18 October 2019

I am writing in response to questions you raised during the debate on the management and treatment of offenders, on 3 October 2019. These are recorded in Hansard, Volume 799, Column 1831.

You asked if the Government would confirm that contracts for probation services will be awarded mainly to not-for-profit organisations rather than large for-profit companies; expressed concern that the lead-in period for the changes was insufficient; queried what steps the Government is taking to ensure that women offenders’ histories of victimisation are being considered; and what support is being given to women whose offending has been driven by a coercive and abusive relationship.

On probation services, we continue to believe in the benefits of a mixed market for probation and up to £280m of services per year will still be delivered by the private and voluntary sectors. We will award contracts to those best placed to carry them out. As with any major procurement exercise, all bidders will be subject to a rigorous assessment of their suitability and previous experience. We are, however, developing a Dynamic Procurement Framework to allow the National Probation Service to directly commission services on a scale that encourages the participation of smaller and voluntary sector suppliers and is responsive to the needs of local areas. And we are engaging closely with Clinks, the umbrella group for voluntary sector organisations in the criminal justice sector, to ensure that this framework helps overcome the barriers to participation faced by these organisations.

With regard to the lead-in time to the changes, I should explain that we have put in place arrangements to allow us to extend CRC contracts to ensure we have time to get the transition to the new system right. We intend to use these arrangements to end contracts and implement new arrangements in spring 2021. We will launch competitive procurement processes later this year for the delivery of Unpaid Work placements, Accredited Programmes and rehabilitative interventions. Meanwhile, we continue to develop the commercial and operational frameworks sitting behind the new model and consult with stakeholders on plans for the transition.
In Wales, where our plans are more developed, we will transfer offender management functions over to the NPS from the CRC before the end of 2019. Our experience there will help inform the approach to transition in England.

Turning to your questions on women offenders, there are a number of Government interventions which recognise that women in the criminal justice system are often victims as well as offenders, particularly the almost 60% who report experience of domestic abuse. We have developed a new staff training package, Positive Outcomes for Women Empowerment and Rehabilitation (POWER), to equip staff to respond to women in a gender and trauma informed way. The new package commenced roll out in April 2019 to staff managing women in custody and the community.

For women in custody, we offer a variety of support services that recognise the impact that a history of trauma and abuse can have and provide much needed support (for example the Freedom Programme, Power to Change Programme, and the Healing Trauma Intervention). Women in prison also have access to the National Domestic Violence Helpline (Freephone) on the PIN Phone system, and Women’s Aid and other local women’s organisations come into prisons to provide advice and support for women who have experience of being a victim.

In 2018-2020 we invested £5 million in community provision for women, to provide holistic and specialist support for vulnerable women, and address the often complex issues underlying their offending behaviour. This funding includes £2m funding to address the needs of female offenders who have experienced domestic abuse. We also made a £70k grant to the Greater Manchester Police and Crime Commissioner to pilot a victims’ pathway for female offenders, to ensure that these women are able to access support for their needs as victims, as well as offenders.

I am copying to all noble lords who spoke in the debate and I will place a copy of this letter in the library.

Earl of Courtown

Baroness Burt
House of Lords