



Northern
Ireland
Office

Summary of responses to

DRAFT STRATEGY FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF WOMEN OFFENDERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND: A CONSULTATION

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Summary of responses to consultation on the draft Strategy for the Management of Women Offenders

Background

The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) consultation on the draft Strategy for the Management of Women Offenders was launched in February 2009 and concluded in June 2009. The consultation was the latest step on the journey to improving our approach to the management of women offenders in Northern Ireland, both in the community and in custody.

This document attempts to reflect the range of views expressed by all those who participated in the consultation process and in the associated events but does not describe all the responses in detail. We are grateful to all who took part.

You can obtain copies of this report and the consultation document from www.nio.gov.uk or from:

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This document can also be made available on request in different formats, for individuals with particular needs.

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Chapter 1 – Overview of Comments

General

As explained in the consultation document, although women make up only a small proportion of the overall offender population in Northern Ireland, their experiences of the criminal justice process and the interventions and services available has an enormous impact, particularly on children and families. The problems underlying women's offending are often complex. Issues such as poverty, homelessness, mental illness, abuse, domestic violence, and addictions have been shown to be prime motivators for a woman's involvement in crime. To reduce offending, it is vital to develop ways of supporting women to address these multiple needs within the community where possible.

The consultation document set out the NIO's strategy for meeting these needs identifying our objectives and giving a commitment to a structured, co-ordinated, multi-agency approach leading to the development of interventions designed specifically for women.

Summary of responses

We received a total of 29 responses to the published consultation. Some commented on the draft strategy as a whole, while others responded to the specific questions posed. This document summarises the responses received.

While we are grateful for the time and effort devoted by the organisations and individuals in providing detailed comment, due to the extensive nature of some of the replies it has not been possible to reflect all aspects within this summary.

A public consultation event was held on 21 April 2009 in the conference facility at Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) Headquarters. A total of 46 people, representing 32 organisations attended.

All staff and prisoners from Ash House, Hydebank Wood were invited to take part in separate workshops at an event held on 2 July 2009 at Hydebank Wood. A total of 13 prison staff and 7 women prisoners chose to attend.

The views expressed by the participants at these events are also included in this summary.

A full list of respondents and workshop participants is provided at Annex A.

Comments in the summary of responses have not been attributed to any organisation, stakeholder or individual.

General Responses

The draft strategy was broadly welcomed.

Many felt that it was a positive and forward-looking document that should benefit all women offenders and that it had the potential to make a huge impact on the treatment of women offenders and offending behaviours in general. It was also considered to be a positive move towards the realisation of human rights for women offenders.

Numerous respondents were glad to see this subject being given the serious attention it deserved.

Of those expressing reservations, two respondents felt the draft strategy was too general to enable informed comment while a further two felt the proposals were insufficiently far-reaching to make the necessary impact. Three of those four also said that specific timescales were needed for implementation and monitoring of the proposals since little would be achieved without a strong implementation plan.

Three further respondents raised more specific points. One respondent suggested that the draft strategy did not appear to address the specific challenges posed by violent and dangerous women offenders, the special needs of long-term prisoners, or the disturbed grief reaction suffered by women who have killed. Another respondent felt that the issues dealt with in the consultation paper would be better dealt with by locally elected representatives after the transferring of policing and justice powers had been completed and that any NIO plan should be revisited post-transfer of these powers. The third felt that the draft strategy “ghettoised” female offenders and moved away from the principle that prisoners should be treated as equals.

The following chapters summarise the responses on the specific proposals.

Strategic Aim

To provide alternatives to prosecution and custody by looking at alternative diversionary approaches in relation to lower level offences, where prosecution through the courts may not be the most effective way of delivering a proportionate justice outcome; or where non-custodial sentences might achieve a better outcome than imprisonment.

Specifically, we will:

- *implement (in April 2009) electronic monitoring (“tagging”) for monitoring compliance with curfews to, amongst other things, support the use of curfews as a condition;*
- *work with sentencers to increase their understanding of the particular needs of women offenders and facilitate use of the full range of non-custodial sentences available to the courts;*
- *review the pathways to custody for women offenders to identify areas where enhancements to existing community disposals, or the development of additional interventions, could support the greater use of non-custodial (as opposed to custodial) sentences in appropriate cases;*
- *work with other Government departments to improve the processes for diverting women offenders with severe mental health problems away from prison;*
- *legislate to develop diversionary measures which act as an alternative to traditional prosecution through the courts for women, and other offenders, admitting the commission of relatively low level criminal offences; and*
- *develop legislation to improve the defences available in cases where killing occurs as a result of sustained physical abuse – particularly important for vulnerable women in what are often tragic circumstances.*

Do you think these proposals will be effective in diverting women offenders from prosecution and custody?

23 commented

Most of those who commented fully supported the proposals.

Two respondents thought that the proposals would be effective; a few thought the proposals would be helpful; but most thought that more detail and clarification was required before they could comment. One respondent felt that the proposals fell short of what was required to keep women out of the formal Criminal Justice system because to effectively divert women away from prosecution the scheme must also focus on diverting them away from further offending.

The point raised most often was that the section did not provide any firm details of which policies would be adopted or when and that more clearly defined timescales on implementation and an indication of how progress will be monitored were needed.

One respondent felt that criteria must be developed to identify those for whom alternatives are appropriate while another stressed that alternatives must be seen as effective.

Electronic monitoring elicited mixed views. On the positive side one respondent thought that electronic monitoring could have a positive impact on reducing the number of women in custody, another that it had potential value as a condition for the remainder of a short period of licence for a woman re-released after recall to prison. A number of respondents were more cautious and felt that it may not be suitable for some offenders – a woman with mental health problems who may wander from her control area or a woman living in an abusive relationship who may need to flee her control area for safety were cited as examples. The comment made by most respondents was that electronic monitoring must be used only in appropriate circumstances and that it should be independently monitored. It was also pointed out that curfews and electronic tagging both potentially engage a number of rights under the European Convention on Human Rights so must be used proportionately and with due regard for the individual's rights.

Most respondents thought it was necessary for sentencers to be appraised of the issues that underlie many women's offending behaviour and to be made aware that these problems were often better addressed outside prison. They also needed to be

made aware of the low level of some women's income to realise how inappropriate the imposition of fines could be.

Most respondents stressed that if more women were to be given non-custodial / community disposals the relevant resources and services must be provided.

While most were in favour of alternatives to custody, some respondents pointed out that it was essential that any strategy for diversion did not ignore the need to prevent re-offending and in this respect the section was not clear about what would happen to the persistent female "minor" offender not deterred by the range of non-custodial options.

How best can we engage with sentencers and the community on the effectiveness of non-custodial disposals for women offenders?

12 commented

Most respondents agreed that a multi-agency approach was needed. Suggestions included ongoing contact with the Judicial Studies Board to increase awareness of the range of community disposals available; appropriate training programmes for sentencers; and inviting sentencers to meet with the statutory and community / voluntary sectors involved in taking these initiatives forward. It was suggested that feedback from female offenders diverted from custody and those who had desisted from re-offending should be gathered to support engagement with sentencers and community groups.

A number of those who responded thought that gaining public support would be more difficult. A few suggested a need for a media campaign to inform the public about the goals of the draft strategy and highlighting the evidence and research behind it. One respondent suggested a publicity campaign using posters, TV advertising and documentaries with real life stories of women offenders to educate the community about women's offending and increase awareness of alternatives to imprisonment.

Are there further measures, which are not identified, which would further improve the likelihood of diverting women offenders from prosecution and custody?

11 commented

The majority of those who responded felt that diverting women from prosecution must also be about providing assistance and support. Most advocated the promotion of closer links to the Voluntary Sector and stressed that appropriate funding and resources would be needed to ensure consistent delivery of programmes and services.

A number of respondents also thought that restorative justice processes should be considered as an alternative to prosecution and custody for women offenders.

Other suggestions included a diversion scheme run by the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) offering voluntary referral to an appropriate service in the community; a “bail scheme” including support services and/or access to accommodation for women who appear before the Courts; and the exploration of ‘drug courts’ used in Canada to divert offenders with an addiction into treatment and rehabilitation while reporting to a judge or magistrate.

Workshop comments

There was a consensus that sentencers needed to be educated about the particular vulnerabilities of women offenders and the availability of suitable diversionary programmes. It was suggested that voluntary groups should present directly to sentencers on this issue.

There was broad consensus that fines could be counterproductive particularly for women in primary care roles within families. It was suggested that cautioning systems, linked to appropriate programme delivery, should be developed like those currently in place for driving offences. Community Based Restorative Justice was suggested as a possibility for a range of relatively low level criminal cases.

It was felt that literacy or self-esteem building courses should be made available as part of The Probation Board for Northern Ireland’s (PBNI) community serving package. Conditional Cautions could support rehabilitation through the use of literacy and numeracy programmes, but they would require adequate resourcing.

All agreed that links should be forged between PBNI and voluntary sectors to tap into the wealth of resources, including a range of diversionary programmes available within the community sector. However, both PBNI and voluntary/community sector

inputs needed to be adequately resourced to achieve the desired outputs.

Chapter 3 – Reducing Offending

Strategic Aim

To reduce the number of women entering the criminal justice system, by supporting women who are at risk of offending and responding effectively to their needs in relation to issues such as abuse; domestic violence; mental well-being; substance misuse; poverty; isolation and unemployment; and by directing women out of pathways that lead to crime.

We will, in partnership with Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM):

- *establish a Ministerial Group on Reducing Offending to promote and facilitate the development of a coherent Northern Ireland response to addressing all aspects of offending.*

Respondents broadly welcomed the proposed Ministerial Group but one felt that its mandate, membership and timescale for implementation should be clarified while another warned that focussing too heavily on bureaucracy may prevent any action taking place. Most stressed that there must be a firm commitment to the draft strategy across all departments involved in its delivery and this must be backed up with the finance and resources required.

Pathway 1 – Accommodation

What further actions could we take to address the issue of homelessness and its impact on women’s offending / reoffending?

17 commented

Most respondents agreed that a multi-agency response was required involving closer working between the criminal justice services, Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and community-based housing providers. A number felt that a range of accommodation was likely to be necessary for women offenders and instead of investing in only one model, other options such as landlady schemes should also be considered.

Some suggested that models of best practice in other jurisdictions should be

explored and evaluated to assist in the development of a housing strategy which should clearly set out the responsibilities of relevant agencies and have a defined timeframe for implementation. All stressed that adequate and specific resources are necessary to address this issue.

More than half the respondents felt that women should be provided with appropriate support and assistance before leaving prison and that support must continue after an initial accommodation solution is provided on release.

A few felt that on leaving prison a woman who has no accommodation should be entitled to emergency accommodation paid for by the NIO. They further suggested that appropriate practical and adequate financial assistance in making the house habitable should also be provided for as provision of post-release accommodation and support for women should not place a financial burden on voluntary agencies.

One respondent said that the caring responsibilities of the woman must be taken into consideration when planning accommodation as available accommodation is not always suitable for children or children are precluded.

A number of respondents highlighted women with complex mental health needs, women with drug or alcohol addictions and women with older teenage sons as urgently needing specific attention.

One respondent stressed that accommodation providers must be aware of and competent to deal with behaviour which is in conflict with licence conditions and which may elevate the risk a woman poses to the public.

Workshop comments

All agreed that more support was needed for women in debt to prevent them becoming homeless.

It was felt that NIHE must be more flexible in its approach to ex-offenders and should review the points system to better help these women and their families.

Better provision of sheltered accommodation was needed for women whose offences (eg arson) prevented them from being placed in conventional housing.

It was felt that community support was vital in reducing isolation in rural areas. In these areas, where hostels were not a viable option, individuals needed support in

utilising existing provisions eg the Simon Community and church organisations.

It was stressed that accommodation had to be organised well in advance of release. The possibility of moving in with family was suggested if no suitable housing alternative was available.

Pathway 2 – Education, Training & Employment

We will, in liaison with the Department of Education (DE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL):

- *take forward the development of a Learning and Skills Forum which will focus on making better use of existing education and skills training to provide a more joined up service for both existing offenders, and those at risk of offending. The Forum will have the scope to examine, through research, the specific learning and skills needs of women.*

We will

- *develop more targeted work to address the specific needs of women offenders, including where needs have been identified in relation to learning disability and other special needs, taking cognisance of the recent research by the Prison Reform Trust, detailed in their report, “No One Knows (Northern Ireland)”;*
- *examine how the employment needs of women offenders can be addressed as a discrete group; and*
- *take forward an initiative with Business in the Community (BITC) to establish a mentoring programme within the women’s prison to help prepare women offenders for work, and to create job opportunities for women offenders in the community, and on release from prison.*

Are there further opportunities, which are not identified in the strategy, which could address the learning and skills needs of women offenders and provide more effective pathways to employment?

17 commented

The collaboration with DE and DEL and the development of a Learning and Skills Forum were welcomed by all but some respondents felt that more proactive links with DEL programmes/services were needed. Others suggested that DEL should commit

to working with and supporting the community and voluntary sector initiatives to raise levels of employability amongst women.

Respondents unanimously felt that more could be done in respect of education. Most identified the problem as being that classes currently available within Hydebank Wood were designed for young men and did not properly meet the needs of women prisoners.

One respondent suggested that the committal process and assessments should be streamlined to enable women prisoners to engage with education and training as soon as possible. A practice to identify women with learning disabilities should also be developed for use on committal. Most respondents also felt that more effort was needed to increase the opportunities for employment for women being released from custody.

Vocational training and practical work skills were generally felt to be more useful to women prisoners than academic qualifications so links should be formed with specialist employment support projects that could lead to employment upon release.

It was suggested that work experience within prison should include non-traditional vocational training and should be available in forms other than classes, for example, one-to-one sessions and peer mentoring. Another suggestion was that women in custody should be helped to explore different approaches to work experience like part-time or voluntary work.

One respondent felt that long term prisoners should be consulted on the subjects to be included in their training programmes. Another emphasised that pre-release programmes must be improved for women serving long sentences.

A few respondents made the point that some women prisoners are resistant to and often exclude themselves from education and training so specific targeting and creative thinking would be necessary to identify the widest range of realistic, deliverable options.

All respondents stressed that a proactive strategy was required to identify and develop relationships with employers because without their support a skills programme would have very limited impact.

Most respondents welcomed that women offenders would be permitted to engage in education and training programmes in the context of community-based sentences. It

was stressed that women on community service orders who have limited literacy must be able to have attendance at a literacy class seen as part of that order. A number of respondents commended the women-only education and training provided by the community based women's sector and advocated engagement with these.

It was felt that independent research was needed into the learning and skills needs of women, especially those with learning difficulties, and also into identifying how employment relates to re-offending in women.

Workshops comments

All agreed that women offenders should be offered job skills training, personal development and counselling in the form of individual training plans formulated after an assessment of needs.

A cross-departmental integrated approach to training and employment was considered vital so links should be made with training organisations and businesses to help women gain employment. It was felt that DE and DEL should also be asked to provide resources for community sector provision of courses.

One person said that INVEST NI could be asked to help women thinking of starting a business.

Pathways 3 & 4 – Health; Alcohol and Substance Misuse

The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), in liaison with colleagues in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), will:

- *explore the options for developing services to deal more effectively with the health of women offenders, including mental health issues and personality disorder. This will include the provision of enhanced training and development for prison healthcare staff, with improved support and guidance through the development of clinical supervision.*

PBNI and NIPS will:

- *work with DHSSPS to explore the options for developing services and interventions based on assessed need. Interventions will include supporting*

women to deal with the consequences of addiction in relation to their mental health.

Are there other measures which you think would improve co-ordination between agencies to more effectively identify and meet the health needs of women offenders, in particular those with mental health and addiction issues?

15 commented

A number of respondents considered mental health fundamental to the success of many elements of the overall draft strategy and the commitment to provide new services for those deemed 'high risk' was deemed a positive development.

Most welcomed the transfer of the lead responsibility for healthcare to DHSSPS and the positive developments in relation to improved healthcare facilities at Ash House but felt that the provisions of the pathway did not go far enough in tackling the problems associated with mental health.

Some suggested that this pathway should be given greater focus through consideration of appropriate literature, and that an audit was needed of those at risk in this category to inform the need for service development.

Many respondents felt that the draft strategy needed to address the fact that legislation in NI does not recognise personality disorder as a mental health problem and most stressed that women with mental health needs should be removed from the prison system.

Some felt that the *cause and effect* relationship of prison and mental health problems needed greater consideration and that NIPS policies and practices should be reviewed to ensure they did not contribute to mental ill-health. Others suggested that both prison staff and community supervision staff should receive specialist mental health training.

A few suggested that consideration should be given to adopting a multi-agency case conferencing approach to the management and care of individual women offenders undergoing mental health treatment programmes and/or assessment. Others expressed concern with regard to the current level of psychological services within Hydebank Wood, and the ability to provide adequate support for women with mental health issues.

Most welcomed the commitment to support women dealing with the consequences of

addiction but felt there was insufficient detail as to how this would be achieved. Others felt that in addition to the behaviour the underlying causes of addiction should also be addressed.

A number suggested there was a need for a co-ordinated, multi-agency strategy on the prevention and treatment of alcohol and substance abuse and that information and partnership working with the Voluntary Sector would be important.

A few respondents suggested 'one-stop shop' drop-in centres providing a holistic addiction service and individual assessment needs run jointly by the statutory and voluntary sectors with input from community psychiatric nurses should be considered.

Workshops Comments

Some thought that a study was needed to clarify what mental / emotional health strategies were already in place or were being developed. Others felt that better coordination of strategies was what was needed. Most agreed that government departments, GPs and community groups should share responsibilities and objectives to deliver appropriate services and treatment for general health as well as mental health.

All agreed that a dedicated facility to deal with personality disorders was necessary. An integrative counselling approach was suggested as better than Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

It was agreed that there was a need for centres where women could get advice on health issues, counselling, drug or alcohol abuse and alternative therapies etc. The INSPIRE Project could provide advice of this nature and it was suggested that it could be extended to provide medical assessment and possibly even surgeries.

Pathway 5 – Finance, Benefits and Debt

We will:

- *continue to work with the voluntary sector to identify further opportunities to support women offenders in relation to managing money, accessing benefits and reducing debt.*

Are there further actions that can be taken to provide an effective cross-departmental response to the impact of poverty and debt on offending?

9 commented

Respondents were united in saying that fine defaulters shouldn't be given custodial sentences.

Most also felt that consultation with community / voluntary organisations working in the area of poverty, finance and debt was required as was cross-departmental recognition of the need for adequately resourcing those organisations.

Most also pointed out that poverty and/or debt severely impacted upon care for children and other dependents so any disposal must ensure that a woman's financial situation was not adversely affected. Some suggested that women should be offered advice on where to get guidance on how their families can best be supported.

One respondent suggested the need for much more research into the impact of poverty and debt.

Workshop Comments

One person felt that a study was needed into why women were particularly vulnerable to poverty, bringing them into the criminal justice system. Another suggested research into the number of lone parents in the criminal justice system was also needed.

It was suggested that local women's centres and projects or Citizens' Advice Bureaux should be resourced to provide women-specific advice on benefit entitlements etc. as this would help prevent women being released from prison getting into debt. It could also prevent women from becoming involved in the criminal justice system in the first place. Support from charities like the St Vincent de Paul Society should be encouraged.

Most felt that extra support and resources were required for women in debt and already in the criminal justice system and that options other than prison must be used for fine defaulters. Where custody was the only option, support networks had to be engaged from the start – the first day of the sentence should be viewed as the first day towards resettlement and release.

Participants were unanimous in thinking that nothing would change if the judiciary did not operate within the recommendations of the draft strategy.

Pathway 6 – Children and Families

We will:

- *use the Women’s Centre model to address the issue of lack of childcare and its impact on the case management process in the community;*
- *further develop the NIPS Family Strategy for women offenders in custody, exploring ways to enhance the range of family services, including identifying improvements in relation to visits, particularly child-centred visits, as well as wider family link issues;*
- *continue to develop work with Barnardos and other relevant agencies, on one to one support for women and parenting programmes; and*
- *provide an extended family contact facility at Ash House, where, in the appropriate circumstances, mothers in Ash House will be able to apply to have extended visits with their children.*

Are these measures appropriate?

15 commented

Most respondents acknowledged and supported the proposals in this section. The commitment to improve upon the NIPS’ Family Strategy and the work being done with Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) and Barnardos were both welcomed.

Some respondents felt that the proposals may not be sufficient and that more was needed, for example, training for criminal justice staff on the impact of imprisonment on mothers and children; the provision of additional support and counselling for women serving long-term sentences; and more detail on the provision of support to help women leaving custody reintegrate into the family.

One respondent felt that, in addition to Barnardos, Health Visiting and Social Services should also be included in planning any initiatives aimed at supporting women in custody to maintain relationships with children and family. Another felt clarification was needed on the role of Family Support Packages in meeting the

needs of women offenders and their children and the role of extended families and fostering agencies.

A few respondents suggested incorporating various domestic and international standards and recommendations on the rights of women and children into the draft strategy. A number of respondents stressed that maintaining contact with children was crucial for women in custody and cited schemes from other jurisdictions that could inform and help develop practice in relation to this.

One respondent said that a woman's caring responsibilities must be checked at every stage of the judicial process so that the best interests of the children can be determined.

Where retribution and deterrence rather than risk are the key issues, one respondent felt that consideration should be given to permitting women to serve their sentence on a part-time basis to facilitate the maintenance of parent-child relationships. The same respondent also felt that consideration should be given to greater use of risk-assessed home leaves from the start of sentence rather than just at the end.

Another said that the current criteria for awarding Assisted Prison Visits was too restrictive and should be expanded to enable the children of estranged parents to visit. The expansion of child-centred visits and the role of the family officer was commended.

A few respondents felt that the PBNi managed INSPIRE Women's Centre should provide an appropriately staffed family area and that proper childcare facilities should always be available to enable women with children to fully engage in the interventions provided.

The majority also felt that there should be flexibility in responding to women's failure to comply with community disposals if childcare difficulties were the cause. To avoid that situation arising it was suggested that the details of the children of all offenders, including those given community and other non-custodial disposals, should be recorded so that childcare support can be provided.

What other measures would help women prisoners maintain family links?

8 commented

The majority of respondents felt that prison staff should receive appropriate training with regard to dealing with children, and that more should be done to ensure that visits to prison were not unsettling for children.

Suggestions included the provision of child-friendly literature prior to visits and a variety of activity options including specific provision for older children. Some respondents suggested that child-centred visits should be overnight when possible while another, who indicated that mothers in custody welcomed the provision of a dedicated extended family visits unit adjacent to Ash House, suggested that more could be done to make visits, in general, more child-friendly.

A number of respondents suggested making telephone calls more accessible by keeping costs down, introducing a 'family and friends' system and providing financial assistance where necessary.

One respondent felt that families should be allowed to send home videos / DVDs / tape recordings to women prisoners and vice versa and those with computer skills should be allowed to send and receive monitored emails with photo attachments.

Is there more that could be done in the community, in liaison with the statutory and voluntary sectors, to improve access to childcare for offenders and those at risk of offending?

8 commented

Most respondents felt that the wealth of family support and childcare provision that existed in disadvantaged areas through Women's Centres should be utilised but that adequate resources must be made available.

Most also felt there was a key role for the Inspire Project in conjunction with Children's Health and / or Social Services co-ordinating and promoting developments in childcare provision.

Workshop Comments

Most agreed that dedicated family facilities such as children's play areas and private rooms should be available in prisons and that adequate time should be allowed for family visits. A few thought that the role of the 'family officer' should be expanded

upon and funded on a permanent basis.

All agreed that it was important to recognise that the children of women offenders needed support and counselling too and suggested that NIACRO, women's centres and community / voluntary groups and prisoners' family support groups should be resourced to provide such services.

It was also felt that church support, harnessed through the prison chaplains and organisations like St Vincent de Paul Society and the Prison Fellowship, could be helpful.

Pathway 7 - Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviours

We will:

- *research best practice in this area; and*
- *develop gender specific offending behaviour programmes. It is anticipated that programme development and implementation will lead to the availability of a range of accredited interventions that will be suited to both community and custodial use.*

Are these measures appropriate? We would welcome your views on best practice in this area.

11 commented

The proposal to develop gender specific offending behaviour programmes and to research best practice was welcomed by all respondents.

Given that the background to women's offending was often very different from that of men, the majority of respondents stressed that gender-specific programmes and assessment tools for women offenders should not be adaptations of those currently used for men.

A few respondents felt that the community based women sector should be engaged and consulted throughout the process. Others felt that consideration should be given to utilising those programmes currently in use in the voluntary and community sector and that direct consultation with women offenders was essential.

Most felt there was a need to commence research to explore the programmes that

exist in Europe and the rest of the world as well as locally, in GB and the ROI. One respondent suggested that violent offending amongst women should be given specific attention.

One respondent suggested that drama projects addressing attitudes, thinking and behaviour could be developed and performed by women offenders, and that group discussions may lead to alternative thinking.

Workshop Comments

It was felt that while research on women-only provisions in the community sector was already produced in NI, lessons could be learned from best practice elsewhere.

All agreed that an integrated gender-specific approach was needed across all agencies, departments and the community sector at all levels. Gender-specific training was also required across the board.

Links between PBNI and voluntary women's organisations and NIPS should be improved and prison staff should be encouraged to participate in the delivery of women-focused initiatives and programmes. The effectiveness of such programmes should be assessed and evaluated by women offenders.

Some expressed concern that women offenders both in prison and in the community were often regarded and treated as offenders first and women second.

Pathway 8 – Supporting Women who have been Abused Raped or who have experienced Domestic Violence

We will:

- *work with specialist services identified in both the Domestic and Sexual Violence Strategies to provide greater support for women offenders who have been abused, raped or who have experienced domestic violence.*

What more can be done to give effective support to women whose offending behaviour is linked to sexual or domestic abuse?

11 commented

The proposals in this section have been welcomed by all respondents.

All stressed the continuing need to provide psychological therapeutic support and services for women who have been victims of abuse, both in the community and in custody and one respondent felt that greater provision of services for children and young people who had suffered abuse was needed. One respondent felt that it was critical that women approaching their parole hearing had the chance to resolve these issues during the custodial phase of their sentence.

All respondents stressed that commitment must be made to providing adequate resources to the community and voluntary sector and that direction must be sought from key services such as Women's Aid, Nexus and the Belfast Rape Crisis Centre. One respondent said that while the establishment of a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) in NI is a welcome development it should not be allowed to detract from established independent services.

A few respondents felt that prison staff, probation officers and members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) should receive training in domestic violence.

One respondent felt that measures should be put in place to ensure that women who are removed from, or leave their home, were not separated from their children, and suggested that information campaigns, highlighting what would happen to children in these circumstances should be developed.

Workshop comments

Ideally, women who have experienced sexual abuse or domestic violence should not be given a custodial sentence and a more suitable disposal that would address their mental and emotional health should be given, however, where women are committed to custody, the significant impact of abuse or domestic violence should be taken into account.

Such women need consistent and continuous support and one-on-one counselling so it was stressed that community / voluntary groups that provided such support needed more funding and resources. Service Level Agreements were also suggested to clarify responsibilities etc.

It was suggested that DE could support the provision of education programmes in schools aimed at preventing sexual and domestic abuse.

Pathway 9 - Supporting Women who have been involved in Prostitution

We will:

- *research the needs of women in Northern Ireland involved in prostitution. The findings of this research will also help inform the development of the CSU Strategy;*
- *ensure that access to the new Women’s Centre includes those women involved in prostitution. It is hoped that they will feel able to approach the Centre, and make use of its resources, including the multi-agency support that might help them leave prostitution; and*
- *develop specific arrangements for the care of women who are victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland.*

What further actions can be taken to help women move away from prostitution?

13 commented

The commitments in this section were broadly supported but most respondents felt that expertise in this area should be sought to gain greater understanding of how women become involved in prostitution and of their specific needs. Respondents also unanimously felt that specialist advice should be sought into the complex needs of trafficked women and that study and implementation of best practice from other jurisdictions should be commenced.

One respondent felt that the proposal for the INSPIRE Project to assist women involved in prostitution suggested that prostitution was criminal behaviour which was unhelpful since most women involved felt they had no choice.

Another said that while there should be a human rights compliant policy to deal with victims of trafficking this draft strategy was not the appropriate place as they felt that it perpetuated the idea that victims of human trafficking are criminals and confuses human trafficking with human smuggling. Both felt that the criminal justice system should better target those who sought financial gain from the exploitation of women.

A number of respondents suggested the provision of refuge and rehabilitation, advisory services, drug rehabilitation, counselling, and other forms of psychiatric, medical and social support with the availability of interpreters if necessary for victims

of the trade. Others said that direction to the information, support and refuge offered by Women's Aid should be given.

One respondent suggested that the establishment of a support group involving women who have ceased to be involved in prostitution would be helpful.

Workshop Comments

All felt that authorities should work with these women to discover what leads them into prostitution and help try to remove this perceived cause. These women need to have their self worth and confidence developed and to be educated on their alternatives.

A need for on-street support and drop-in centres for these women was suggested, possibly run by charities, where advice and help for things like drug and alcohol abuse could be given.

It was felt that the draft strategy lacked focus on the trafficking of women for prostitution and that this area required more research. It was stressed that as foreign nationals these women had additional problems and need appropriate support and advice.

Restorative Interventions

We will:

- *establish pilot schemes in two rural areas;*
- *evaluate the pilots; and*
- *subject to the recommendations of the evaluation, and the availability of necessary funding, develop a formal restorative conferencing service for appropriate women offenders, which will include community mediation and re-integration.*

What are your views on restorative interventions?

17 commented

The development of restorative interventions and strategies to prevent offending was

seen as a positive step by all and was fully supported with only a few reservations.

One respondent stressed the need for comprehensive assessment of who was suitable and said it was important that structures to support safe implementation and evaluation were put in place.

One respondent felt that developments in formal restorative conferencing should be a priority.

A few others felt that more research was needed and that independent evidence-based evaluation of the benefits of restorative interventions for women should be carried out.

The majority felt that community-based and -led initiatives, in partnership with the wider criminal justice system, were best suited to the task and that a mapping exercise should commence to avoid duplication of services.

Some respondents felt the proposals did not go far enough. One respondent felt that restorative interventions should not only be used as a means of working in the community with adult women offenders, but should be embraced as a culture within the entire strategy for managing women offenders. Another suggested they should be made available in prison since the potential value of restorative justice interventions to victims and long-sentence prisoners alike was significant.

In the delivery of a formal service, how can we best engage with partner agencies to deliver community mediation and re-integration?

3 commented

Those who responded on this point suggested a review of what currently exists in the statutory and other sectors and that PBNi could then arrange and co-ordinate a seminar for those keen to engage.

It was stressed that mediators would require a very high standard of training and that all parties / agencies involved in a case must be thoroughly informed of all the circumstances surrounding it.

Workshop Comments

Those present felt that research should be carried out into best principles but in the meantime community-based projects and centres already in place should be used to help prepare women for victim / offender engagement.

Gender-Specific Research

We will:

- *publish an independent literature review of the international research evidence on reducing offending;*
- *undertake further research to explore national and international evidence into what works in terms of reducing women's offending;*
- *compile an updated statistical report on gender and the Northern Ireland criminal justice system, and commission longitudinal studies on what works in a number of areas particular to women in Northern Ireland, with the aim of building up an effective data set for the development of future work; and*
- *refine existing information systems to collate data specific to women offenders.*

Do you think these actions will provide sufficient information to assist in the development of policy to reduce offending?

3 commented

This proposal was welcomed as respondents felt it would fill the gap in research relating to outcomes and impact on re-offending and capture data that is NI-specific.

Are there other areas we should be considering? If so, please outline.

9 commented

While all welcomed the proposals, some suggested undertaking additional research on -

- the specific situation of women offenders in NI including study of the similarities and differences with GB
- women in prison and their experiences of non-custodial alternatives
- early attachment and trauma based experiences of women offenders

- women potential offenders in areas of deprivation throughout NI.

A few respondents recommended collation of data on women offenders across **all** Section 75 categories.

The majority agreed that qualitative research should be undertaken as well as quantitative / statistical.

One respondent said that workforce planning should be considered in relation to clinical and forensic psychology staffing.

Strategic Aim

To ensure that, where women are sentenced, their needs, wherever possible, are met in the community. That means offering women gender-specific assessments and women-centred interventions to support them in the community. This includes piloting a Women's Centre in the Belfast area as well as the use of the existing network of community resources to bring a multi-agency partnership approach to directing women to appropriate services.

We will, in the **short term**:

- *establish new premises for the Women's Centre pilot in Belfast in 2009;*
- *adopt a multi-agency partnership approach to routing women to appropriate services;*
- *begin to develop gender-specific assessment tools and programmes;*
- *begin to build relationships with other external organisations that may provide services/advice on a part-time basis to those accessing the Women's Centre;*
- *work to provide greater continuity of the services offered to women offenders in the community;*
- *research the effectiveness of women's hostels in other jurisdictions; and*
- *develop options for consideration in respect of the establishment of dedicated hostel accommodation in Northern Ireland.*

In the **medium term**:

- *evaluate the Women's Centre pilot; and*
- *subject to the outcome and recommendations of the evaluation, establish a permanent dedicated Women's Centre in Belfast.*

In the **long term**:

- *if resources allow, and building on the learning from the pilot and the subsequent permanent Belfast Centre, roll out the Women's Centre across Northern Ireland to include rural areas.*

Are these measures appropriate?

20 commented

The proposed gender specific standards and assessment tools were commended and welcomed by all. Most were in agreement that these should take cognizance of the needs of women from diverse backgrounds, including women with disabilities. One respondent felt there should be specific mention made in the standards of the need for supervision of the special circumstances of those women released with long and demanding licence conditions.

The INSPIRE Project was also widely welcomed, but all stressed that, in order for it to properly meet the different needs of the wide range of women who would have access to it, the centre would need to be appropriately resourced and funded. The intention to roll it out throughout NI was also welcomed. One respondent stressed the need to ensure that all were fully accessible to people with disabilities.

Most respondents welcomed the fact that access to the INSPIRE Project would be available to community groups helping women to resettle after long sentences. One respondent suggested that it should also be open to self-referrals and referrals from non-criminal justice agencies, as well as women in the criminal justice system. Two respondents suggested that a residential component should also be considered.

One respondent particularly welcomed the fact that the INSPIRE Project would be open to suitably assessed women prisoners and the inclusion of a working-out scheme for life sentence prisoners. Women serving long sentences needed to be able to access the full range of its services, either through in-reach to the prison or through direct access on pre-release or after release on licence.

There were some criticisms - one respondent said that to call the statutory-run facility a Women's Centre caused confusion with the long-established definition of Women's Centres within the community/voluntary sector; another said it would only be useful as part of a continuum of service provision, incorporating partnership working with the Voluntary Sector; and a third said the concept was based solely on findings in England and Wales and had ignored valued and valuable local community experience and expertise.

A few respondents were concerned that, as the INSPIRE Project would be managed and staffed by PBNI; it could be perceived negatively by offenders and suggested

that the community / voluntary sector would provide a more appropriate management agent. Staff from different professional backgrounds should also be used.

Most respondents recommended that an independent monitoring group be set up, involving both statutory and non-statutory bodies from different professional backgrounds, and that evaluation of the INSPIRE Project pilot should be conducted within 2 years of the scheme beginning.

Workshop Comments

The INSPIRE Project pilot was welcomed, as was the proposed roll out to rural areas. Recognition was given to the network of women's centres in the community providing a number of services in a neutral environment, but it was stressed that adequate funding and resources were required to enable the centres to continue.

How can we best engage with external organisations and the wider community on contributing to service provision to women offenders in the community?

7 commented

Respondents suggested the following as possible ways to engage with external organisations:

- make contact with bodies that have a national remit and contacts across many communities as an efficient way of reaching a wide range of stakeholders;
- deliver training to women's services in the community, recruit women to become volunteer mentors or "buddies", and create a structure which facilitates the bridging of statutory and voluntary services;
- fund the women's sector to research, pilot and evaluate community based preventative interventions for women, that will lead to the development of policy to reduce offending; and
- give assurance that any services being proposed by PBNI funded facility for women offenders would not duplicate, and/or act in competition with, services already provided by Women's Centres in the community/voluntary sector.

Most respondents agreed that engaging the wider community would be more difficult.

One respondent said that providing factual information that was neither patronising nor sanitised would help. Most others suggested that this could be done via the media and that television and local newspapers could be used to explain the role of community supervision and that it was more cost effective than custody. A documentary highlighting success stories was also suggested.

Workshop Comments

All agreed that stronger links were needed between PBNI and community/voluntary support services when dealing with women offenders on probation. Twinning with, or mentoring by, women offenders who have already been through the criminal justice system was suggested as they are best placed to empathise with and advise newer offenders.

It was felt that agreed protocols or contracts were needed between the statutory and community/voluntary sectors to ensure that all were aware of expectations and their responsibilities.

While the INSPIRE Project tried to help women build life and social skills there was only so much it could provide so it should direct women to the appropriate outside services available to them.

An open day at both Hydebank Wood and the INSPIRE Project was suggested at which women's groups and other organisations would give offenders advice about issues like housing, debt, and drug and alcohol addiction and what services would be / are available to them on the outside.

What are your views on the provision of dedicated hostel accommodation?

16 commented

Most respondents had reservations in respect of this proposal. One said that public consultation should be considered in respect of the best facility for accommodation for women released from custody. Others felt that models and best practice in comparable jurisdictions should be thoroughly investigated before a decision was made.

The majority were in agreement that whether or not a hostel was the most

appropriate, it was evident that women-only, supported accommodation was needed for those leaving prison and also as an alternative to being remanded in custody.

Almost all respondents felt that supervised apartments or houses offering four to six beds would be more appropriate for women offenders.

One respondent suggested that the charity-run Tus Nua project in Dublin for single women leaving prison with no fixed abode should be explored in a NI context.

One respondent said that the value of having offender-specific hostels available for those nearing or at the end of long sentences could not be over-estimated, but realised that it may not be cost effective.

Whatever accommodation was used it was stressed that it must provide the same educational, training and employment service as in prison and that consideration must be given as to whether children could be allowed to live with their mothers.

All accommodation would require a contract to report behaviour which may be in breach of licence conditions or which may aggravate risk.

One respondent suggested that a joint solution to the needs of prisoners leaving custody and women leaving secure forensic health facilities could be considered.

Workshop Comments

It was felt that accommodation for women offenders needs to be reviewed particularly for those who present as homeless, but participants were unconvinced that a hostel was the answer and that alternatives should be considered.

As women preferred to have their own space it was felt that a better alternative would be single accommodation units like bedsits within a larger complex or other “safe” options. It was agreed that NIHE and community housing associations would need to be involved in finding the best solution.

If hostel accommodation was the only option then it was stressed that it must be for women only. Mixed hostels were not suitable as it was felt that the majority of vulnerable women offenders had suffered at the hands of men. It would also have to be gender-specific as the typical model used for men’s hostels was not transferable to meet women’s needs. The location of any hostel was recognised as a serious problem since most communities did not want a hostel for offenders in their area.

Chapter 5 – Developing a Gender-Specific Approach to the Management of Women in Custody

Strategic Aims

To develop a tailored approach to the management of women in custody, recognising that men and women should be treated with equivalent respect according to need and that this will result in different approaches and services for men and women. This includes developing gender-specific standards and guidance for those working with women prisoners.

To take forward the options for developing a new purpose built facility for women prisoners, including the potential location and design.

We will:

- *develop gender-specific standards for the women's prison that will underpin the implementation of a gender-specific approach to all areas of custody;*
- *in response to the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, develop and embed new offender management processes that provide a multi-disciplinary approach to addressing the needs of women, with improved sentence planning and case management that ensures appropriate access to protective factors, such as contact with family, learning and skills, employment, and offending behaviour programmes;*
- *provide gender-specific guidance and training for staff working with women prisoners so that they are better prepared for engaging with women on many of the complex areas of need that have been identified; and*
- *take forward the case for the provision of a new, purpose-built women's prison facility.*

Do you think these measures are appropriate for the development of an effective gender-specific approach to the management of women in custody?

17 commented

The commitments made in this section were commended and welcomed by many, although one respondent considered the measures were akin to unfair treatment of

and discrimination against male prisoners.

Most felt the measures were worthy of striving to maintain and build upon but some were concerned that without effective leadership, vision and adequate resources there was a risk that the aims would not fully be achieved.

Several respondents said that greater detail was needed in relation to staff training as this was crucial to the success or otherwise of the commitments made in the section. Most felt that staff training in gender-specific issues in relation to mental health, trauma and personality/mood disorders was essential. Disability awareness training was also considered necessary. One respondent suggested that appropriate competencies and accredited programmes could be developed in partnership with Skills for Justice.

Two respondents suggested that new prison officers should be specifically recruited and given specialist gender-specific training to work with women. Another said employing all female discipline and support staff to work with women should be considered.

A number of respondents highlighted the need to ensure positive staff morale and felt that staff should be provided with support and counselling to help them cope with the demands of dealing with the diverse and often complex needs of women in custody.

Workshop comments

All present commended the setting up of the Women's Project team, an indication of NIPS' commitment to addressing the specific needs of women prisoners. The many improvements, including the provision of a dedicated reception, separate healthcare facilities and new, less intrusive full search procedures were all welcomed. The introduction of a "Personal Officer" Scheme was suggested as this had proven to be effective in promoting positive staff/prisoner relationships.

Are there further opportunities, which are not identified, that could further improve the response provided to the needs of women prisoners?

13 commented

A number of respondents felt that, in addition to improvements to the physical

environment, a service-wide culture change should be promoted. Those who commented thought that a creative, woman-centred environment, which was appropriately mindful of security but care-focussed and prisoner-centred, should be established.

One respondent raised concerns with regard to the lack of progression opportunities beyond Ash House for women serving long sentences, and suggested that, to avoid institutionalisation, strong links to community based-organisations and facilities such as the Women's Centre would be essential.

The earliest possible allocation of a community probation officer was also recommended for these women to enable them to build a relationship with the person they will be accountable to after release. Other respondents suggested these women should be given increased responsibility for managing their lives within the prison environment by accommodating them in smaller custodial units where they have an element of control like planning and cooking meals etc.

Another respondent felt that special consideration must be given to the conditions of women on remand since they had not yet been found guilty of a crime.

A few recommended the introduction of a Personal Officer Scheme as this would encourage positive engagement with prisoners. Others thought that enabling staff to participate in personal development opportunities would increase their interest and commitment to change.

One respondent felt that mental health provision for women in the criminal justice system should be better resourced in order to provide appropriate therapeutic interventions.

One respondent expressed concern at the conditions in which women prisoners were being held and suggested that a radical review of regime, particularly time out of cell, was needed. Another felt that implementation of the recommendations made by Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) and Criminal Justice Inspectorate for Northern Ireland (CJINI) was important to ensure the proposals in the draft strategy had any chance of success; while another said that the key criticisms regarding women's accommodation in Ash House raised by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) research should be taken on board.

Workshop comments

The need for NIPS to encourage a service-wide change in culture, infrastructure and staffing was emphasised. Comprehensive training for staff, both in the context of culture and the gender-specific needs of women prisoners would be essential.

All agreed that the current regime was not effective in distracting vulnerable women from thoughts of their children and families and that there was a need to ensure that women prisoners were enabled to engage in purposeful activity throughout the day.

Positive staff/prisoner relationships played a key role in effective rehabilitation and re-integration and a greater emphasis should be placed on prisoner care as opposed to security.

As the first night in custody can be particularly difficult, a system similar to the Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT) scheme, currently in operation in prisons in England and Wales, was suggested. Peer-mentoring, was also proposed.

Group therapy and support delivered by either specially-trained prison staff or external facilitators was also suggested as something that would be particularly beneficial to women prisoners.

What are your views on the need for a purpose built women's prison?

21 commented

The majority of respondents fully supported the proposal for a new women's prison. Others agreed that a self-contained purpose-built facility for women was urgently needed but were not sure that a prison was the best option. One respondent said it would reserve judgment until a formal Outline Business Case was made.

A number of respondents urged caution in relation to the capacity of a new prison and made the point that if the draft strategy was successful in its aims, the number of women committed to custody in NI should decrease significantly and, therefore, the capacity of any new facility should be capped accordingly.

Respondents were in agreement that the proposal must take a radical approach and not use a model based on managing male offenders. Several suggested consideration of a multi-purpose custodial facility comprised of a small secure custodial unit with both hostel-type accommodation and separate houses or flats

within the grounds through which women could progress to prepare them for leaving custody.

One respondent said it is critical to provide a suitable regime for women serving long sentences, however the small numbers within this group make this more difficult. The respondent expressed the view that women prisoners were less likely to attempt to escape than male prisoners and that a more creative, woman-centred environment could be established in which a resettlement-based regime (mindful of, but not preoccupied with, security) could flourish. The same respondent was concerned that the draft strategy made no mention of how high-risk and long-term sentenced women prisoners would be managed.

A number of respondents said that the new women's prison unit should have a discrete management team, recruited from outside the current management pool, and be staffed primarily by female officers with specialist training.

A few respondents felt that a more central site, as opposed to a rebuild on the existing Hydebank Wood site, would have been a more suitable location for the new women's prison. One suggested that women prisoners should be consulted with regard to the proposals for a new-build women's prison, including location, and that consultees should be given access to the proposed site to enable them to make an informed recommendation. Some respondents stressed that the new prison should have good public transport links to facilitate visits and should be fully accessible to women with disabilities.

One respondent suggested that, as cost would be a limiting factor, it may be appropriate to consider a joint facility which was both a prison and a secure forensic mental health unit for women.

One respondent said that decisions regarding the facility should not be dependent on the timetable for devolution of policing and criminal justice.

Workshop comments

The majority were in favour of a new women's prison. However, accepting that any new-build facility will, by necessity, take some years to develop, one respondent suggested that a pilot to manage Ash House as a separate women's prison rather than as a unit within the larger Hydebank Wood site, should be undertaken. Best

practice should be sought from HMP Peterborough, the UK's only dual purpose-built establishment for both male and female prisoners.

Comments from Workshops held in Ash House

The vast majority of comments at both the workshop for women prisoners and the workshop for prison staff (both held in Ash House), were in relation to the management of women in custody. The comments of the women prisoners and prison service staff who attended are summarised below. In addition, comments relating to other strands of the draft strategy are also included.

Prison staff comments

The discussion with Ash House Prison staff firstly revolved around issues relating to women and **custody** in general. A number of issues and concerns were raised, as follows:

It was noted that women had a number of roles and related concerns with respect to their family: their children, their role as parent and carer, the support they needed to provide and receive and the issue of spending time with their family. The facilities (or lack of) for visits was often an issue.

Staff felt that the level of information and support available to the relatives of women offenders was currently inadequate. Information, about what to expect, should be provided to families prior to sentencing to enable them to take care of practical issues such as childcare, before the woman is committed to Ash House.

Mental health issues and depression were prevalent among the female prisoner population, and there was a need for improved support from the Department of Health, both in the community and in custody.

Court Diversional procedures were discussed and staff felt that, for many women, particularly those with personality disorders, prison was not the most effective disposal. Due to current mental health legislation in NI, women with this condition often ended up in prison because there was nowhere else for them to go. Mental health provision in the community needs to be improved. Some women felt more secure and supported in prison and would re-offend to be re-committed. Some of the

staff participants felt that the transfer of lead responsibility to DHSSPS had not helped, as there were insufficient resources.

Staff felt that, for some women, who did not have much support on the outside; prison often provided a sense of stability and security, and at times a replacement for normal family environment, where friendships and relationships could be formed.

Staff felt that the revolving door/repeat cycle of offending was a “catch 22” situation for the prison in terms of providing help.

The importance of being proactive with families from committal was highlighted, and some suggested that the NIACRO Family Links service should be better publicised, as often it was not availed of.

It was suggested that more support could be provided from outside in relation to, for example, healthcare and jobskills. This could be delivered via informal talks etc.

Staff felt strongly that the programmes available to women prisoners were not as effective as they should be and, given the gender-specific needs of women prisoners, it was not acceptable to deliver the same programmes that were delivered to male offenders. In addition, the age range of women should be taken into consideration when developing and delivering programmes for women prisoners.

The importance of tying in the work of Ash House with the INSPIRE project run by PBNI was highlighted. The problems faced by women in prison, or those being released, were generally the same as those experienced by the women being managed in the community by PBNI.

The usefulness and importance of the First Night Booklet was commended and it was suggested that perhaps this could be replicated with a ‘Last Night Booklet’.

Some support facilities were not as readily available in other areas of Northern Ireland and this caused increased difficulty for those women who were not from Belfast.

Prison staff noted that the risk of re-offending was different for different groups of offenders. It was noted that offenders who were in and out of custody for perhaps only a few days at a time often needed the most support.

Staff stated that they needed a better awareness of where to direct women on leaving custody.

Staff felt that whilst hostel type accommodation was potentially a good idea, there were issues in relation to its location (an example was given of the needs of a woman in the Greater Belfast area, but the women's hostel is currently in Cookstown). A hostel could, however, play a vital role in supporting homeless women who needed secure and safe accommodation. Staff also felt that strict conditions would be needed in terms of managing hostels and ex-offenders. Most offenders would benefit from support to help them resist re-offending.

The workshop also considered issues relating to **regime** and the following issues were discussed.

Staff recognised the therapeutic benefits of initiatives such as pet care and noted the importance of providing education and building life skills, such as budgeting and parenting. Staff felt it was important for women to be prepared for seeking employment on release, and thought that they would benefit from further work on a one-to-one basis. There was however, little time for staff to do this. Learning and skills delivered to women prisoners should be tailored to meet their individual needs, for example, those women who were likely to be full-time carers on release would not necessarily benefit from learning skills aimed at increasing their employability.

Staff also felt there was a need to look at the specific needs of those women with mental health issues, to see what other options could be explored to increase employability.

When discussing a possible **new prison**, staff suggested that there was a need for properly run, effective workshops which could also provide a public service, for example, the assembly of headphones for airlines.

Staff acknowledged that some women did not want to work, and suggested that they should be offered the opportunity to engage in alternative constructive activities whilst in prison. The need to increase motivation, and instil a work ethos, was recognised as important when equipping women to work. It was suggested that it might help to start with undertaking one small job a day and build on that. It was noted that many of the women prisoners may prefer mundane work, such as badge-making or packing as this would make the day pass more quickly.

Other issues that were raised specifically in relation to a new prison included the need for dedicated programmes, dedicated healthcare, additional staff, ongoing training and a tailored resettlement process. It was suggested that a new-build

prison should be comprised of several types of accommodation suited to the needs of the different categories of prisoner, for example, a landing specifically for prisoners with mental health issues, staffed by both healthcare and discipline staff.

A number of issues were raised specifically in relation to **staff**. The importance of training, as well as consistency with regard to procedures was mentioned. It was acknowledged that the prison officer's role had evolved in recent years to include a more pastoral element, and staff felt that they should be provided with support and counselling to help them cope with the demands of dealing with the diverse and often complex needs of women in custody. Staff said they would welcome opportunities to broaden their experience and thought that this could be achieved through short secondments to other establishments or community-based projects, such as INSPIRE.

Staff felt that staffing levels were sometimes an issue, and they also thought that there was a need for improved communication and relationships with external partners (who also work in establishments).

The final topic discussed by the prison staff centred round how to support women to **stay out of prison**. All agreed that fine defaulters should not be committed to custody, and that alternative disposals should be availed of.

It was agreed that improved community supervision and interventions may help more women find another path in life and prevent them from coming into the prison system. Those women who did end up in custody needed help in the form of support services and resources, from committal to help them stay out of prison upon release.

Women prisoners' comments

The first and most lengthy topic discussed by the women prisoners who attended the workshop centred on **custody**.

The women noted the prevalence of mental health issues among the female prisoner population and highlighted the need for effective therapeutic support in addition to the routine prescribing of anti-depressants and other medication.

Prisoners, particularly foreign nationals, expressed significant concern with regard to the first night in custody. Some reported being anxious and fearful and stressed the need to ensure that new committals were made to feel safe and secure during their

first night in custody. Prisoners felt a fuller explanation of the regime and rules was needed on committal and a "First Night Buddy" was suggested.

The prisoners reported that foreign national women often had difficulty communicating with doctors and healthcare staff and stressed the importance of having an interpreter available as soon as possible following committal. Language Line was helpful when dealing with minor issues, but not particularly effective when dealing with personal or complex issues and the women suggested that interpreters should be invited into Ash House on a regular basis to assist foreign national women communicate their needs with regard to issues such as healthcare.

The women recognised the importance of maintaining family contact whilst in custody and current procedures for keeping in touch with families were welcomed, particularly the facility which enabled foreign national women to phone home on a regular basis. However, some women felt the current telephone charges should be reviewed to take account of the cost of ringing a mobile. The women also thought that consideration should be given to allowing the women to receive incoming calls.

The women explained how distressing it could be when leaving young children behind. They said they often found it difficult to communicate their feelings and that this could be especially difficult for foreign national women. It was often difficult to talk to staff in private, because the rooms provided for this purpose were being used or, if there was only one member of staff on duty, they could not leave the landing to go into a room for a one-to-one conversation with a prisoner.

The women felt that work opportunities should be tailored to meet their individual needs and suggested that peer-tutoring, by prisoners with particular skills, should be considered. The women expressed an interest in taking classes in painting and interior design, DIY and home maintenance, and childcare and parenting skills. Positive-thinking programmes, aimed at identifying goals and how to achieve them, would be welcomed. Some of the women expressed an interest in engaging in the workshops currently available to young male offenders, such as plumbing and joinery. The women felt that there were insufficient opportunities to gain accredited qualifications whilst in custody.

One prisoner recommended the type of work available in prisons in the United States of America, where women could take on contract work for companies such as Levis and Fruit of the Loom. She reported that the prisoners got paid slightly more for this

work and all profit went towards improving the prison. Others welcomed this idea but cautioned that it should not become a “sweat shop”. Other possible work avenues suggested included tele-sales and envelope-filling.

The women thought that a constructive plan should be developed to re-unite women prisoners with their children upon release. The mother and baby facilities in Ash House were viewed as a positive initiative and it was proposed that children should be allowed to join the crèche facilities in the visits area so that they could interact with other children. A “Children’s Day” in Ash House, and a Sports Day in the yard were suggested.

The women prisoners were then encouraged to discuss the issue of **staying out of prison**. The women said that a women-only hostel or somewhere to go after release, as a stepping stone to “get your head sorted”, was needed. However, some thought that the influence of individuals in the hostels might encourage the women to re-offend and suggested that small, self-contained units, with the opportunity to progress into a flat may be more appropriate. Sheltered accommodation should not be communal. Some of the women stated that they would rather be in custody than have to share rooms in a probation hostel.

The women thought that pre-release home leave was a good way of developing independent living skills whilst in prison, but recognised that this would not be suitable for everyone, for example, those women with mental health problems.

The recent resettlement day in Ash was commended, particularly the input from Invest NI. The women thought that the job fair had been very successful but felt that this event could have been better communicated throughout the prison. Opportunity Youth was also commended for providing very positive interventions.

Other issues raised included the stigma attached to being an ex-offender, low levels of literacy and numeracy and importance of supporting those women on remand.

The final area discussed was **resettlement**. A suggestion was made that something similar to the Alcoholics Anonymous buddy scheme should be set up, whereby, women released from custody could contact a former offender, via telephone, and receive support and practical help from someone familiar with the prison system.

Do you consider that any of the proposals will have a positive equality impact on groups within any of these nine categories? If so, what is it?

3 commented

All respondents considered the proposals should have a positive impact on the equality and human rights of women offenders and their children.

Do you consider that any of the proposals will have an adverse equality impact on groups within any of these nine categories? If so, what is it and how might we mitigate against this adverse impact?

8 commented

Respondents made the following comments:

- Foreign national women and women from local ethnic minority groups who speak little or no English may be disadvantaged.
- Women without dependants may be discriminated against as the draft strategy only referred to women with children.
- Learning disabilities should be taken into consideration throughout the draft strategy and not just in relation to education and training.
- Women with personality disorders will not be helped unless better mental health care is provided.
- Use of fines could have serious adverse impact on economically disadvantaged women and their families.
- There is an arguable case that these proposals discriminate against male offenders.
- Limiting the Women's Centre to Belfast could discriminate against women in rural areas.

Will any of the proposals potentially affect the promotion of good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group?

1 commented

This respondent felt there was little in the proposals about the promotion of good relations and that the strategy should make stronger commitment to addressing the needs of women who have children and women from minority racial groups.

Do you have any other comments on the equality impact of the proposals?

7 commented

Respondents unanimously said that the proposals contained in the draft strategy and all policies and developments emanating from it should be subjected to an Equality Impact Assessment to address all Section 75 categories.

One respondent felt that the continuing interest of the UN in respect of international obligations relating to women in prisons should be acknowledged in the final strategy and that the provisions of the NI Executive's Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016 may have specific relevance to the management of women offenders.

Another said that monitoring must ensure that gender-specific measures are implemented fully and not undermined by unnecessary security considerations.

From the proposals are there any areas where you consider there to be a potential human rights issue?

6 commented

The respondents felt that the following could have a potential human rights impact:

- Foreign women in the criminal justice system for any reason.
- Women sent to prison for non-criminal reasons because there is nowhere else.
- Issues around family contact have human rights implications for women and their families.
- Children's rights to be with their mother.
- Lack of conjugal visits.

One respondent felt that the draft strategy should be reviewed to address all appropriate and applicable international standards to which the UK is signatory.

Chapter 7 - Next Steps

The publication of this Summary of Responses Document marks a significant milestone in the development of a policy for the management of women offenders. The written responses combined with the range of views which were voiced during the consultation events have provided a considerable amount of very useful material which demands careful examination and detailed consideration.

In keeping with the multi-agency approach adopted throughout this initiative, the NIO is working directly with its partners, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Prison Service, to analyse these ideas and responses. This analysis will directly contribute to the development of related policy in this important area and to some further refinement of the Women Offender strategy. That work is currently underway and is expected to be complete by early 2010.

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List of Respondents

Belfast Health & Social Care Trust

British Irish Rights Watch

British Psychological Society

Cllr Sara Duncan

Committee on the Administration of Justice

Disability Action

Dr Azrini Wahidin

Dr Linda Moore & Prof Phil Scraton

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Extern

First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland

Housing Rights Service

Include Youth

Mr Oliver Robertson

Mr Seamus McNeill

NEXUS

NIACRO

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Northern Ireland Lay Magistrates Association

Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland

Prince's Trust

Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland

Quaker Council for European Affairs

Quaker Service

Sinn Féin

Victim Support NI

Women's Aid Federation NI

Women's Support Network

List of Organisations who Participated in Consultation Events

Atlas Women's Centre

Citizens Advice Bureaux

Clan Mór Women's Group

Cloona Oasis Centre

Committee on the Administration of Justice

Criminal Justice Inspectorate for Northern Ireland

Extern

Falls Women's Centre

Footprints

Greenaway Women's Centre

Independent Monitoring Board

Methodist Church in Ireland

NEXUS

NIACRO

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Northern Ireland Prison Chaplains Association

NSPCC

Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland

Police Service of Northern Ireland

Prison Arts Foundation

Prison Fellowship NI

Prison Governors Association

Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland

Probation Board for Northern Ireland

Quaker Service

Shankill Women's Centre

Staff and Inmates of Ash House

Windsor Women's Centre

Women's Aid

Women's Support Network

Women's TEC