PUBLICATION OF FEMALE OFFENDER STRATEGY

Today, I am launching the Government’s female offender strategy following our commitment in the November 2016 Prison Safety and Reform White Paper.

If we are to make any significant difference for victims, families and wider society, we must break the cycle of reoffending by taking the necessary steps to understand and address the underlying causes of offending.

The evidence tells us that vulnerability is not just a consequence of crime, it is also a driver of offending behaviour, preventing many from breaking out of a cycle of reoffending.

Female offenders can be amongst the most vulnerable of all, in both the prevalence and complexity of their needs. Many experience chaotic lifestyles involving substance misuse, mental health problems, homelessness and offending behaviour, which are often the product of a life of abuse and trauma.

If we take the right approach to female offenders – one that addresses vulnerability, follows the evidence about what works in supporting them to turn their lives around, and treats them as individuals of value – it could have substantial benefits for victims, families, and offenders themselves.

This strategy sets out the Government’s commitment to a new programme of work for female offenders, driven by our vision to see:

- fewer women coming into the criminal justice system
- fewer women in custody, especially on short-term sentences, and a greater proportion of women managed in the community successfully; and
- better conditions for those in custody.

To achieve this, we are shifting our focus from custody to the community. Across Government, we are investing £5m funding over two years in community provision for women. We are committing to work with local and national partners to develop a pilot for ‘residential women’s centres’ in at least five sites across England and Wales. We want to build the evidence base about what are effective, sustainable and scalable options in the community for diverting women from entering and re-entering custody on short custodial sentences. We will not be proceeding with plans to build five new Community Prisons for Women.
Given that a higher proportion of women have dependent children living with them prior to imprisonment, incarceration of women may have a disproportionate impact on families and children and increase the risk of intergenerational offending. That is why we are commissioning Lord Farmer to continue his work on the importance of family ties in improving outcomes for offenders, by conducting a further review into female offenders.

It is only through effective partnerships, at both a national and local level, which take a holistic approach to tackling the causes underlying the behaviour of female offenders, can progress really happen. That is why the strategy outlines a framework for taking this forward with partners, one which is locally-led, partnership-focused and evidence-based.

As part of this, we will work across government and with other national and local partners to develop a National Concordat on Female Offenders, which will set out how services should be working together in partnership to identify and respond to the often multiple and complex needs of women involved in the criminal justice system.

We must ensure we are accountable for the priorities set out in this strategy. Therefore, we will publish an annual update on the progress of the work of the strategy and reform the Advisory Board on Female Offenders to give it a greater role in monitoring the delivery of commitments in this strategy.

We are clear that making a meaningful change will be a substantial and ongoing task; this is the start of a journey. I welcome your continued interest in this area and hope for your support and challenge as we work to deliver the strategy.

The strategy can be accessed online here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/female-offender-strategy

I will be holding a parliamentary drop-in session on the strategy on Wednesday 4th July, 4.30-6.00pm in Room 26, Upper Ministerial Corridor, House of Commons where I will be happy to discuss our plans for improving outcomes for female offenders.

In addition, would the Justice Committee welcome a specific briefing on our strategic plans? Minister Argar and officials should be very happy to come and talk to an informal gathering of committee members. If this would be of interest, I will ask his office to get in touch with you to agree a mutually convenient date.

Yours ever,

RT HON DAVID GAUKE MP