

Justice Committee

Select Committee Announcement

PUBLICATION OF REPORT

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GOVERNMENT'S PROBATION REFORMS DESIGNED FOR MALE OFFENDERS AND IGNORE WOMEN IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM, SAYS JUSTICE COMMITTEE

NEW REPORT: Women offenders: after the Corston Report

Introducing a report by the Justice Select Committee, Rt Hon Sir Alan Beith MP, Chair of the Committee, said:

"The Government's Transforming Rehabilitation reforms have clearly been designed with male offenders in mind. This is unfortunately symptomatic of an approach within the Ministry of Justice and National Offender Management Service that tends to deal with women offenders as an afterthought."

The Committee says that Government plans to introduce payment-by-results in probation services need to be redesigned in respect of women offenders—who are often classified as presenting a lower risk of reoffending—so that they receive the intensive tailored support they need.

In a report that looks at the progress made since the Corston Report in reducing the number of women being imprisoned, the Committee also raises concerns that efforts to implement Baroness Corston's recommendations have stalled and the Government is failing to deliver the joined-up approach needed to support women at risk and help women offenders lead a law-abiding life. Strong political leadership and cross-government support at the highest levels is needed to make effective provision for women offenders in a criminal justice system where policy is framed around the much larger numbers of male offenders. The Government's strategic priorities for women offenders lack substance and in particular must take a broader approach to supporting women at risk of reoffending and addressing the inter-generational nature of crime.

Sir Alan added:

"As the Corston report identified six years ago, helping vulnerable women break the cycles that lead to offending or reoffending requires a tailored joined-up approach across Government."

"This is not about treating women more favourably or implying that they are less culpable. It is about recognising that women face very different hurdles from men in their journey towards a law-abiding life."

The Committee welcomes the Government's extension of through the gate statutory support to prisoners sentenced to less than 12 months, likely to benefit many women offenders. However, the report cautions that potential providers of rehabilitative services need to recognise that levels of risk posed by women may not reflect the level of support such women require.

Although progress has been made in the overall treatment of—and provision for—women offenders since the Corston recommendations, a number of concerns remain:

- The women's prison population has not fallen sufficiently fast;
- Over half of women offenders continue to receive ineffective short-custodial sentences;
- Mental health and substance misuse treatment which could reduce use of custody remains unavailable to Courts in sufficient volume.

Maintaining a network of women's centres and using residential alternatives to custody are likely to be more effective and cheaper in the long run than short custodial sentences, the report points out. The Committee does not recommend substantive changes to the overall sentencing framework, but argues instead that more emphasis be placed on ensuring courts are provided with robust alternatives to custody specifically appropriate to women. The MPs recommend a gradual reconfiguration of the female custodial estate with women who have committed serious offences being held in smaller, more dispersed, custodial units.

Sir Alan commented:

"Prison is an expensive and ineffective way of dealing with many women offenders who do not pose a significant risk of harm to public safety."

"Women's centres and other community provision offer a route for diverting vulnerable women and girls away from crime and tackling the root causes of offending."

"Although steps have been taken towards achieving a network of such provision it has been at a disappointingly slow pace and too many women still receive short custodial sentences."

"There needs to be a systematic change in a approach and to achieve that we need strong Ministerial leadership to further this agenda."

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Between 2000 and 2007 the women's prison population increased by 27%. In 2006 Baroness Corston was commissioned by the Home Office to examine what could be done to avoid women with particular vulnerabilities ending up in prison, prompted by the deaths of six women at HMP Styal.

The Corston Report made 43 recommendations including improved governance and cross-departmental working on women offenders; the reservation of custodial sentences for the most serious and violent offenders; improvements to prison conditions and a reduction of strip-searching in women's prisons; the use of community sentences as the norm; and the development of a network of one-stop-shop community provision for women at risk of offending.

On 9 January 2013 the Government published its "Transforming Rehabilitation" consultation paper setting out plans for an overhaul of the system for the rehabilitation of adult offenders managed in the community, to extend payment by results to independent providers of rehabilitative services in the community.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Committee Membership is as follows:

Rt Hon Sir Alan Beith (*Liberal Democrat, Berwick-upon-Tweed*) (*Chair*); Steve Brine (*Conservative, Winchester*); Rehman Chishti (*Conservative, Gillingham and Rainham*); Jeremy Corbyn (*Islington North*); Nick de Bois (*Conservative, Enfield North*); Gareth Johnson (*Conservative, Dartford*); Rt Hon Elfyn Llwyd (*Plaid Cymru, Dwyfor Meirionnydd*); Andy McDonald (*Labour, Middlesbrough*); Seema Malhotra (*Labour/Co-operative, Feltham and Heston*); Yasmin Qureshi (*Labour, Bolton South East*); Graham Stringer (*Blackley and Broughton*); Mike Weatherley (*Conservative, Hove*).

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