

Written evidence from Lambeth Council's response, on behalf of the South London Alliance

Introduction to the South London Alliance

Lambeth Council is the lead commissioner for the South London Alliance (SLA) – a Whole System Approach to women in contact or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system. In 2018 Lambeth Council was successful in a bid to the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) London Crime Prevention Co-Commissioning Fund for £1,606,173 for the South London Alliance Whole System Approach to female offending. This was in recognition of the success and innovation of the Beth Centre service model, which was developed by Lambeth Council to improve support for women in contact with the criminal justice system.

The service, delivered by Women in Prison (WiP) with a range of voluntary sector organisations, has been operating since 1 April 2018 and is co-commissioned by MOPAC and Lambeth Council, with Lambeth Council as the lead co-commissioner for the six London boroughs who comprise the alliance: Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham, Wandsworth, Croydon and Sutton. The original funding grant was due to end in March 2021, however, funding has been extended to 30 June 2022, and from 26 June 2021 (through combined funding from MOPAC and the Ministry of Justice) the SLA will also include the boroughs of Bromley and Merton. Additional investment of both direct and in-kind funding is also provided by local authorities.

This submission focuses on those questions directly relevant to services provided by the South London Alliance.

(2) What has been done to reduce the number of women serving short sentences? Do community sentences currently offer a credible alternative to custody?

Utilising the gender-specific support provided by women's centres, community sentences offer a credible and effective alternative to custody, which appropriately address women's needs through a focus on the causes of women's offending behaviour.

The Whole System Approach provides tailored gender-responsive and holistic support, delivered through a Women's Centre (the Beth Centre in Lambeth) and local Hubs which provide a safe and confidential space for women to receive expert support.

The service supports up to 275 women per year with 1-2-1 keyworkers, and receives referrals from probation, statutory partners and voluntary organisations, and women can also self-refer. Support is based on women's individual needs, including advice and advocacy around housing, health and wellbeing, harmful substance misuse, financial management, education and employment, parenting support and domestic abuse. The Women's Centre also offers a comprehensive group workshop timetable where women can be creative, learn independent living skills and develop positive social networks.

During 2020/21, despite the challenges caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, the SLA achieved the following key outputs: 277 women engaged in 1-2-1 support; 549 accessed women's centre provision; 21 peer mentors were trained; 75% of women felt safer from

domestic violence and abuse; 68% of women reported improved housing outcomes; 66% improved health and wellbeing; 59% increased confidence in gaining employment; and 55% improved financial management.

(10) What support is available to ensure that women are successfully resettled into the community upon release and reduce reoffending? Are there any barriers to effective resettlement, and reduced reoffending?

Specialist community support services for women, such as the South London Alliance, have a vital role to play in women's successful resettlement and reduced reoffending. However, the success and effectiveness of a Whole System Approach to female offending rests on strong partnership working and integrated service delivery with key partners such as the police, prisons, health services (particularly Liaison and Diversion), the judiciary, probation and local authorities, with embedded pathways and appropriate information sharing protocols to support women into community provision. In addition, a trauma-informed approach should underpin all stages of a woman's journey through the criminal justice-system.

Alongside this there needs to be greater awareness of specialist women's services as an effective alternative to custody, particularly by the judiciary and through use of Pre-Sentence Reports. A gendered approach to diversion is also needed, through programmes such as Community Sentence Treatment Requirements (CSTRs) which provide the opportunity for women to receive the treatment they need to address the underlying causes of their offending behaviour, in the community, where they can also access other support. The South London CSTR pilot, which has been operating since February 2020, has been successful in improving access to mental health treatment for female offenders, improving mental health outcomes and reducing the use of short-term custodial sentences. The Female Offender Diversion pilot, commissioned by MOPAC, also aims to divert women who have committed low-level offending away from the criminal justice system and into specialist community support services such as the SLA, thereby reducing reoffending and escalation of offending.

A sustainable funding model is crucial to enable Women's Centres and specialist community provision like the SLA to continue to meet the multiple, complex gendered needs of women in contact or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system.