

Written evidence from Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison initiative

1. INTRODUCTION

The Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison initiative welcomes the Justice Committee Inquiry into Women in Prison with its focus on evaluating progress towards the government's stated goal of reducing women's imprisonment.

Our submission is confined to the Inquiry's tenth Term of Reference, on **support for women on release from prison** and the question about **"any barriers to effective resettlement and reduced reoffending?"**. It is our contention that the ongoing failure to identify and address women's specific circumstances, vulnerabilities and housing needs is a major barrier to effective resettlement, has significant intergenerational consequences, and is long overdue for resolution. To improve resettlement outcomes for women their accommodation needs must be addressed in relation to risks of domestic abuse and sexual exploitation, responsibility for children, mental health support and drug and alcohol dependencies deriving from past trauma. A lack of safe, supported accommodation makes it near impossible for women to turn their lives around.

Thousands of women are released from prison every year with nowhere to go, which is scandalous. Many women are made homeless by a short period of imprisonment and preventing this through early intervention would be cost effective. Recognition of the distinct drivers of women's offending and the impact of imprisonment must inform post-release resettlement support to stop the revolving door of short prison sentences, recall and reoffending spinning and the toll it takes on women, their children and the wider community.

2. BACKGROUND

The [Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison initiative](#) is an informal partnership of the London Prisons Mission (LPM), the Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields (SMitF) and the Prison Reform Trust (PRT). Its purpose is to identify and strive towards realistic solutions to the plight of women leaving prison to homelessness.

The initiative began in early 2019 when LPM volunteers working inside HMP & YOI Bronzefield learned that up to 50 women were leaving prison each month to homelessness, putting them at grave risk of abuse, recall and reoffending. The volunteers felt strongly that vulnerable women were being failed. Indeed, a prison inspectorate report in 2016 found "*the prison chaplaincy often gave out sleeping bags*" as women were being released without anywhere to go.

LPM consultations with the management of Bronzefield, now the largest women's prison and the main one for women imprisoned by London courts, as well as with the London Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, demonstrated that they shared these concerns. Both agencies were closely involved in the Safe Homes Summit held in November 2019 at St Martin-in-the-Fields, chaired by the Right Reverend Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester and now Bishop for Prisons.

We [attach](#) alongside this submission, for the Committee’s attention, the *Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison* briefing published in October 2020, after 20 months of research and consultation across the sector. It provides a comprehensive overview of the policy landscape, gives examples of good practice and makes key recommendations for change in policy and practice. We are very pleased to note that one of those, to increase the level of the prison discharge grant, has now been implemented. However, much more concerted government action is required if the longstanding systemic neglect of women’s resettlement needs is to end.

Since publication of the briefing, the Safe Homes initiative has organised a wide range of meetings with Ministers, parliamentarians of all parties including MPs with women’s prisons in their constituencies, stakeholders and service providers to:

- raise awareness about women’s distinct needs and circumstances on release;
- foster more joined up working between the criminal justice system and the agencies responsible for housing support;
- advocate for improved women-specific resettlement support and
- press for more gender-disaggregated data and reporting on the government’s various initiatives to reduce homelessness including on release from prison.

In January, the Ministry of Justice announced £20 million for a new temporary accommodation service for prison leavers being piloted in five out of 12 probation regions. Only one of the ‘pilot’ regions includes a women’s prison and the scheme is limited and lacks specific measures to support vulnerable women leaving prison. We are calling for the new accommodation service to be rolled out more widely and for women to be supported to find long-term safe and secure accommodation beyond the 12 weeks of temporary accommodation this pilot will offer.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF HOUSING TO RESETTLEMENT

Homelessness is a known risk factor for reoffending. It has long been recognised by the National Offender Management Service that *“ensuring appropriate accommodation for people who offend is the foundation for successful rehabilitation, resettlement and risk management. It can provide the anchor for a previously chaotic life and act as a springboard for other crucial steps – such as getting and keeping a job and accessing healthcare or drug treatment.”*

This is especially the case for women and in her 2007 review Baroness Corston noted that *“the accommodation pathway is the most in need of speedy, fundamental gender-specific reform”*. Well over a decade later this has still not been achieved. In February 2020 the Independent Monitoring Boards in ten of the 12 women’s prisons conducted a survey of women being released – only 41% of women interviewed said they had housing to go to on release. The report also found that a quarter of the women had lost their homes as a result of imprisonment, often a very short prison sentence. The point is made repeatedly by women that being released to homelessness or to unsuitable, temporary or unsafe housing means they are being “set up to fail”.

In December 2018, the Prison Reform Trust report on the rising number of women being recalled to prison ([Broken Trust](#)) found a strong link between unmet housing need and recall to prison. Most of the women interviewed said they needed more help with housing on release, and nearly half of them said they had been homeless and/or in dangerous housing situations at some stage following their initial release. The Prison Reform Trust's earlier report [Home Truths](#) contains a wealth of evidence about the consequences for women of being discharged from prison homeless, and the links between homelessness and offending.

Despite the 12 months post-custody supervision that even the shortest sentenced prisoners serve (since the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014), and the duty to refer a prisoner at risk of homelessness to a local authority in good time (since the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017), still housing support on release is wholly inadequate. There is inconsistent, patchy and conflicting data from prisons and probation services on housing outcomes for women which is also unhelpful and in need of resolution.

4. WOMEN HAVE DISTINCT HOUSING RESETTLEMENT NEEDS

The profile of women in prison is different from men's and this profoundly affects their resettlement needs including the kind of housing support that should be provided. Women are:

- more likely to be imprisoned far from home
- more likely to be a primary carer so requiring accommodation that enables them to be reunited with their children on release
- more likely to be at risk of domestic and sexual abuse and may therefore need to relocate for safety
- more likely to have been in care as a child and therefore have less family support
- more likely to have significant physical and mental health problems, often deriving from past abuse and trauma, for which access to health and social support services is critical.

Women are less likely than men to be rough sleeping and are often described as the 'hidden homeless' because rather than put themselves at risk on the street they will tend to 'sofa surf', exchange sex or risk exposure to abusive and coercive relationships for a roof over their heads. We and others have pointed out in meetings with government Ministers and officials that the strategy to reduce homelessness marginalises women by its focus on rough sleepers. No data has been provided on how many women have been supported by the rough sleeping initiatives or how much of the £20 million fund is being spent on safe homes for women released from prison.

There are two excellent research reports by Griffin Society fellows on women's housing needs on release, which we commend to the Committee. These provide detailed insights into women's experiences and practical solutions. [A Sense of Place – a study of accessing housing for women exiting prison – housing first not housing last](#) by Tracey McMahon criticises the reliance on 'signposting' and the futility of short term or temporary housing offers. The other report, by Alice Moore, analyses the [Impact of the Housing \(Wales\) Act 2014 on women involved in the criminal justice system](#). Both reports (presented at the

Safe Homes Summit chaired by Bishop Rachel Treweek) call for more adequate and more transparent funding of women's housing provision and for training of prison and probation and housing personnel to improve the quality and effectiveness of housing needs assessments.

Without stable accommodation it is almost impossible to register with a doctor or access other health services, obtain a job or claim benefits. The criminal justice system is not a housing provider but unless a woman in contact with it is provided with the necessary housing support she can become trapped in it, to the detriment of all. Hence the government's commitment to a 'whole system approach'. Relevant departments, including the MHCLG, are signatory to the cross-government [Concordat on Women in or at risk of contact with the Criminal Justice System](#) but this is woefully devoid of specific commitments, outcome measures or timeframes.

It is also disappointing to find no gender specific commitments in the [HMPPS Action Plan](#) submitted in August 2020 to HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation in response to their critical "Report on accommodation for adult offenders in the community and on release from prison". For example, HMPPS commits to introducing "a metric concerning settled accommodation for all service users under supervision" but doesn't indicate that it will be gender specific. Unless it is, it is likely to fail many women. It is critical that women themselves should be asked and encouraged to disclose their housing situation so that the necessary help can be given.

There are ample examples of successful housing provision for women in the Safe Homes report [attached](#). Many involve at least initially wrap around support, some specialise in reuniting mothers with their dependent children, all recognise that a home must be safe, long term and affordable. The government needs to be more proactive and strategic to ensure that all women released from prison are offered this support. Adequate targeted funding for housing and related resettlement support services is long overdue and would be a much better use of public funds than new prison places.

5. PROVISION OF ADEQUATE POST RELEASE ACCOMMODATION FOR WOMEN

We are disturbed by recent information received about the re-commissioning of services at HMP & YOI Bronzefield which apparently will not include accommodation support for women released to London. If so, support for women leaving the main women's prison in the UK is set to deteriorate rather than improve, which is a shameful state of affairs.

The reunification of the probation services should be an opportunity to improve resettlement services for women, and ensure they include essential housing and related support. We recommend that the Justice Committee probe the relevant Ministers and officials and service providers on this. What funding is being made available to provide in-prison pre-release and through the gate housing support to women, and exactly what arrangements are in place to ensure women will be safely housed on release and for the

long term? Responsibility for this needs to be clearly designated and outcomes closely monitored and regularly reported.

Our research and consultations to date suggest the following measures are also needed to improve housing outcomes for women:

- Pre-sentence reports (PSRs) should identify and record a woman's housing status, as well as childcare responsibilities and arrangements.
- A dedicated housing officer should be located in all women's prisons to provide housing assessments, advice and support.
- On reception into prison a woman's situation should be assessed and action taken to ensure that this informs her resettlement plan at the earliest possible stage.
- The operation of the 'duty to refer' introduced by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 should be systematically monitored and reviewed to improve its operation.
- The MHCLG should provide sufficient funding to local authorities to ensure they can meet their housing duties for women leaving prison.
- Women received into prison on remand or on short sentences should be provided with advice and support to retain suitable extant tenancies.
- The Women's Release Protocol developed by the Safe Homes team should be refined and operationalised by HMPPS.

6. WOMEN'S PRISON RELEASE PROTOCOL

To spur and support progress in joined-up working, the Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison Initiative has produced a draft Protocol to ensure women in contact with the criminal justice system in London have safe and suitable accommodation. Developed through consultation with frontline agencies in London, it builds on the commitments made in [London's Blueprint for a Whole System Approach to Women in contact with the Criminal Justice System \(2019-2022\)](#) and has recently been presented to the London Offender Homelessness Prevention Group.

Signatories to London's Blueprint agreed that "*all women in London who are in contact with the criminal justice system or at risk of such contact are entitled to receive a holistic, trauma informed, woman-centred approach throughout the criminal justice process and in the delivery of early prevention and intervention services*", and made the following commitment:

We will work towards establishing a shared approach across London, working closely with local authority housing departments and London Councils, to address the housing needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system, including preventing homelessness and resettlement on release. This will include:

- a. Working together to intervene earlier and more effectively to prevent women being made homeless, in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and Code of Guidance;*

b. Aiming to ensure that all women are resettled into safe and suitable accommodation, either long term or including a realistic plan for achieving long term accommodation; and

c. Aiming to ensure that all women have access to tailored wrap around support to meet their emotional, health and practical needs upon resettlement.

The protocol is informed by the Ministry of Justice's [Female Offender Strategy](#), the [Farmer Review for Women](#) and the cross-government [Concordat on Women in or at risk of contact with the Criminal Justice System](#). It is also informed by the [Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison briefing](#), and by HM Government's [Prison Release Protocol Guidance](#).

The protocol has been produced at a time of transition, with the recent introduction of the Offender Manager in Custody (OMiC) system in women's prisons, the reunification of probation services and transfer of resettlement services to new providers from June 2021, with further changes ahead in the commissioning of services from June 2022. Its purpose is to embed joined up working and achieve sustained improvement in women's resettlement outcomes.

7. CONCLUSION

We would be pleased to provide the Justice Committee with a copy of the Draft Women's Release Protocol upon request and any other further information that the Committee members would find helpful. Members of the Safe Homes team and supporters of the initiative would welcome the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Committee.

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