

Northern
Ireland
Office

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

February 2009



NORTHERN IRELAND
PRISON SERVICE

INDEX

	Page	
Ministerial foreword	3	
Chapter 1	Introduction	5
Chapter 2	Women Offenders - Context and Background	9
Chapter 3	Women Offenders - Sentencing Patterns	13
Chapter 4	The Strategy – Vision and Aims	17
Chapter 5	Strategic Strand 1 Providing Alternatives to Prosecution and Custody	19
Chapter 6	Strategic Strand 2 Reducing Offending	23
Chapter 7	Strategic Strand 3 A Women’s Centre: Gender-specific Community Supervision and Interventions	39
Chapter 8	Strategic Strand 4 Developing a Gender-specific Approach to Custody	45
Chapter 9	A Longer Term View	51
Chapter 10	Equality and Human Rights Issues	54
Annex A	Strategic Outline Case for a Suitable Custodial Facility for Women Offenders in Northern Ireland	57
Annex B	Glossary of Abbreviations	62
Annex C	Summary of Ongoing initiatives and Commitments	63
Annex D	How to Respond to the Consultation	69
Annex E	Consultation Response Form	72

MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

I am delighted to launch this consultation on a strategy for the management of women offenders as the next step on the journey towards improving our approach to the management of women offenders in Northern Ireland, both in the community and in custody.

Although they make up only a small proportion of the overall prison population, women's imprisonment has an enormous impact, particularly on children and families. Indeed, the small numbers belie the point that too many women still end up in prison, when a wealth of research and experience shows that what is needed is a range of more creative and constructive alternatives. 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. If we are to reduce offending, it is vital that we develop ways of supporting women to address these multiple needs outside of the custodial sanction, where possible.

Custody is the ultimate sanction for some offences. The Government has an over-arching duty to protect the public and that remains one of my key priorities. Indeed, last year I introduced a new sentencing framework for Northern Ireland which has enhanced public protection at its core, with strengthened sentencing options for dangerous offenders now available to the courts. However, the response of the criminal justice system must be proportionate. For some women, custody will be the proportionate response, but, to be truly effective, the criminal justice system must also provide alternatives which give the courts greater opportunity, where appropriate, to apply sanctions that enable the complex needs of women offenders to be addressed more effectively in the community.

This consultation document sets out our strategy for meeting these needs, recognising that our response to those needs will often differ from the response offered to men in the criminal justice system. The draft strategy identifies our objectives, and gives a commitment to a structured, co-ordinated, multi-agency approach that will see the development of

interventions designed specifically for women, building on initiatives already underway.

The criminal justice agencies are already working effectively in partnership with other statutory agencies, and the community and voluntary sector, to address the particular vulnerabilities which women offenders present. However, all recognise that more needs to be done at a strategic level to deliver services and interventions to women in a more holistic and co-ordinated way.

This new strategy sets out an ambitious cross-cutting programme of work. Responding to the often complex needs of women offenders poses considerable challenges, but by delivering a cohesive approach, and marshalling the available resources in a more effective way, it is hoped that we can help women to take responsibility for their own lives, and reduce the cycle of offending and re-offending that can be so distressing for them and their families.

The development of the draft strategy has already benefited from some pre-consultation with women offenders and those who work with them, and has been informed by a 4 day consultation event with key stakeholders held in April 2008. These views have helped to shape the proposals on which wider views are now being sought. Speaking at the event, Juliet Lyon, the Director of the Prison Reform Trust, concluded that the development of this strategy provided an unparalleled opportunity for people to pool their knowledge and experience in order to transform the criminal justice system for women, and to translate good policy into even better practice. That is our aim.

This document is an opportunity to comment on the Government's proposals and I would encourage everyone to contribute.

Paul Goggins MP
Minister of State

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Women and men are different. Equal treatment of men and women does not result in equal outcomes.” – Baroness Jean Corston

1.1 In 2006, the Government commissioned Baroness Jean Corston to carry out a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system in England and Wales. This followed on from extensive previous research, much of which showed that women offenders present particular problems.

1.2 Baroness Corston was asked to examine women’s experience of the criminal justice process and the interventions and services available at each stage. Her task was to identify what more could be done to tackle problems at an earlier point and, where possible, avoid vulnerable women ending up in prison. Her report, published in March 2007, contained 43 recommendations aimed at improving the approaches, services and interventions for women offenders and those at risk of offending. Nearly all of her recommendations were accepted by Government, and considerable progress has already been made through a co-ordinated cross-government approach. Although the recommendations relate to England and Wales, there is much that resonates with our experience in Northern Ireland.

1.3 In the course of her review, Baroness Corston identified some of the problems that, combined, often lead to a crisis point in women’s lives that in turn leads to offending. These include:

- **domestic circumstances** and problems such as domestic violence and childcare issues;
- **personal circumstances**, such as mental illness and substance misuse; and
- **socio-economic factors**, including poverty, isolation, unemployment and homelessness.

1.4 Baroness Corston was clear that addressing these issues is vital if we are to ensure that women are properly supported to lead law-abiding lives, and if we are to reduce the levels of re-offending by women. She concluded that a more women-centred, integrated approach was required, and she stressed that securing equal outcomes sometimes requires different services and policies for men and women. Some of the fundamental differences she identified include:

- women who have been the victims of violence and abuse are over-represented in the criminal justice system and can be described as victims as well as offenders;
- the biological difference between men and women has different social and personal consequences;
- relationship problems feature strongly in women's pathways to crime;
- coercion by men can form a route into criminal activity for some women;
- mental health problems are far more prevalent among women in prison than among women in the general population;
- drug addiction plays a major part in all offending but this is disproportionately the case with women;
- women prisoners are far more likely than men to be the primary carers of young children and this factor makes the prison experience significantly different for women than men; and
- prison is disproportionately harsher for women because prisons, and the practices within them, have for the most part been designed for men by men.

We believe these conclusions hold essentially true for women offenders in Northern Ireland, although the relative importance of some of these factors may differ here.

The need for a distinct approach

1.5 Some of these issues are explored further in Chapter 2, but it is clear that women offenders will experience a broad range of vulnerabilities with regard to issues such as family relationships, children, health and mental well-being, and addictions. They will also suffer concerns about their financial situation and their accommodation needs, particularly if they have dependants. Baroness Corston and others have shown that women experience all of these issues in a very particular way, and that addressing the often complex needs of women offenders requires a targeted and tailored approach.

A co-ordinated approach in Northern Ireland

1.6 Building on the ongoing work in England and Wales, and also approaches taken in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, the Government is committed to delivering a co-ordinated, long-term and sustainable approach to addressing the needs of women offenders in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is hoped that the more limited size and scale of the issue in Northern Ireland will offer the opportunity for a radical approach to the issue here. This will mean taking forward a major cross-cutting programme of work at a strategic level, maximising the opportunities to address the social factors that contribute towards offending and re-offending by women and improving current service delivery on the ground. The draft strategy sets out objectives which combine ambition with realism (within the resources expected to be available), to produce an integrated approach to effectively managing all women offenders.

1.7 This document details current developments in the management of women offenders, in the community and in custody, and outlines proposals for building on these developments in the future to provide a more effective, gender specific approach. The key areas include proposals to provide effective alternatives to prosecution and custody; to reduce offending; to

develop a Women's Centre for the delivery of women specific services; and to provide a tailored approach to the management of women in custody.

1.8 The purpose of the consultation is to seek views from all interested parties on the proposals set out in the draft strategy. A summary of ongoing initiatives and commitments is attached at Annex C. Details of how to respond to this consultation document are at Annex D.

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN OFFENDERS - CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

2.1 In approaching this work it is important to try to understand who women offenders are. Above all else, they are people - mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters – individuals who are not all the same, but who often have in common a history of significant trauma in their lives.

2.2 Many women offenders will have led very chaotic lifestyles. Some will already have spent time in Juvenile Justice facilities, although many will have no previous convictions. Often they will have spent long periods of their childhood in care. Many will have had dysfunctional relationships with partners and families; they may have truanted and have very low educational attainment, as well as little, if any, experience of employment. Poverty and a lack of choices can lead to women feeling that they have little control over their own lives.

2.3 Women offenders will often have a history of having been subjected to serious and sustained sexual or other violent abuse, including domestic violence. Statistics from HMIP, HMPS and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) show that up to 50% of women in prison in England and Wales report having experienced violence at home.

2.4 All of these issues can be particularly devastating when a woman is also a mother.

Alcohol and substance misuse

2.5 Drug addiction (including prescribed drugs) is now a significant factor in much offending, but as Baroness Corston's report highlighted this seems to be disproportionately the case with women, who often have more complex poly-substance misuse. A snap shot view of women prisoners in Northern Ireland early in 2008 showed that half had a history of alcohol misuse, with 40% misusing drugs.

2.6 Research, such as the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime report, and the literature review conducted by the Department of Health Sciences at the University of Leicester, both published in 2004, indicates that there are gender-specific pathways into substance misuse and crime. Issues such as physical and sexual abuse, mental health status and relationships with children are often strong motivators for a woman's substance use that is directly related to offending. For example, women involved in prostitution are often victims of domestic violence and are often driven into prostitution as a survival activity because of drug addiction and debt. Studies of women involved in street-based prostitution in England and Wales show a very close relationship with Class A drugs. While the use of such drugs is less common in Northern Ireland, this is nevertheless a risk factor which needs to be monitored closely.

Mental health

2.7 Mental health/well-being is often a key factor in women's offending, and can have a profound impact on how they experience custody. In many cases serious mental illness or personality disorder lead to women experiencing social exclusion and chaotic lifestyles. Baroness Corston reports that up to 80% of women in prison in England and Wales have diagnosable mental health problems: in Northern Ireland, a snap shot view of women prisoners in early 2008 showed that over a third had suffered from depression.

2.8 There continue to be significant levels of self-harm amongst women prisoners. The 2006/07 HMCIP Annual Report indicates that women in England and Wales are 16 times more likely to self-harm than men, and account for nearly half of all self harm incidents. Between 1 October 2007 and 1 October 2008, 61% of all "Prisoner at Risk" reports opened for women prisoners in Northern Ireland were as result of an act of self-harm or a threat of self-harm. A wide range of issues can underlie women's self-harming, including substance misuse, depression, personality disorder, anxiety in relation to children and families, bereavement, relationship problems, bullying, and worries about losing accommodation. When in custody, there is also evidence that those who self harm cause distress for other prisoners, many of whom may be trying to address their own history of self harming.

Mothers and children

2.9 Many women offenders are mothers. The Interim Report on Women Offending, prepared by the Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice System in November 2003, reported that “half of all women prisoners have dependent children, and that it is estimated that 17,000 children (in England and Wales) are separated from their mother by imprisonment each year”.

2.10 Baroness Corston highlights that women in prison are less likely than men to have someone on the outside looking after their home and family and more likely to lose their home and family as a result of imprisonment. It is, of course, the case that some women may have to spend all or part of a pregnancy in prison, or may even give birth while in prison. Evidence shows that the children of imprisoned mothers, and particularly those who are taken into state care during the mother’s imprisonment, are at significantly greater risk of developing criminal behaviour in adulthood than other children.

Learning, skills and employment

2.11 Research has shown that the chaotic lifestyles and background of many women offenders, coupled with the prevalence of learning disabilities, impacts greatly on their ability to get employment. In Ash House – the women’s prison (near Belfast) in Northern Ireland - a sample of 100 committals taken in early 2008 showed that approximately half of women prisoners at that time had not completed secondary education, and around 13% had literacy levels below entry level 1 (equivalent to 5-7 year old).

Post-release issues

2.12 Women leaving prison receive varying degrees of support, and may face many problems around finding accommodation or employment, staying drug or alcohol free and, in particular, regaining custody of their children – to do so, women obviously need to be able to demonstrate that they have somewhere to live. Problems with regaining custody can make it difficult for women to return to a normal way of life and may, thus, encourage re-offending. Added to this, children may have changed or grown up in their absence, or established new relationships with family and carers that may give rise to tension.

CHAPTER 3

WOMEN OFFENDERS – SENTENCING PATTERNS

3.1 Women represent a relatively small proportion of the overall offender population in Northern Ireland. The 2006 conviction rate for women (44 per 10,000 population) is considerably lower than that for men (312 per 10,000 population) and of all those convicted in the courts in 2006¹, 13% (3428) were female. The table below shows the sentences awarded and the number of female offenders receiving each disposal.

Table 1: Disposals in all courts for female offenders by offence classification

	Immediate Custody	Suspended Custody	Community Disposal	Fine	Conditional Discharge	Youth Conference Order	Other	Total
Female Offenders	109	242	320	2248	318	26	165	3428

Custody

3.2 The Northern Ireland women's prison population is relatively small in comparison to the rest of the United Kingdom and most of Western Europe: in 2007, women represented 3% of the average prison population in Northern Ireland (and in the Republic of Ireland), compared to 4.1% in Sweden, 5.2% in England and Wales, 6.5% in Norway, 8.1% in Spain, and 8.7% in the Netherlands. The release of prisoners following the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement has been followed by a growth in the overall prison population, including in the female population. However, although numbers are rising (there was a high of 60 in September 2008), and can fluctuate, women in prison still represent a very small proportion of the total prison population.

3.3 As can be seen from Table 1, significant use is already made by the courts of non-custodial disposals for women offenders. In 2006, the fine was most common disposal - given to 66% of female offenders. A sentence of immediate custody was given to 3%. However, these statistics do not reflect the complete profile of the female custodial population, nor the management challenges faced by the Criminal Justice agencies and NIPS (Northern Ireland

¹ Court Prosecutions and Sentencing 2006. NISRA Research and Statistical Bulletin 11/2008

Prison Service) in particular. In addition to sentenced prisoners, the prison population consists of those held on remand and offenders committed to custody for fine default. In 2007², of the total 370 female prison receptions (an offender may be committed to prison more than once during the year), 38% (142) were for fine default and 46% (165) for offenders remanded to custody pending trial.

Remand

3.4 Over the last 5 years, on average, 42% of women prisoners were on remand, compared to 35% of male prisoners. However, the remand population can be quite volatile and can be significantly influenced by targeted police operations. For example, on 8 December 2008, 50% of women prisoners were being held on remand, compared to 35% of male prisoners.

3.5 This can create significant management challenges for NIPS. As the only women's prison in Northern Ireland, Ash House has to fulfil many different roles, including that usually played by a local women's prison in England and Wales. Ash House does, therefore, have a large proportion of remands at any given time, which gives rise to a rapidly changing, short stay population.

Fine Default

3.6 In 2007 there were 142 female committals to custody for fine default. Most of the fine defaulters who end up in custody have defaulted on low level fines imposed for relatively minor offences, suggesting that more suitable and tailored disposals could be made available as alternatives to imprisonment for default.

² The Northern Ireland Prison Population in 2007. NISRA Research and Statistical Bulletin 9/2008

Juvenile females

3.7 The use of custody for juveniles is limited to serious and persistent offenders, and as a last resort. The number of girls held in custody is traditionally low, typically no more than 4 at any one time. Provisions were introduced in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 to enable all girls under the age of 18 requiring custody to be accommodated in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. This resolved a long standing difficulty which had resulted in a very small number of 17 year old girls occasionally being accommodated with adult prisoners. Woodlands is the only custodial facility solely for children in Northern Ireland. It is a purpose-built facility for a maximum of 48 children (girls and boys), with a typical average population of around 30.

Community Disposals

3.8 Of the total convictions for female offenders in 2006, 9% were sentenced to a community disposal under the supervision of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI). Community disposals include: Custody Probation Orders; Probation Orders with or without requirements; Community Service Orders and Combination Orders.

3.9 Based on PBNI's current caseload of 359 female offenders (see Table 2 below), a significant proportion of offences for which community disposals are given relates to acquisitive crime and the Deception/ Fraud category in which a number of offences relate to benefit fraud where women have claimed monies without disclosing full information about total income.

Table 2: Offence Classification of Female Offenders under PBNI Supervision

Offence Type	% of Offenders
Assault	19%
Theft	19%
Deception/Fraud/Forgery	14%
Criminal Damage/Arson	10%
Motoring Offences	9%
Drug Offences	4%
Burglary/Robbery/Aggravated Robbery	3%
Sexual Offences	1%
Other (inc. public disorder, blackmail & breach of court orders)	21%

3.10 PBNI research indicates that the majority of women under supervision present low risk of harm to the public and that most women (80%) fall into the low/medium category of likelihood of re-offending. However, the lack of appropriate, gender-specific interventions impacts adversely on the ability of women offenders to address the distinctive personal and social issues which contribute to their offending behaviour.

CHAPTER 4

THE STRATEGY – VISION AND AIMS

4.1 The overall vision for this strategy is to provide a Criminal Justice system in which the particular needs of women offenders and those at risk of offending are recognised and addressed, and effective pathways out of crime are delivered.

4.2 **Its strategic aims are:**

- **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.
- **to reduce the number of women coming through 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.
- **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.

- **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.

4.3 **Successful outcomes for the strategy will be:**

- reduced offending and re-offending amongst women.
- a range of women-centred interventions available within the community to support women offenders and those at risk of offending, and to help women desist from offending behaviour at an earlier stage.
- custody being used only for those women who have committed serious and violent offences.
- a better experience, and a better outcome, for those women who receive a custodial sentence.
- more effective rehabilitation and re-integration by women offenders into the community.

CHAPTER 5

STRATEGIC STRAND 1

PROVIDING ALTERNATIVES TO PROSECUTION AND CUSTODY

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.

5.1 Whilst imprisonment and non-custodial sentences provide options for dealing with offenders on the basis of the risks posed and the seriousness of the offence, there are a range of offences at the lower end of the spectrum which offer the opportunity for alternative diversionary approaches to be taken. Prosecuting minor offences through the courts, particularly where they are committed by persons unlikely to persistently re-offend, may not always be the most appropriate and effective way of delivering a proportionate justice outcome.

5.2 Receiving a criminal record for a minor offence may also have a significant long term impact on employment prospects and on the ability of individuals to pass through a short-lived phase of offending to go on to lead law-abiding lives. That is not to say that low level offending should be ignored. What is important is that the offence is acknowledged and, where appropriate, the harm caused to victims is repaired and the root cause of offending behaviour is tackled in a more meaningful way.

5.3 We are already developing a number of initiatives aimed at tackling these issues. These include:

a) Alternatives to Prosecution

A consultation on potential options for alternatives to prosecution, carried out in 2008, examined options for the increased use of fines and a system

of cautions with rehabilitative, reparative and punitive conditions. The operational, technological and resource impacts of implementing the various options are currently being assessed by key criminal justice agencies to inform the identification of preferred policy proposals. A number of gender-specific issues are being considered as part of the policy development process. These include the potentially disproportionate impact on the family, where women are fined for minor offences, and the prevalence of mental health issues amongst female offenders.

b) Fine default

Recognising that some low level offending will result in prosecution, work is also being taken forward to create and promote the use of non-custodial sentences. For example, a fine default consultation on alternatives to imprisonment for those who do not pay fines has recently closed. This looked at options for dealing with offenders – including many women – who end up in custody solely in relation to fine default.

Much of this work is aimed at preventing default situations arising and, where they do occur, avoiding the automatic triggering of custodial sentences for low level default. Better information for sentencers on incomes; deploying reminder systems ahead of default; additional powers for staged payments deducted at source; and community alternatives instead of custody where default occurs will all be important approaches in taking this forward. Such powers will have a beneficial effect for *all* those in danger of defaulting on fines – but could have a real benefit for women offenders who default on fines because they *can't* pay rather than *won't* pay. Preventative and diversionary steps such as those proposed will have a positive effect and are intended to reduce the numbers who end up in prison.

c) Electronic Monitoring

Electronic monitoring (“tagging”) will be available in Northern Ireland from April 2009 to support the monitoring of curfews. An electronic monitoring requirement can be directed in a variety of ways and the curfew can be adapted to suit the needs of the individual. For example, it can be used as a condition of bail potentially reducing the levels of women remanded to custody.

Electronic monitoring can also be applied as part of a community sentence: a woman can remain at home with her family, and undertake education, training, work or rehabilitative programmes. It is hoped that this will, in many cases, have a positive impact on women offenders, possibly contributing to a reduction in re-offending.

5.4 The strategy aims to build on these developments and to establish new mechanisms by which women can be diverted from prosecution and custody.

Specifically, we will:

- *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;*
- *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; and*
- *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. The proposal for a Women’s Centre (see Chapter 7), in particular, is seen as offering the opportunity to pilot new diversionary approaches, targeting individual needs with appropriate women offenders.*

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

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

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

CHAPTER 6

STRATEGIC STRAND 2 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.

6.1 The Government's commitment to the reduction of offending in Northern Ireland is set out under the NIO's Public Service Agreement (PSA) target of Making Communities Safer. Addressing women's offending is a key strand of the work being taken forward to develop a strategy for reducing offending in Northern Ireland, work that also has relevance to the Community Safety Strategy 'Together. Stronger. Safer.' which makes commitments to create opportunities offering alternatives to involvement in crime and to support the rehabilitation of offenders.

6.2 While much can be done to address offending behaviour within the criminal justice system, a justice-based approach is not enough. To be really effective, a coherent cross-government approach is essential in addressing the pathways to offending behaviour, as well as dealing with its consequences.

6.3 Experience in Great Britain and elsewhere has shown that establishing effective partnerships and developing a co-ordinated, cross departmental and inter-agency approach is vital to reducing offending. To promote this co-operation at the highest level, **we will**, in partnership with 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.*

6.4 A cross-Government approach should assist Departments and Agencies in identifying how their policies and practices can impact on women's offending, and provide a valuable impetus to co-ordinated action. In Great Britain, where a similar group has been established for some time, relevant Ministers have set up a Ministerial sub-group specifically to address women's offending and to guide cross-departmental developments.

6.5 Whilst the scale of women's offending in Northern Ireland is at a lower overall level compared to Great Britain, many of the factors contributing to it are similar. Consequently, there may be practical lessons emerging from the GB sub-group that could inform developments here. However, there are some differences in the types of offences that women commit between the two jurisdictions and the way that the courts deal with them. These will have to be explored in greater detail to establish similarities and differences in women's offending and how it is handled in Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Addressing Offending Behaviour – The Pathways

6.6 Research has shown that there are a number of social factors which contribute to offending and re-offending. These are embedded currently within the NIPS/PBNI Resettlement Strategy as 7 key "pathways" around which partnerships help to support offender management and reduce re-offending by addressing personal needs. In England and Wales, it has been recognised that the original 7 pathways failed to take account of two crucial women-specific issues - women who have been abused, raped or who have experienced domestic violence; and those who have been involved in prostitution. These issues have now been adopted as pathways 8 and 9, and it is proposed that they should also be adopted as part of the gender-specific approach to reducing offending and supporting women who offend and those at risk of offending in Northern Ireland.

6.7 The Government is committed to focusing on these 9 pathways to meet the needs of women in the Criminal Justice system through a multi-agency approach. To ensure that the pathways lead to women offenders and those at risk of offending being able to access mainstream and specific services, work is being focussed on a number of fronts, both in the community and in custody.

Pathway 1 – Accommodation

Problems with homelessness are often linked to offending. This experience is often complicated by mental health issues.

Current Provision

In the community:

- accommodation is provided through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) Homeless Advice Unit; through access to voluntary sector accommodation, including Women’s Aid and through dedicated provision within PBNI approved hostels.
- “Supporting People” is a NIHE programme aimed at preventing homelessness. It works by supporting vulnerable people at risk of homelessness to maintain their independence, or by assisting people who are already homeless to regain a level of independence so that they can manage a tenancy on their own.

In custody:

- the “Housing Advice in Prison Project”, funded by NIHE and NIPS, is aimed at assisting in the prevention of homelessness amongst those leaving prison, thereby enhancing their opportunities for rehabilitation and community integration, and contributing to the reduction of re-offending. This is achieved through direct delivery of advice and support services within prisons by the Housing Rights Service (e.g. advocacy/representation services to those prisoners with more complex housing issues; a specialist housing consultancy/support and referral service to those advisers and resettlement staff currently

operating in the prisons). The Housing Rights Service also uses the evidence gathered from this work to identify barriers and bring about improvements in housing policy, practice and provision for those entering and leaving custody.

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

Pathway 2 – Education, Training and Employment

Learning and Skills

There is strong evidence to suggest that many offenders have serious deficits when it comes to education and training, and that this limits their capacity to avoid re-offending following periods of supervision, or when released from custody. To provide an over-arching, co-ordinated approach to this issue, **we will**, in liaison with the Department of Education and the Department of Employment and Learning:

- *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 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.*

Within custody, a mapping exercise of learning and skills provision is already underway, including that specifically accessible by women. When this is completed **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)”³.*

³ Talbot, J. (2007) No One Knows – Identifying and supporting prisoners with learning difficulties and learning disabilities: the views of prison staff. London: Prison Reform Trust
www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/temp/NOKNIspfinalsppdf.pdf

Employment

Women offenders often have difficulty securing employment on release from custody.

Current Provision

The Criminal Justice Agencies, in liaison with other Government Departments and the voluntary and community sector, are working to maximise employment opportunities for offenders. This work has led to initiatives, including:

- funding from PBNI's community development budget to community/voluntary agencies providing employment training services for female ex-offenders;
- developing a prisoner employment strategy to better integrate learning and skills development with internal work and job experience opportunities, in preparation for job-seeking on release; and
- working in conjunction with NIACRO, through the Jobtrack employment project, to ensure that women's needs are specifically addressed. Jobtrack provides a structured job preparation programme to serving prisoners who have been referred to the programme within the last few months of their sentence. The programme is designed to develop or enhance relevant skills for accessing the labour market. Jobtrack also works with some prisoners over a longer period, providing an individual employment based assessment and working with them to help them progress into mainstream training/education and employment. An important aspect of the Jobtrack programme is the strong linkage with similar programmes in the community for those prisoners who are motivated to continue to engage with the programme post release.

In taking forward this work, **we will:**

- *examine how the 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.*

Q. 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?

Pathway 3 - Health

PBNI's 2004-05 desktop study of Pre Sentence Reports indicated a relatively high prevalence (36%) of women offenders with mental health problems. With the transfer of lead responsibility for healthcare to the DHSSPS in April 2008, NIPS, in liaison with colleagues in the 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.*

Pathway 4 – Alcohol and substance misuse

Effective delivery of interventions to deal with alcohol and substance misuse makes an important contribution to a woman offender's ability to engage in programmes and activities that might contribute to her rehabilitation.

Current Provision

Issues associated with alcohol and substance misuse are being addressed in the DHSSPS led Drug and Alcohol strategy for Northern Ireland.⁴ A number of key priorities are identified in the strategy, including a measure to specifically target those who are vulnerable and at risk. Those specified as being included in this category are: homeless, people living with domestic violence, sex workers, ex-offenders, people with mental health problems, street drinkers and people with learning disabilities. Commitments in the strategy include reviewing local treatment and support services; and, if necessary, developing new services across a range of settings for those deemed at high risk; as well as delivering a range of regional and local programmes and projects that inform and educate families about alcohol.

The Youth Justice Agency is participating in piloting a Regional Initial Assessment Tool in co-operation with the Eastern Drugs and Alcohol Co-ordination Team. This assessment model is designed to ensure professionals can deliver targeted interventions to young people responding appropriately to both age and level of risk.

A seamless approach to service provision is required in order to deal effectively with the alcohol and substance misuse of women offenders. PBNI and NIPS have separately had their substance misuse strategies under review, and will:

⁴ New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006-2011 DHSSPS May 2006

- *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.*

Q. 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?

Pathway 5 – Finance, benefits and debt

Financial problems are often a major contributory factor in women's offending. Many women are on low incomes, and advice in relation to managing money, accessing benefits and reducing debt can be an integral part of the support they need to help prevent them re-offending. Both PBNI and NIPS work with voluntary sector organisations to provide support on these issues and fund NIACRO to provide benefit and debt management advice to women, both in the community and in custody.

In going forward, **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.*

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

Pathway 6 – Children and families

In the community, the difficulties caused by lack of childcare can impact adversely on a woman's ability to comply with the terms of any community disposal. In custody, helping women to maintain their family ties is critical to reducing re-offending.

Current provision

NIPS has worked with Barnardos to develop a comprehensive Family Strategy. Key elements of the strategy are to provide information, advice and support to families. This includes assistance with visits, including family visit arrangements, and family programmes.

The Barnardos Parenting Matters Project helps prisoners develop parenting techniques and maintain relationships with their children. NIPS has also worked with Barnardos to produce child-friendly literature to help inform children and young people who have a parent or relative in prison.

Currently, NIACRO's Family Links initiative provides services to families and children of women prisoners. The service offers both practical and emotional support in coping with having a mother in custody.

Building on current provision **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.*

Q. Are these measures appropriate?

Q. What other measures would help women prisoners maintain family links?

Q. 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?

Pathway 7 – Attitudes, thinking and behaviours

Current provision

Women are included in programme provision around attitudes, thinking and behaviour, and every effort is made to be women-centred in the delivery of programmes. For instance, the ‘Think First’ programme, which challenges offending behaviour and is accredited by the Home Office for delivery to men and women, was implemented by PBNi in June last year. 2008 also saw the introduction of a creative arts project based on exploring past experiences and their linkage to offending behaviour. However, there are no programmes which have been developed specifically for women.

In order to begin to address the current lack of gender-specific initiatives in this area, **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.

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

Pathway 8 – Supporting women who have been abused raped or who have experienced domestic violence

There is a need to work with specialist services to provide greater support for those women, both in custody and in the community, with emotional needs related to issues such as domestic violence, rape, and abuse.

Current Provision

Work in this area is already closely linked with other key government strategies including:

- the Regional Strategy 'Tackling Sexual Violence and Abuse', a joint initiative between DHSSPS and NIO which sets out the commitment of Government and its agencies, in partnership with voluntary and community sector organisations, to adopt a consistent and long-term approach to the prevention of sexual violence and abuse; and an effective and timely response when it occurs. One of the key commitments is to establish a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) in Northern Ireland by December 2010. It will play a key role in encouraging women to come forward to receive the help they need. The SARC aims to deliver an integrated service to victims providing immediate medical aftercare, ongoing practical and emotional support services and a supportive gateway to the criminal justice system for those reporting offences committed against them.

- “Tackling Violence at Home”, a 5 year strategy for addressing domestic violence and abuse in Northern Ireland. The strategy is implemented through a series of annual action plans which aim to:
 - address domestic violence and abuse through improved services and support for victims;
 - provide a high quality, co-ordinated multi-agency approach to domestic violence;
 - increase awareness about domestic violence and the measures that are in place to help its victims;
 - educate children, young people and the wider public that domestic violence is wrong and unacceptable, and to enable them to make informed choices; and
 - hold perpetrators /abusers accountable for their behaviour.

Initiatives to date have included a series of media campaigns to increase awareness; the provision of a 24 hour free phone domestic violence helpline; routine enquiries at maternity units so that help and advice can be offered if domestic violence is disclosed; and an information leaflet for victims on how the law can help.

- legislative powers, which have also been strengthened to protect the most vulnerable. Key provisions of the Domestic Violence Crime and *Victims Act 2004* were specifically targeted at providing extra protections for women. Common assault was made an arrestable offence to provide police with sufficient powers to take action in domestic violence cases - even in cases where the victim felt unable to press charges. Restraining orders were made available to the court on acquittal. Previously protection from harassment was only available on conviction but this was extended to provide extra powers in domestic violence cases. Now, new powers are being created to improve the defences available in cases where killing occurs as a result of sustained physical abuse – this is particularly important for vulnerable women in what are often tragic circumstances.

Building on these developments **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.*

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

Pathway 9 – Supporting women who have been involved in prostitution

There is also a need to work with specialist services to provide greater support for those women, both in custody and in the community, with needs related to their involvement in prostitution.

Current initiatives

The draft CSU Strategy, “Together. Stronger. Safer”, covers proposals for supporting the most vulnerable in our society, including the intention to adopt a multi-agency approach to tackling the underlying factors which lead to people becoming part of the sex trade, and to help them move away from prostitution.

In addition to being involved in the development of these proposals, **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.*

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

Restorative interventions

Young People

6.8 The number of girls coming through the youth justice system is small. For those who do, the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) adopts an individually tailored plan to address their offending behaviour and meet their needs.

6.9 The YJA has a particular focus on the prevention of offending and re-offending and their innovative Youth Conference Service is a world leader in bringing young people face to face with victims of their crimes. There is a growing body of evidence that this type of restorative approach and diversionary work is particularly successful in keeping young people away from further criminal behaviour. The YJA also works with statutory and voluntary partners in Children and Young People's Committees in each of the four Health and Social Service Board areas in the development of strategies to prevent offending and promote positive outcomes for children and families.

Adult women

6.10 Given the evidence of the effectiveness of a restorative approach for young people, two pilot schemes offering a range of restorative interventions to adult women offenders have been established in Belfast by PBNI. These pilots, supported by community partners, work with offenders post conviction to facilitate victims and offenders to work together to address the impact of offending and to prevent further offending.

Building on these developments in respect of 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 funding, develop a formal restorative conferencing service for appropriate women offenders, which will include community mediation and re-integration.*

Q. What are your views on restorative interventions?

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

Gender-Specific Research

6.11 In the development of this strategy, the lack of relevant data for Northern Ireland was a recurring theme. If we are to effectively target offending, its causes and the impact of interventions, we need more information that is specific to women offenders. The process of improvement has already begun. To help inform the reducing offending debate, an independent literature review of the international research evidence on reducing offending has been completed and will soon be published.

In going forward, **we will** also:

- *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.*

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

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

CHAPTER 7

STRATEGIC STRAND 3

GENDER-SPECIFIC COMMUNITY SUPERVISION AND INTERVENTIONS

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.

7.1 Government statistics on reconviction in Northern Ireland provide evidence that community supervision is effective in reducing re-offending. Figures for the 2005 offender cohort show that the two year reconviction rate for those adults subject to PBNI supervision was 35%, which compares favourably with a two year reconviction rate of 49% for those adults discharged from immediate custody sentences. Of those offenders who received a PBNI disposal, 18% of women and 38% of men were reconvicted within two years. Of those discharged from an immediate custody sentence in 2005, 42% of women were reconvicted within the two year follow up period, compared to 49% of men.

7.2 However, more can be done to address women's re-offending. At present, there are very few interventions designed specifically for women: the development of interventions has been focused on male offenders who comprise a much larger segment of the offender population. Interventions based upon male offending characteristics may not be appropriate for women, who have different offender characteristics and needs. Women who receive additional requirements to Probation Orders, which are designed for delivery through group work, may end up completing this work on a one to one basis, rather than within a group as intended, given the small number of women offenders in any particular area.

Gender-specific standards for assessment and supervision

7.3 With commencement of the Women's Centre pilot, particular emphasis is being given to the development of gender-specific standards for the assessment and supervision of women offenders. PBNI will link development of these standards to its separate objectives in relation to the implementation of a new strategy for community service, and the commencement of implementation of an agreed action plan for the formulation and introduction of new practice standards to support delivery of the Criminal Justice Order 2008.

Women's Centre Pilot

7.4 Baroness Corston's report examined how services and interventions for women offenders are delivered, both in prison and within the community. She was particularly impressed by the model of the Women's Centre as a referral centre for women who offend or who are at risk of offending, and she concluded that these centres are able to provide much-needed support for women with particular vulnerabilities to take responsibility for their lives. Taking on board Baroness Corston's findings, PBNI, NIO and NIPS are co-ordinating a pilot of the Women's Centre concept in Northern Ireland. The pilot centre was initiated in the Belfast area at the end of 2008 under the direction and staffing of PBNI.

7.5 The aim is to develop and deliver in the community a new, enhanced range of women-specific services, which directly contribute to reducing women's offending through targeted community-based interventions. The pilot, which will run until March 2011, is being established as a test-bed for developing and refining a range of women-specific services to meet the needs of women offenders. The project, once fully developed, should be influential in shaping future community based provision and will provide a model for a managed roll-out of women-focused services beyond Belfast.

7.6 A gender-specific model for the assessment and supervision of offenders has been developed, based around best practice. This has identified the need to develop new assessment tools, focused on women

offenders - initial proposals have been developed for integrating strands of existing service provision by PBNI and NIPS. The Women's Centre takes account of related research in Northern Ireland and lessons from the establishment of women offenders' services in England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. In both prison based analysis and PBNI research, the needs of women offenders in Northern Ireland largely mirror those identified by comparable research in other areas of the United Kingdom.

7.7 The target groups of women offenders who will make use of the Women's Centre will be drawn from appropriate women on community supervision and those currently in custody who are eligible for day-release and/or a working-out scheme for female life sentence prisoners. As the Centre develops it may be possible to use its facilities to support women directed towards alternatives to prosecution and send a limited number of offenders direct to the Centre from the courts, again on a pilot basis – this would have to be carefully controlled and managed. The Centre will prepare women for release, and for testing them in terms of their re-integration into the community.

7.8 The first phase of the pilot became operational on 27th October 2008, operating temporarily from PBNI premises in Belfast city centre. It will move to a more permanent location in 2009. The pilot will focus on the integration of women offenders into their communities and, to this end, the Women's Centre has already developed links with the Belfast Women's Support Network, an umbrella organisation for over 30 community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups. It is planned to significantly develop this link between the Women's Centre and the network of local women's centres over the course of the pilot, and to ensure that services are co-ordinated with, and inclusive of, this network in developing the range of support and provision for women offenders in their local communities.

7.9 PBNI, NIO and NIPS are all fully committed to using the Women's Centre as a spring-board for subsequent developments to meet the challenge of identifying the precise components of the community-based women's services that are needed in Northern Ireland. The principle of partnership runs through the work of the Centre, as it runs through all of the work aimed at

reducing offending. Our expectation is, therefore, that, as the pilot develops, the potential scope for inter-agency working, and cross-sectoral co-operation should increase to optimise the pool of existing resources already available for women.

The need for a hostel?

7.10 Some very vulnerable women offenders may be in need of more complex networks of support than can be provided on a 'day' basis. The Women's Centre is not set up or resourced to operate as a hostel and its focus will be on developing women-specific community programmes. However, it does offer real scope to develop creative partnership arrangements with other community-based women's organisations which provide accommodation under "Supporting People", such as women's groups and housing associations.

7.11 However, separately, there may be a potential need for dedicated accommodation, outside of a prison setting, to be used for women approaching the end of custodial sentences or, on occasions, as an alternative to custody for appropriate women offenders. The advantage of providing such hostel accommodation is that it could provide a real alternative to sending women offenders to prison and facilitate the earlier, controlled release of women from custody. It would, therefore, support and promote the continued involvement of women in the community and so ease them back into community-living after a period in custody. Against this, the number of women that might require, or would elect to use, such hostel accommodation is likely to be very small while the hostel would have to operate and be staffed on a 24/7 basis. A hostel would also have a fixed location, which would, inevitably, limit its capacity to build or sustain its residents' links into their local communities, which could be anywhere in Northern Ireland. Consequently, there are concerns that such a hostel would be underused and would not prove cost-effective, possibly drawing funds away from other priority women's services at a time when there is publicly funded "Supporting People" accommodation readily available.

7.12 There are strong advocates, both for, and against, women's hostels in Great Britain, and further analysis and debate is required in Northern Ireland to test the need for, and viability of, such a facility in Northern Ireland. Work will be commissioned to explore this potential provision in 2009 - 2010, drawing on the growing experiences of the pilot women's centre and the operation of dedicated women's hostels and 'half-way houses' in other jurisdictions.

Taking forward gender-specific community interventions

7.13 In progressing and developing the initiatives outlined above, **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 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.*

Q. Are these measures appropriate?

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

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

CHAPTER 8
STRATEGIC STRAND 4
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.

8.1 For some women offenders there will be no alternative to custody, either because of the severity of their offence, or for reasons of public protection. Baroness Corston acknowledges, however, that “prisons are being asked to do the impossible”. She concludes that many women in prison have been failed long before they arrive at the prison gates, and that many are simply too ill for prison to be an appropriate location for them. However, while such women continue to be given custodial sentences, the Northern Ireland Prison Service recognises that it is critical to find ways to improve their experience of custody and to respond to the considerable vulnerabilities they often present.

Accommodation

8.2 Currently, women prisoners are accommodated in Ash House at Hydebank Wood. This was, originally, one House of the male Young Offenders Centre and, while there are discrete self-contained accommodation units for the young offenders and the women, there are considerable shared services and facilities. It is accepted that the accommodation is not ideal, and that there is a need to provide, as soon as possible, a purpose-built facility for women prisoners

8.3 The Prison Service has now conducted a comprehensive options appraisal, and developed a Strategic Outline Case (see Annex A) in respect of providing a new, separate, purpose-built facility. However, recognising that any new build facility will take some years to develop, the Prison Service is currently taking forward a process of incremental change within the current facilities at Ash House in order to promote a more gender-specific approach to the management of women in custody.

A gender-specific regime

8.4 In the last couple of years, the Service has invested in excess of £1m to upgrade the current accommodation in Ash House. Work is well developed in respect of creating a greater physical separation from the young men in the Young Offenders Centre, including the addition of a new reception area for women prisoners, which opened in August 2008. The refurbishment of the healthcare accommodation, to create separate facilities for the women prisoners, was completed in December 2008. It is aimed to open an additional facility for extended family contact, adjacent to Ash House, by March 2009, where the Service will pilot a scheme enabling women, in appropriate circumstances, to have extended visits with their children. In addition, new, less intrusive, search procedures for women prisoners are currently being piloted in Ash House.

8.5 The Prison Service accepts that improvements to the physical environment must be complemented by progress in respect of the prison culture. To that end, the Service continues to foster an increased awareness of the need for respect and reciprocal relationships between prisoners, and between staff and prisoners. It is recognised that women prisoners, many of whom will have vulnerabilities, including mental health problems, can be highly dependent on staff for emotional support, and that this can be very stressful for staff. There is, clearly, a need for an investment in appropriate training and ongoing support and supervision for all those staff charged with meeting the complex needs of women in custody. Gender-specific training for staff working with women prisoners commenced in January 2009.

Offender management – the impact of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008

8.6 In light of the new Criminal Justice Order, women prisoners, like other prisoners, will now benefit from the services of a multi-disciplinary Offender Management Group which will be established at Hydebank Wood. This group will specifically address key issues, referring prisoners for support in relation to issues such as offending behaviour, addictions, learning and skills, employment, and family links. They will help to prepare women for release on licence or to be seen by the Parole Commissioners, who will consider the available information and make a recommendation in relation to release.

8.7 The Offender Management Group will allocate each sentenced prisoner a dedicated Sentence Plan Manager and a Case Manager, who will work together to regularly review, address and case-manage each prisoner during custody and make preparations for their licensing conditions and onward connection with Probation services on release. The Sentence Plan and Case Managers will, at the appropriate stage of custody, consider all eligible women for conditional early release in order to support their rehabilitation, and test their readiness for returning to the community.

Gender-specific standards and guidance

8.8 To underpin the new approach to the management of women in custody in Northern Ireland, and to complement the development of this wider Strategy for the Management of Women Offenders, the Prison Service has developed gender-specific standards for working with women prisoners. These address all areas of regime, and are complemented by the development of a practical guide for staff working with women prisoners. The draft standards will be published for public consultation in March 2009.

8.9 The Prison Service also has in place a comprehensive action plan to take forward the implementation of its commitments in relation to a gender-specific approach. This work will be developed in consultation with stakeholders to address all aspects of regime and practice, and take account

of some of the specific criticisms that have been raised by inspectorates and other agencies in respect of the care of women offenders in Northern Ireland. Developments will include progress in all areas, from reception and first night, through to release.

8.10 The Prison Service does not under-estimate the challenges in taking forward a gender-specific approach to custody. This is a huge agenda, cutting across all areas of the regime and facilities for women prisoners, much of it requiring significant multi-agency working.

The options for a new purpose-built women's prison

8.11 In keeping with the development of the overall strategy, the Prison Service has been examining the options for relocating the women from Ash House to more appropriate purpose-built accommodation and facilities. The options appraisal is now complete, and a Strategic Outline Case (SOC) has been developed.

8.12 The SOC, the executive summary of which is attached at Annex A, responds to the need to provide suitable custodial facilities for women offenders in Northern Ireland in the medium to long term. The work is being taken forward in the context of this wider Strategy for the Management of Women Offenders, and in light of the findings of the House of Commons NI Affairs Committee (December 2007) which noted the "...pressing need for a self contained women's prison facility in Northern Ireland", the HMCIP inspection of Ash House in November 2007 which recommended that "A separate prison should be provided for women in Northern Ireland", and the report by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, "The Prison Within – The imprisonment of women at Hydebank Wood 2004-06", which recommended that "The use of a residential unit within Hydebank Wood should be regarded as a temporary and time-limited location for imprisoning women in Northern Ireland," and that, "A self-contained and separately managed women's custody unit should be constructed at Hydebank Wood..."

8.13 The SOC has been prepared in full recognition of the current initiatives, outlined earlier in the Strategy, which are considering alternatives to prosecution and custody, and efforts throughout the criminal justice sector to support women offenders, and those at risk of offending/re-offending, within the community.

8.14 The initial outcomes of the SOC highlight three feasible options which have the ability to deliver the accommodation needs for women in custody within Hydebank Wood. These will be examined in further detail within a formal Outline Business Case.

8.15 Moving forward on this issue will require the investment of considerable resources, at a time when there are significant budgetary constraints. Given the timescales involved, it would be anticipated that final decisions around a new build might fall to a devolved administration.

8.16 This strategy sets out a number of ways in which we aim to improve the experience of custody for women and to develop a gender-specific approach to their management. **Specifically, 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.*

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

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

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

CHAPTER 9

A LONGER TERM VIEW

9.1 In order to deliver this strategy, it will be vital to ensure that there is effective co-operation between those delivering services to women offenders in the community and in custody so that the interfaces between different partners occur in a timely and accurate manner, with clear expectations and agreement on what is to be delivered, when and by whom.

9.2 The Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 sets out a range of measures to increase public protection, improve the efficiency of the criminal justice system, and tackle anti-social behaviour. There will be a number of implications for female offenders, such as the opportunity to be considered for electronic monitoring instead of being remanded in custody and the potential to divert more women from the formal justice system. As the new offender management processes embed, it will be a priority to develop a service framework that will enable us to measure the success of our delivery of services to women offenders as they pass through the various stages of their journey from arrest to sentence to community supervision or imprisonment to release, and potentially to breach or recall to prison.

The next steps

9.3 In the meantime, it will be important to ensure that the work identified across all the key strands set out in this document is progressed in a co-ordinated way - inter-agency working is the key to delivery. The contents of this strategy are closely linked with other key government strategies including:

- Lifetime Opportunities: An Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland;
- Our Children and Young People – A 10 Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006 – 2016;
- Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005 – 2010;
- Tackling Violence at Home – A Strategy for Addressing Domestic Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland;

- Tackling Sexual Violence and Abuse – A Regional Strategy 2008 – 2013;
- The New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006 – 2011; and
- Together. Stronger. Safer – a draft Community Safety Strategy

9.4 By adopting a gender-specific approach, recognising the distinct needs of women and responding to them, the main focus of this strategy is on rebalancing the criminal justice system's approach to dealing with women offenders. The proposals set out in this document provide a co-ordinated approach to addressing their needs, with the aim of reducing offending by women through early and appropriate intervention, and by ensuring that, where they commit serious or persistent offences, the criminal justice system works effectively to address their offending behaviour.

9.5 The impact of these short and medium term initiatives, along with measures already taken, such as the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, will have a material effect on the development of the longer-term strategic approach to women offenders.

A New Landscape

9.6 The future scale and pattern of women's offending should be strongly influenced by the developments outlined in this strategy, and, in particular:

- the development and introduction of practical alternatives to prosecution;
- the progress of work across government to build a systematic approach to reducing offending, with a greater emphasis on early and timely intervention;
- developments arising from recent legislation in the sentencing field, including the introduction of public protection sentences, electronic monitoring, and sentencing reforms;
- the progression of the women's centre initiative and the new assessment tools and women-centric programmes that it will bring;

- the roll-out of women specific offender programmes in the community and initiatives to reduce the number of women held in custody on remand; and
- the development of prison regimes that ensure that the distinct needs of women prisoners are more effectively addressed.

9.7 At this stage it is difficult to assess accurately the cumulative effect of these and other women-centred initiatives. There is little doubt, however, that the strategic landscape in relation to offending by women will become significantly different and that this, in turn, will affect plans for the further development of women-specific services. It will be important to assess how far experience in Northern Ireland on this basis differs from that in the rest of these Isles.

9.8 To develop the longer term strategy, one key question will be: how effective have the short and medium term interventions been in reducing offending by women, and in helping women offenders to desist from, or stop, their offending behaviour? Experience over the next couple of years will have a bearing on a range of issues, including the focus and sizing of future provision for women offenders.

CHAPTER 10

EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES

Equality Implications

Northern Ireland Act 1998

10.1 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires the Northern Ireland Office in carrying out its functions to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:

- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group;
- age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- between men and women generally;
- between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- between persons with dependants and persons without.

10.2 In addition, the NIO must also have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

10.3 This draft strategy sets out a policy framework for the delivery of improved services and interventions for women offenders.

10.4 We intend that the proposals will have a positive impact on equality of opportunity and outcomes for women. In particular, the strategy will impact most positively on women within all of the section 75 equality categories. Data and research shows that these women experience greater levels of disadvantage and gender inequality.

10.5 All significant policies arising from this strategy will be screened for their impact on equality of opportunity in accordance with the guidance produced by The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. If it emerges that a policy could have any adverse implications for equality of opportunity for any of the s75 equality categories, an Equality Impact Assessment will be carried out and ways of either avoiding or mitigating the effect considered.

10.6 In developing this strategy we have carried out some pre consultation, and taken on board opinions and contributions from relevant women's organisations, the voluntary and community sector, and other stakeholder organisations.

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

Q. Do you consider that any of the proposals in this document 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?

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

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

Human Rights implications

10.7 This draft strategy will have a significant positive impact on the human rights of all women offenders within Northern Ireland. It will increase the options available for the diversion of women from prosecution and from custody. It will also improve the conditions under which women are held if they are committed to custody, through the development of gender-specific policies and practices and by advancing the proposal to build a new prison designed specifically to address the needs of the female offender. The strategy will also provide for greater support for women offenders within the community, and improve the potential for successful rehabilitation.

10.8 The organisations involved in producing this strategy will be conducting human rights assessments on each of the strands to ensure that every opportunity is taken to uphold and promote the rights of all women offenders,

and that obligations under human rights law, including the United Nations Conventions as well as the Human Rights Act 1998, are fulfilled. This will include a human rights audit of the current prison conditions in Ash House to ensure that the new strategy will address any existing human rights concerns.

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

**STRATEGIC OUTLINE CASE
FOR A SUITABLE CUSTODIAL FACILITY FOR WOMEN PRISONERS IN
NORTHERN IRELAND**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

The Strategic Outline Case (SOC) relates to a need to provide suitable custodial facilities to meet the medium to long term needs of women offenders in Northern Ireland. The work is being taken forward in the context of the wider Strategy for the Management of Women Offenders, and in light of the findings of the House of Commons NI Affairs Committee (December 2007) which noted the "...pressing need for a self contained women's prison facility in Northern Ireland", the HMCIP inspection of Ash House in November 2007 which recommended that "A separate prison should be provided for women in Northern Ireland", and the report by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, "The Prison Within – The imprisonment of women at Hydebank Wood 2004-06", which recommended that "The use of a residential unit within Hydebank Wood should be regarded as a temporary and time-limited location for imprisoning women in Northern Ireland," and that, "A self-contained and separately managed women's custody unit should be constructed at Hydebank Wood..."

The SOC has been prepared in full recognition of the current initiatives, outlined in the Strategy, which are considering alternatives to prosecution and efforts throughout the criminal justice sector to support women offenders, and those at risk of offending/re-offending, within the community.

The current facility

The current facility for women offenders within the Northern Ireland Prison Service is based at Ash House, situated within the Hydebank Wood establishment. Hydebank Wood, which opened in 1978, also provides 240 places for young offenders between the ages of 16 and 23.

Details of movements in the female prisoner population since 1990 are summarised in Figure 1 below. Prior to the Belfast Agreement, the number of

sentenced prisoners was significantly higher than the remand population, most likely due to the long sentences arising from paramilitary offences. Since 2000, however, not only have the female remand and sentenced populations been similar, but they have also been the subject of sustained increase.

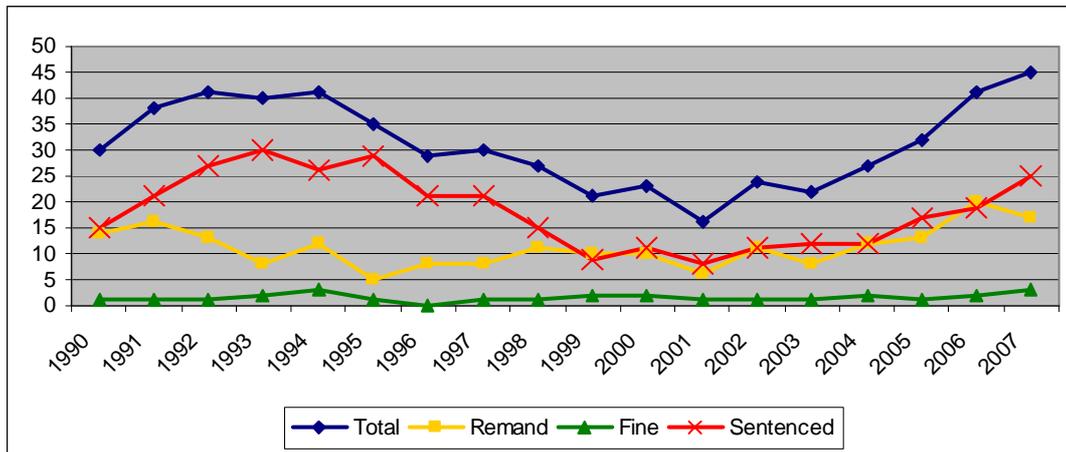


Figure 1: Female Prison Population 1990 – 2007

The existing population in Ash House, at 19th November 2008, was 61. Whilst the existing Certified Normal Accommodation is 74, the number of available cells is actually only 66, due to a number of cells being classified as ‘mother and baby’ or ‘listener’ cells. Importantly, the Ash 5 landing (providing 10 cells) has recently been introduced to provide a secure, low custody, enhanced environment for prisoners who meet the appropriate criteria. On the basis that this accommodation cannot be used by other prisoners, there are 56 cells available for the majority of the female prisoner population. As it is, insufficient space currently exists to accommodate any growth in the women’s population. Furthermore, there exists a lack of contingency accommodation in the event of cells becoming unavailable.

Over the period 2001 – 2008, the female prisoner population has experienced significant growth as evidenced by the statistics in Table 1.

Table 1 : Changes in Prison Population 2001 – 2008					
Year	Total Population	% Change	Average Female Population YTD	% Change	Female Population as % of Total Population
2001	895	n/a	16	n/a	1.8%
2002	1,006	+ 12.4%	24	+ 50.0%	2.4%
2003	1,138	+ 13.1%	22	- 8.3%	1.9%
2004	1,244	+ 9.3%	27	+ 22.7%	2.2%
2005	1,289	+ 3.6%	32	+ 18.5%	2.5%
2006	1,414	+ 9.7%	41	+ 28.1%	2.9%
2007	1,453	+ 2.8%	44	+ 7.3%	3.0%
2008	1,507	+ 3.7%	45	+ 2.3%	3.0%
TOTAL		+ 62.3 %		+ 181.3 %	
AVERAGE		+ 10.4 %		+ 25.9 %	

In seeking to quantify the impact of future projected increases in the female prisoner population, the Northern Ireland Prison Service has compiled a range of projections based upon various publications and benchmark trends

Impact of alternatives to prosecution and the Criminal Justice (NI) Order

During the preparation of this SOC, NIPS has assessed the potential impact of alternatives to prosecution for low level offences – this has the potential to generate a reduction in the number of prisoners in custody, either on remand or for fine default offences. The Service has found that opportunities may exist to reduce the number of remand, fine default and non-criminal offenders, who would historically have been placed in custody, by up to 21 % (expressed as a percentage of the annual average population).

The SOC has also sought to consider the impact of new sentencing arrangements which became effective in Northern Ireland from 15th May 2008

(Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008). These arrangements are intended to address concern about the early release of serious sex and violent offenders. Over the long term, the impact of the new sentencing arrangements is likely to result in a greater number of prisoners serving longer sentences.

In addition to needs arising from prisoner numbers, the external reviews conducted by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC), HMCIP/ Criminal Justice Inspectorate and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission have looked at the needs of female offenders in Ash House. The reviews have focussed upon accommodation constraints, support services and also resettlement needs within a women's prison environment. All reviews have consistently recommended the need for a purpose-built separate women's facility.

Aims

The aim of the proposed project is: (i) the provision of dedicated prisoner accommodation and support services to meet the needs of the women's prison population over the 15 year period to 2023; (ii) the creation of a prison environment which is responsive to the particular needs of women, and which fits within the wider strategy for the management of women in custody; and (iii) to permit a step change in the approach to management of women in custody.

Options

From a long list, the following options have been considered as the main alternatives:

Option	Description
1	Do Nothing
2	Do Minimum
3	Provide a new replacement women's facility at the North East corner of the Hydebank Wood site
4	Provide a new replacement women's facility in the area of the Walled Garden of Hydebank Wood
5	Provide a new replacement women's facility on the elevated pitches at the Hydebank Wood site

The initial outcomes of the SOC highlight three feasible options (options 3 – 5 inclusive) which have the ability to deliver the accommodation needs for women in custody. These options are discussed in greater detail within the SOC which NIPS will publish shortly. The final option will be developed within business cases as the work is taken forward.

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

BITC	Business in the Community
CSU	Community Safety Unit
DHSSPS	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
GB	Great Britain
HMCIP	Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons
HMIP	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons
HMPS	Her Majesty's Prison Service
NI	Northern Ireland
NIAC	Northern Ireland Affairs Committee
NIACRO	Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
NIHE	Northern Ireland Housing Executive
NIO	Northern Ireland Office
NIPS	Northern Ireland Prison Service
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
NOMS	National Offender Management Service
OFMDFM	Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
PBNI	Probation Board for Northern Ireland
PSA	Public Service Agreement
SARC	Sexual Assault Referral Centre
SOC	Strategic Outline Case
YJA	Youth Justice Agency

SUMMARY OF ONGOING INITIATIVES AND COMMITMENTS

Strategic Strand 1: Providing Alternatives to Prosecution and Custody

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.

Strategic Strand 2: Reducing Offending

We will:

- 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;
- take forward the development of the 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, with a particular focus on the specific learning and skills needs of women offenders;
- on completion of a current mapping exercise of learning and skills provision of women prisoners, 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;
- take forward an initiative with Business in the Community 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;
- work with DHSSPS to explore the options for developing services to deal more effectively with the health of women offenders, including mental health issues, personality disorder and addictions. 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;
- 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;

- 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;
- 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 links issues;
- continue to develop work with Barnardos and other relevant agencies, on one to one support for women and parenting programmes;
- provide an extended family contact facility at Ash House, where, in the appropriate circumstances, mother in Ash House will be able to apply to have extended visits with their children;
- research best practice and develop gender-specific offending behaviour programmes for women offenders;
- 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;
- research the needs of women in Northern Ireland involved in prostitution, and develop, on a multi-agency basis, initiatives to help support those involved to stop;
- 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;
- develop specific arrangements for the care of women who are victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland;
- establish and evaluate pilot restorative intervention schemes in two rural areas;
- 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.

- publish an independent literature review of the international research evidence on reducing offending, and take forward further research;
- exploring 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

Strategic Strand 3: A Women's Centre – Gender-Specific Community Supervision and Interventions.

In the short term, ***we will:***

- establish new premises for the 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;
- develop options for consideration in respect of the establishment of dedicated hostel accommodation in Northern Ireland.

In the medium term ***we will:***

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

In the long term, ***we will***:

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

Strategic Strand 4: Developing a Gender-Specific Approach to the Management of Women in Custody

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.

HOW TO RESPOND TO THIS CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

This consultation document seeks views on the proposals set out in the draft strategy. Specific points on which comments are sought are set out throughout the main text and also listed in the Consultation Response Form at Annex E. However, this does not preclude comments on any aspect of the draft strategy. The response form has been attached for those who might find it a convenient way to respond, but we would of course welcome responses in whatever form respondents find most suitable.

Duration of consultation

The consultation on the proposed strategy will run for a period of 12 weeks from 23 February 2009. All responses to the consultation should be submitted for receipt by **5pm on 18 May 2009**.

Responses should be emailed to:

cjd.public@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk

Or, alternatively, sent to:

Strategy for the Management of Women Offenders Consultation Co-ordinator
Criminal Justice Services Division
Northern Ireland Office
Massey House
Stoney Road
Belfast
BT4 3SX

Telephone: 028 90527358

Fax: 028 90523652

Text Phone: 028 90527668

Respondents should indicate clearly where they are responding on behalf of a group or organisation.

This consultation is being run in accordance with the Government's Code of Practice on Consultation. If you have any concerns about the way the consultation process has been handled you may raise these with the NIO Consultation Co-ordinator at the following address:

Donna Knowles
Central Management Unit
Stormont House Annexe
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SH

Telephone: 028 9052 7015

Text Phone: 028 9052 7668

E-mail: Donna.Knowles@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk

Alternative formats

An electronic version of this document is available to view and download from the following websites:

Northern Ireland Office – www.nio.gov.uk

Northern Ireland Prison Service – www.niprisonservice.gov.uk

Probation Board for Northern Ireland – www.pbni.org.uk

Hard copies will be posted on request. The text phone details are provided above. Copies in various other formats, including large print, Braille, audio cassette, computer disk etc may be made available on request. If you wish to access the document in an alternative format or language, please let us know and we will do our best to assist you.

Confidentiality of responses

Following completion of the consultation process a summary of responses will be published. Unless individual respondents specifically indicate that they wish their response to be treated in confidence, their name and the nature of their response may be included in any published summary of responses. Respondents should also be aware that our obligations under the Freedom of Information Act may require that any responses not subject to specific exemptions under the Act, be disclosed to other parties on request.

Next Steps

Responses will be analysed and a summary of responses published on the NIO website. The responses will inform further policy consideration by Northern Ireland Office Ministers on the final shape of the strategy.

NIO Ministers will remain responsible for taking decisions in this area up to the point of devolution of justice and policing. After devolution responsibility for these matters will transfer to the relevant Minister in the NI Executive with any legislative change being the responsibility of the NI Assembly.

CONSULTATION RESPONSE FORM

For convenience, the questions raised in the discussion paper are replicated below.

Chapter 5 - Strategic Strand 1: Providing Alternatives to Prosecution and Custody

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

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

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

Chapter 6 - Strategic Strand 2: Reducing Offending

Pathway 1 - Accommodation

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

Pathway 2 - Education, Training and Employment

Q. 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?

Pathways 3 & 4 - Health, Alcohol and Substance Misuse

Q. 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?

Pathway 5 - Finance, Benefits and Debt

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

Pathway 6 - Children and Families

Q. Are these measures appropriate?

Q. What other measures would help women prisoners maintain family links?

Q. 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?

Pathway 7 - Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviours

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

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

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

Pathway 9 - Supporting Women who have been involved in Prostitution

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

Restorative Interventions

Q. What are your views on restorative interventions?

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

Gender-Specific Research

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

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

Chapter 7 - Strategic Strand 3: Gender-Specific Community Supervision and Interventions

Q. Are the proposed measures appropriate?

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

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

Chapter 8 - Strategic Strand 4: Developing a Gender-Specific Approach to the Management of Women in Custody

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

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

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

Chapter 10 - Equality and Human Rights Issues

Q. 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?

Q. 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?

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

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

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