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Minister of State

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Professor Monica McWilliams
Chief Commissioner
Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
Temple Court
39 North Street
Belfast
BT1 INA

2 January 2010

Dear Monica

Thank you for your letter of 9 December setting out your concerns in relation to progress in taking forward plans for the building of a new women's prison, as well as your wider views with regard to budgetary provision in respect of women offenders.

First, can I say that I am grateful for your recognition that considerable effort has been made to address the needs of women offenders in recent years, and I am grateful for the role that you and your colleagues have played in contributing to the development of the draft Strategy for the Management of Women Offenders, as well as to the gender-specific work being taken forward at Ash House.

I appreciate that you would like to have greater certainty around the availability of resources for taking forward the building of a new women's prison facility. We have already invested considerable time and resources in the development of the Strategic Outline Case, and we continue to progress proposals for a way ahead. However, as you will appreciate, I am unable to make commitments in relation to how or indeed what resources will be allocated following devolution of policing and justice. I can assure you, though, that we will work very closely with any newly nominated Minister to ensure that any future developments build on the significant progress that has been made so far. Looking ahead the development of such a facility is likely to depend on the outcome of the next spending review. You will be alert to the general constraints on public expenditure.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



Northern Ireland Office

In relation to your request for an update on the budgetary provision that has been made for the roll out of Supervised Activity Order disposals across Northern Ireland, my officials are working closely with Probation and Court staff to model future needs in light of the pilot exercise. Financial arrangements will be made and managed in due course as part and parcel of the normal budgetary arrangements.

You asked too about the Inspire Women's Project which became operational on 27 October 2008 and which has already been instrumental in developing a multi-agency partnership model to route women to local community services.

I should stress that I am satisfied that the Inspire project is adequately resourced for the pilot period, which is due to run until March 2011. An independent evaluation is about to commence and, subject to the outcome and recommendations of the evaluation, my expectation is that a permanent, dedicated Women's Centre will be established in Belfast. Building on the learning from the pilot and the subsequent permanent Belfast Centre, and if resources allow, I would also hope to see the concept developed in other parts of Northern Ireland.

I appreciate that this response falls short of the firm assurances and certainties that you seek. However, I am sure you will recognise that it would be inappropriate for me to give commitments around the budgetary provision that might be made by any future Minister.

*Yours
Paul*

THE RT HON PAUL GOGGINS MP
Minister of State for Northern Ireland

