

Supplementary submission from Safe Homes

1. INTRODUCTION

The [Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison initiative](#) was originally established as an informal partnership of the London Prisons Mission (LPM), the Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields (SMitF) and the Prison Reform Trust (PRT). It is now led by LPM and SMitF, although PRT continues to advise it in an informal capacity. Its purpose is to identify and strive towards realistic solutions to the plight of women leaving prison to homelessness.

We submitted written evidence to the committee in June 2021 and now offer a brief supplementary submission in order to draw the committee's attention to recent developments concerning the provision of safe and suitable accommodation for women leaving prison. Again, this 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"**.

2. CHALLENGES FOLLOWING PROBATION REUNIFICATION HAVE LED TO GAPS IN SERVICE PROVISION

We are concerned about a gap that has recently arisen in housing support for women in HMP & YOI Bronzefield, amid the new commissioning arrangements put in place after probation reunification in June. We understand this reflects a wider issue in at least some local areas, whereby some specialist pathway services - such as 'in prison' housing support - have not been provided for alongside holistic women's advocacy services in the community.

For Bronzefield, while provision has been extended for women's community services in London and Surrey to continue offering Through The Gate resettlement support via bi-weekly inreach surgeries, no arrangement has been made to extend the specialist housing advice services that were previously provided by St Mungo's staff working full-time within the prison. Both services are essential to help ensure women leaving Bronzefield have safe and suitable accommodation.

Staff at Bronzefield advise that their Prison Performance Tool demonstrates a 25% decline in accommodation outcomes since probation reunification, which they relate directly to the removal of the prison-based specialist housing advice and advocacy service. These gaps in provision, and any similar gaps that may exist in other prisons, must be filled as a matter of urgency, including provision for remanded women (see below).

Further challenges have arisen at Bronzefield since probation reunification because it has been designated as a 'Kent Surrey Sussex' prison, although many of its women are released to London. Staff report that this new designation has already led to a reduction in crucial links with London services, putting women seeking to resettle in London at a disadvantage.

3. LACK OF PROVISION FOR WOMEN ON REMAND

Women held on remand (40% of the population at HMP & YOI Bronzefield) fall outside scope for the current commissioning arrangements in that prison, and are not supported by probation because they have not been sentenced. However [remanded women](#) often require additional support and if not homeless when remanded into prison may well lose their accommodation as a result of imprisonment. A prison-based housing support worker is needed to ensure steps are taken to prevent loss of tenancies during a period of remand, especially as, even if subsequently convicted, a woman may well not receive a prison sentence. One of the challenges is that remanded women have unpredictable release dates and may be released unexpectedly from court, including on a Friday afternoon. Effective strategies need to be developed locally to ensure women released in these circumstances have somewhere safe and suitable to go. This may include learning from the NHS Liaison and Diversion [Reconnect](#) Pathfinder model and provision of emergency temporary accommodation.

4. LINKS BETWEEN HEALTH, ABUSE AND HOMELESSNESS

The Prison Reform Trust's recent [report](#) on the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the mental health of women in prison, and the Prison and Probation Ombudsman's [report](#) on the death of a baby in HMP & YOI Bronzefield, both highlight in different ways the inability of the prison system – despite the best efforts of many of those working on the ground – to protect the safety and wellbeing of the women in their care. The evidence in these reports powerfully underlines the need to reduce women's imprisonment and increase the use of community alternatives.

Also published since our original submission to the Committee is a report by the Centre for Homelessness Impact on [Women, Homelessness and Violence – What Works?](#) This is relevant to improving housing outcomes for women released from prison as so many have experienced and are at risk of domestic and sexual abuse. This report endorses the Housing First model and recommends increased provision of women-only temporary accommodation whilst emphasising the importance of long term provision.

5. NEED FOR BETTER, GENDER DISAGGREGATED DATA AND A SINGLE DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

As reported in our [2020 briefing](#), it remains the case that there is no consistent approach across prisons and probation to investigating, recording, reporting or resolving housing need and outcomes, and no settled definition of 'No Fixed Abode'. Data from a range of published sources appear to vary, partly because of the lack of a single definition of homelessness or of safe and suitable accommodation. It is worth noting the requirement set out in HM Inspectorate of Prisons' new [Expectations](#) (Criteria for assessing the treatment of and conditions for women in prison) for women's accommodation after release to be both suitable and sustainable (see Expectation 90).

Consistent definitions must be adopted and gaps filled in gender disaggregated data on, for example, the links between homelessness and re-offending and between homelessness and imprisonment. Otherwise it will not be possible to establish a baseline and measure future outcomes, including for racially minoritised women and those with other protected characteristics, for young women, foreign national women including those with no recourse

to public funds, and for mothers and their children. Assessments of performance should always also include an element of consultation with women themselves, as demonstrated by the Independent Monitoring Boards in their [surveys of women](#).

The review of evidence on [Preventing Homelessness Amongst Former Prisoners in England and Wales](#), published by Royal Holloway in July 2021 notes the strong link between homelessness and reoffending. It provides a useful analysis of both the problem and recent attempts to tackle it but has very little gender disaggregated data and only a paragraph on women (p.7).

6. FURTHER SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

If this has not already been done, we would encourage the committee to ask all Heads of Reducing Reoffending (and/or Heads of Resettlement or Rehabilitation) across the women's custodial estate for a summary of the current position and barriers faced in ensuring women leaving their prisons have safe and suitable accommodation. This operational evidence will be invaluable in reflecting the reality on the ground and ensuring there are no gaps between policy and implementation.

Members of the Safe Homes team and supporters of the initiative would welcome the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Committee.

John Plummer, Jenny Earle, Katy Swaine Williams, Sarah Tubbs, Sarah Jane Haydon for the Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison Initiative

London Prisons Mission
27 September 2021