Written evidence submitted by the National Federation of Women’s Institutes-Wales (PPW0011)

Executive Summary
The National Federation of Women’s Institutes (NFWI)-Wales does not support the provision of a prison for women in Wales. We support non-custodial alternatives for female offenders and investment in local community-based provision based on women’s centre models, which carry out therapeutic work and are close to families and networked into local services.

Response
1.0 The NFWI is the largest voluntary women’s organisation in the UK with some 220,000 members in over 6,300 WIs. In Wales there are 16,000 members belonging to about 600 WIs. It plays a unique role in enabling women to develop new skills, giving them opportunities to campaign on issues that matter to them and their communities, and provides wide-ranging activities for members to get involved in.

2.0 In July 2008, the WI passed a resolution calling for an end to the inappropriate detention of people with mental health problems. The resolution originated from the experiences of a WI member whose very ill son ended his life in prison.

“In view of the adverse effect on families of the imprisonment of people with severe mental health problems, this resolution urges HM Government to provide treatment and therapy in a more appropriate and secure residential environment”

2.1 This mandate highlighted an enormously important and often hidden issue – how we treat people with mental health problems when they come into contact with the criminal justice system and what impact this treatment has on their families and therefore society as a whole.

2.2 We are concerned that people with mental health problems who come into contact with the criminal justice system are not always being diverted to hospitals or community based alternatives. We want to ensure that people with mental health issues are not held in custody but are cared for in the most appropriate location.

2.2 As part of our Care not Custody Campaign, we are calling for:-

- Effective diversion schemes across the country;
- Access to early assessment and intervention;
- Community mental health services offering safe alternatives to imprisonment;
- Full implementation of Baroness Corston’s proposals for women in the criminal justice system; and
- Help with resettlement.

3.0 Women from Wales who are imprisoned in England, on average 100 miles from their homes and local communities.

3.1 Four out of five women prisoners have mental health problems, most commonly depression and anxiety. Women and young people are particularly hard hit by prison being the default option, with the after-effects of inappropriate detention often leading to pressure on relatives and even family breakdown. Short spells in prison, even on remand, damage women’s health and family life yet do little or nothing to stop them offending again.

3.2 NFWI-Wales does not support the building of a women’s prison in Wales as a solution to addressing the problems currently faced by women offenders from Wales and their families. On the contrary, we are calling for the provision of alternative facilities for women with mental health problems in the criminal justice system such as greater use of community sentences for
women, more community-based provision and less use of custody for remand when women are charged with an offence that is unlikely to bring a custodial sentence.

3.3 The needs of women with mental health problems in the criminal justice system must be prioritised. The benefit of keeping them out of prisons would be enormous. It would both give women autonomy over their own lives and help keep families together that would otherwise be split apart.

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