

Response to Consultation Document:

Draft Strategy for the Management of Women Offenders in Northern Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

Housing Rights Service was established in 1964 and is the leading provider of independent specialist housing advice services in Northern Ireland. We believe everyone has the right to a decent, safe, affordable home. Our services include:

- Providing a housing advice line
- Undertaking advocacy and legal representation on behalf of people with housing problems
- Providing online advice through our award winning website www.housingadviceNI.org and an email advice service
- Providing a specialist housing advice service within the prisons
- Delivering a skills and knowledge based training programme on housing
- Producing housing information resources
- Supporting (In partnership with Citizens Advice and AdviceNI) generalist advice agencies to deliver high quality housing in their local communities
- Providing client based comment to influence the development of relevant public policy and legislation.

All our services are delivered throughout NI and focus on the key areas of preventing homelessness; accessing accommodation; tackling poor housing conditions and affordability.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Housing Rights Service has direct experience of housing and related issues affecting women offenders through our prisons' work. The Housing Advice in Prisons Service is a developing initiative managed and delivered by Housing Rights Service in partnership with the Housing Executive, NI Prison Service, Probation Board NI and NIACRO. The project provides a specialist housing advice and information service within the three Northern Ireland prisons with the principal aim of preventing homelessness amongst those leaving prison.

Within the field of criminal justice there is growing recognition of the need to promote the rehabilitation of prisoners and reduce the likelihood of re-offending. In recent years there have been a number of key policy documents which highlight the close relationship between prisoners

re-offending and homelessness. Government statistics support this; with a significant number of those leaving prison without appropriate accommodation going on to re-offend. Our experience confirms this and also confirms that women are at high risk of re-offending and this is often related to their housing situation.

Housing Rights Service therefore welcomes the development of a NI strategy for women offenders. We agree with problems identified by Baroness Corston's review which can lead to women offending i.e. summarised as domestic circumstances; personal circumstances and socio-economic factors. We fully support the development of distinct gender specific approach to tackling these issues in the community, in custody and on release.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

From our engagement with women in prison the predominant issues are as follows:

- Women are more likely to lose their accommodation and their families as a consequence of offending
- As primary carers women often apply for bail. However there is a lack of bail accommodation and because of bail conditions, general needs hostels often cannot accommodate them
- There is also a lack of hostel places for females – including crash facilities (outside Belfast).
- There are high levels of addiction and self harm amongst women which can present problems linking into appropriate services (where available)
- There are cases where women have re-offended to get back into prison
- The movement of female prisoners in Hydebank is very restricted. This makes it more difficult for women to access services in comparison to male prisoners.

Housing Rights Service is very supportive of the proposed aims of the draft strategy. We have grouped our comments under the strategic strands and they focus specifically on issues which directly affect our clients.

STRATEGIC STRAND 1 – PROVIDING ALTERNATIVES TO PROSECUTION AND CUSTODY

We have concerns about the number of women who receive custodial sentences for low level offending, particularly for fine default. The impact of a custodial sentence for such offences can be significant on a prisoner's family and can result in loss of accommodation. Housing Rights Service would welcome alternatives to custodial sentences for lower level offences.

STRATEGIC STRAND 2 – REDUCING OFFENDING

This strand aims to reduce the number of women entering the criminal justice system by supporting those who are at risk of offending and responding effectively to their needs. One of the pathways of diversion is to address this issue of accommodation.

The document highlights current provision for temporary accommodation. It implies that accommodation is available through a number of sources in the public and voluntary sectors. We would like to point out that homeless women are not automatically entitled to statutory homelessness assistance from the Housing Executive. This very much depends on whether or not they meet prescriptive legislative criteria. In our opinion there is a lack of temporary hostel accommodation for females in general and specifically for ex offenders. Women who, for example, have not been subjected to domestic violence can find it difficult to secure appropriate hostel accommodation. (Where domestic violence has occurred women with male children aged 15+ cannot access Women's Aid accommodation.) There are also very few female crash facilities outside Belfast. Women can also find it extremely difficult to secure bail accommodation.

We recommend that a mapping exercise be carried out to determine the availability of, and need for, specific hostel facilities for women offenders and those at risk of offending.

In terms of advice provision, Housing Rights Service provides independent advice both in the community and in prisons. Our Housing Advice in Prisons Project can assist people who are both entering and leaving prison to prevent them from becoming homeless. At remand stage we seek to ensure that current accommodation is maintained and accrual of arrears is prevented. On release, problems with securing accommodation can present serious difficulties for women including getting custody of any children. The lack of social housing can mean lengthy waiting times for

housing applicants. The alternative is private rented accommodation which can be costly and is often inaccessible due to the normal requirement of a deposit and a month's rent in advance.

Given the gender specific issues which have been identified for female offenders, we believe there is a need for a specific supported accommodation project to meet the needs of female ex offenders. (See comments under Strategic Strand 3.)

Another pathway referred to in the strategy is education, training and employment. We would like to highlight our prisoner led housing advice work which is currently being piloted in Maghaberry. The training and support programme works with male prisoners to develop their skills and knowledge in the delivery of peer housing advice in the prison. This also enhances employability opportunities. We are keen to extend this service and to make it available to women. Given the gender specific advice issues for female offenders we feel this would have a very positive impact on the female prison population. Currently Housing Rights Service employs two Prison Housing Advisers who serve all three prisons. Resources would be required to enable the service to be extended. There are also merits in exploring opportunities to further extend this model to cover other areas such as benefits advice, financial/debt awareness, budgeting skills etc.

STRATEGIC STRAND 3 – GENDER SPECIFIC COMMUNITY SUPERVISION AND INTERVENTIONS

This strand aims to ensure that where women are sentenced their needs, wherever possible, are met in the community.

Housing Rights Service supports the development of women specific services aimed at reducing offending and welcomes the Women's Centre pilot. Additionally, we believe there is a need for a specific accommodation project for women.

In Dublin, De Paul Trust runs a supported accommodation project for women leaving prison. Tus Nua was established to assist in the transition to independent living for women leaving Dochas prison with no fixed abode. The project works with single women between the ages of 17 and 65 who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Working directly with a specific key worker the

women are permitted to stay within the project for up to 12 months, where they develop practical and life skills and take the time and space to adapt to life in the community. A lot of this is delivered through group work. We believe this type of project could make a significant and positive difference to women's lives and recommend that this model is explored further for a Northern Ireland context.

STRATEGIC STRAND 4 – DEVELOPING A GENDER SPECIFIC APPROACH TO THE MANAGEMENT OF WOMEN IN CUSTODY

This proposal includes taking forward the options for developing a new purpose built facility for women prisoners. We fully support the need for a separate self contained facility for women, as accommodation in Ash House is not appropriate.

LONGER TERM VIEW

Housing Rights Service welcomes the NIO's commitment to a co-ordinated approach to the implementation of the strategy and is pleased to hear about the establishment of a Ministerial Group on Reducing Offending. We recommend that this group should also be cross sectoral and include representation from key stakeholder groups in the voluntary and statutory sectors.

It will also be important to ensure that the strategy links in with the Housing Executive's homelessness and supporting people strategies.

Housing Rights Services welcomes the opportunity to comment on these proposals. For further information or clarification on any of the issues raised please contact:

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