee Inquiry on female offenders.

I recognise, too, the importance of keeping people informed about what we are doing for female offenders. I will therefore report on progress in implementing these priorities in my response to the Justice Select Committee's report. I will also consider what more we should do, going forward, to communicate with stakeholders and others with an interest in female offenders. In the meantime, I look forward to working alongside my Ministerial colleagues and key partners, both within and outwith the criminal justice system on this important agenda. Together we can achieve our goal of fewer women offending; fewer women serving short custodial sentences; and fewer women reoffending.