

## Written evidence submitted by Clinks

Dear Dame Meg Hillier

I am writing in response to the Public Accounts Committee call for evidence to inform the inquiry into improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system.

Clinks is the national infrastructure organisation supporting voluntary sector organisations working in the criminal justice system in England and Wales. We are a membership organisation with over 600 members, including the voluntary sector's largest providers, as well as its smallest.

Within our membership, Clinks supports and represents many organisations that work specifically with women in contact with the criminal justice system, including a network of women's centres and specialist women's services. We employ a Women's Network Co-ordinator and convene the women's networking forum in partnership with Agenda. We fully support the evidence submitted to this inquiry by Women in Prison and encourage the Committee to act on the evidence provided by specialist voluntary sector women's organisations in this inquiry.

Clinks works extensively with the government to ensure that the voluntary sector's role, knowledge and expertise is reflected in policy decisions affecting women in the criminal justice system. Until very recently we were a member of the Advisory Board for Female Offenders and following its review, we will now sit on the reconfigured Women in the Criminal Justice System Board chaired by Victoria Atkins MP, Minister of State at the Ministry of Justice. Clinks also sat on the expert group for The Lord Farmer's review into the importance of relationships to women in prison.

Following the publication of the National Audit Office's report, *Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system*, we are pleased to be able to respond to the Committee's inquiry. Clinks, having been interviewed by the NAO as part of its audit process, fully supports the findings made in this report. We also note the similarities between the NAO's conclusions and the recommendations that Clinks have made previously.

When the government's *Female Offender Strategy* was first launched in 2018, Clinks welcomed its publication, and supported its three priorities of early intervention, emphasis on community-based solutions, and delivering better custody. However, we raised significant concerns that the level of funding that had been identified fell short of what was required to realise the strategy's ambitions. At the time, Clinks' CEO, Anne Fox, said, "We are concerned that the financial package announced today falls way short of what will be needed to enable voluntary sector services to affect real and lasting change for these women."

In addition, Clinks also highlighted the lack of detail in the strategy on the timelines for achieving its objectives, and the people responsible for its implementation. Back in 2018, Anne Fox went on to say, "lack of detail on timings and responsibility will make it hard to track progress and ensure the department can be held to account." This lack of funding, programme goals, and performance measures were all issues also raised by the NAO.

The slow progress that has been made in implementing the commitments in the strategy has only heightened these initial concerns. [An analysis published by the Prison Reform Trust in](#)

[April 2021](#) found that less than half of the strategy's commitments had been fully implemented, nearly three years after its publication. This also highlighted the challenges in measuring the impact of measures like the publishing of new guidance.

In light of these shortcomings, Clinks strongly supports the NAO's recommendations that a full assessment of the funding required to meet the strategy's aims is undertaken, with specific goals being set for each of its three main objectives. These will enable the positive aspirations and commitments of the strategy to be most successfully implemented.

Clinks also has concerns regarding the government's plan to build an additional 500 women's prison places. The announcement was informed by a forecasted increase in the number of women in custody, expected to be driven by the recruitment of 20,000 additional police officers. This however indicates an assumed failure of the Ministry of Justice's own strategy, which made a clear commitment to reduce the number of women in custody.

Clinks believes that to achieve the ambitions of the Female Offender Strategy money should be invested in community-based services and diversionary schemes delivered through women-centred and trauma-informed models. Clinks therefore continues to call for the government to provide adequate, sustainable funding to support community-based, specialist women's services. This will enable women to receive the support they need in the community, rather than in prison, and so is one of the best ways to realise the ambitions and objectives to which the government committed.

Clinks would be very happy to meet with members of the Committee or its secretariat to discuss any of the above issues in more detail or to provide further evidence in support of this inquiry.

## **January 2022**