

Foreword

The Programme for Government 2011-2016 requires our two Services to work closely together, to ensure better co-ordination and to create an integrated offender management programme. The Public Service Reform Plan, 2014-2016 requires all public sector organisations to focus on a range of goals including outcomes, service users and efficiency among others.

We have been conscious for some time of the particular needs of women offenders, and the specific issues impacting on service delivery to them, compared to the management of male offenders. Our Joint Irish Prison Service and Probation Service Strategic Plan, 2013- 2015 identified women offenders as one of our key target groups.

The present strategy sets out how our two services will work together, with our other statutory and community and voluntary sector partners to provide more tailored women-centric interventions, to reduce offending among this group, improve opportunities for reintegration as well as positive outcomes more generally.



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Introduction

Women who commit crime comprise a relatively small yet increasing group within the Criminal Justice System in Ireland.

On any day the Probation Service is working with almost 1,300 women offenders in the community¹; either assessing or supervising them on a range of probation type orders, community service or post release supervision. Almost 14% or 1 in 7 new referrals to the Probation Service are for women offenders (1,206 new referrals)².

On any day there are around 150 women in custody. 2,151 women were committed to prison in 2012 which is almost 15% of all committals³. In comparison 2,326 women were committed to prison in 2013 which accounted for 18% of all committals. While there are currently 133 spaces for female prisoners, both female prisons regularly run above capacity with an average female population of 152 in custody in 2012.

All crime must be met by an effective and proportionate sanction that reduces re-offending and victimisation and promotes desistance from crime. In a minority of cases prison is necessary. Most women who offend pose a low risk to society; however they generally have a high level of need. The impact of criminal justice sanctions on the woman, her family and children can therefore be disproportionately harsh, particularly if a woman is placed in custody.

Women's offending is multi-faceted and complex including:

- The pathways into crime.
- The profile of women offenders.
- The nature and range of offences committed by women. Generally women commit crime which poses less risk of harm or violence to the public and is more acquisitive in nature⁴.

¹ Snapshot of women offenders on active caseloads 1/12/2013

² Probation Service Annual Report 2013

³ Irish Prison Service Annual Report 2013

⁴ Corston Report – Review of Women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System

Context

This strategy supports:

- i.** The Department of Justice and Equality in the implementation of the relevant elements of the Government's Programme for National Recovery, 2011–2016 in particular with regard to:
 - Enhancing safety in our communities
 - Balancing the needs of the community and those of victims of crime and the rights of those accused
 - Cross-functional and joint agency collaboration, in particular, ensuring better coordination between the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service to create an integrated offender management programme
- ii.** The National Women's Strategy is the Government's statement of priorities in relation to the advancement of women in Irish society for the period 2007 to 2016. Its vision is an Ireland where all women enjoy equality with men and can achieve their full potential, while enjoying a safe and fulfilling life.
- iii.** The National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2010-2014 - working in partnership with all relevant services, this strategy will deliver a strong foundation for an improved system of prevention and response— Safer lives at home and in our community.

Background

The overall picture emerging from international research suggests that women offenders are likely to be poor, have limited education and are either unemployed or in low skilled employment. Many experience accommodation problems⁵, often resulting in homelessness, and serious problems of addiction and/or mental health often feature.

Relationships are particularly important to women and having non-supportive families, or relatives involved in offending, or unhealthy relationships with intimate partners, can be associated with women offending. Significant numbers of women offenders have experienced abuse, either in childhood or in adulthood, through intimate relationships.

Many women offenders are mothers of young children and may struggle with parenting because of their personal circumstances and unmet needs. Furthermore the outcomes for children whose mothers have experienced prison are of major concern. Children of women prisoners frequently exhibit a number of behavioural and psychological problems and there is an increased likelihood of them becoming offenders themselves⁶.

In order for the needs of these children to be met, the needs of their mothers must be met in the first instance, and an effective response could interrupt the cycle of inter-generational offending. The interplay between the different issues and gender specific needs of the women add to the complexity and challenges associated with addressing female offending.

The impact of effective intervention with women offenders may be difficult to measure financially. However, by reducing a woman's risk of offending, by helping her address addiction, access accommodation, keep her out of prison and increase her ability to attain employment or to parent positively will reduce the enormous alternative social cost in the long term.

⁵ Mayock, P and Sheridan, S (2012) Women's Journeys to Homelessness: Key findings from a Biographical Study of Homeless Women in Ireland

⁶ Silvestri, M. (2006) 'Gender and Crime: A Human Rights Perspective', in F. Heidensohn, (ed), *Gender and Justice*. U.K.: Willan Publishing, pp. 222-42.

Developing a Gender Informed Approach

The much lower rate of offending in the general population amongst females compared with males, coupled with the lower level of risk of harm posed, has resulted in a tendency to provide generic offender based services to women offenders, designed for men in the first instance.

Women's offending is multi-faceted and complex and can be challenging to work with. Recidivism rates for women under probation type supervision and community service is 32% which compared to males at 38% was higher than expected⁷. A similar result was obtained in the 2008 – 2013 study of 34% compared to 42% for males⁸. 36.9% of women released from prison have re-offended within 12 months of release. This rate rises to 46.2% for women who have re-offended within three years of release.⁹

Available international research in the area of women's offending is relatively contemporary in comparison with male and juvenile offending and is still in the early stages of development. However from current international research and practice it is clear that better outcomes can be achieved through utilising gender informed approaches in working with women.

This strategy supports the objectives of increasing public safety, providing alternatives to custody and reintegrating offenders.

A dedicated and effective approach to working with women offenders would incorporate the following:

1. Develop and implement a gender informed approach to working with women offenders in custody and the community, based on evidence and best practice.
2. Improve outcomes for women offenders through strengthened strategic alliances.
3. Develop a range of options which provide an effective alternative to custody, enhance reintegration and reduce reoffending.
4. Actively promote awareness and confidence amongst key stakeholders of the significant role of community sanctions in the reduction of re-offending by women.

⁷ Probation Service Recidivism Study 2007 - 2012

⁸ Probation Service Recidivism Study 2008 - 2013

⁹ Irish Prison Service Recidivism Study 2008 - 2013

“Gender Informed Approach”

1. DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A GENDER INFORMED APPROACH TO WORKING WITH WOMEN OFFENDERS IN CUSTODY AND THE COMMUNITY, INFORMED BY EVIDENCE AND BEST PRACTICE.

There is increasing awareness that women’s offending is different to men’s offending. It is multi-faceted and complex, based on the following:

- The way women become involved in crime
- The profile of women offenders
- The nature and range of offences committed

The Government drive for more evidence-led approaches to policy development and service delivery sets the context for an effective, best practice response to women’s offending. By utilising available management information exploring opportunities for research in this specific area, such as the Mapping of Women’s Services¹⁰ in the Dublin region and building on existing links in other jurisdictions, such as the INSPIRE project in Northern Ireland, a gender-specific approach to delivery of services will be developed.

The majority of women’s offending behaviour is at the low end of the seriousness scale and research has suggested that female specific needs such as parenthood and specifically single parenthood, trauma, victimisation, self-concept, self-harm and also suicide, impact on offending by women¹¹. An effective response will focus on the way interventions are delivered as well as the adoption of a holistic, through care model of intervention incorporating assessment, supervision, custody and post custody which will promote better outcomes for women.

¹⁰ Mayock, P., Parker, S. and Sheridan S (2013)

¹¹ Blanchette, K. (2002) ‘Classifying Female Offenders for Effective Intervention: Application of the Case-Based Principles of Risk and Need’, *Forum on Corrections Research*, 14 (1): 31-35.

Develop and implement a gender informed approach to working with women offenders in custody and the community, based on evidence and best practice.

- a) The Irish Prison Service will maintain a woman centric focus and ethos for female prisoners by upholding positive practices and standards from the committal stage and throughout sentence management.*
- b) The Irish Prison Service will explore the development of an open centre/open conditions for women assessed as low risk of re-offending.*
- c) A dedicated approach to the assessment of and intervention with women offenders will be introduced on a phased basis by the Probation Service.*
- d) A co-ordinated, multi-disciplinary input to sentence management and pre-release planning will be undertaken to reduce re-offending and enhance reintegration, in conjunction with other statutory partners and community based organisations.*
- e) The Probation Service will review standards/guidelines in relation to assessment, interventions and management of non-compliance with supervision by women offenders, recognising the importance of individualised, tailored planning for each woman, depending on her needs, risks and responsivity.*
- f) Develop a specific focus on women offenders in the Central Statistics Office recidivism data (for publication in 2015) and explore other potential research opportunities to inform effective delivery of service in the community and in custody.*
- g) Build on existing links with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Prison Service to examine learning from the INSPIRE¹² project on gender- specific approaches to inform implementation and further development of this strategy.*

¹² The Inspire Women's Project centre provides a range of programmes tailored to address the needs of women offenders. The project is managed by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) working with a range of other agencies to provide a range of gender specific programmes.

“Connecting the dots”



2. IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR WOMEN OFFENDERS THROUGH STRENGTHENED STRATEGIC ALLIANCES.

Many women offenders have complex needs such as alcohol or drug problems, serious mental health difficulties, social disadvantage and dysfunctional backgrounds, which impact on offending. If a woman is placed in custody, the impact on the woman, her family and children can be severe with often long-lasting effects and resulting in intergenerational offending.

All efforts should be made to co-ordinate services so that women offenders can be effectively managed in the community as far as possible. Cross-organisational co-operation and goal sharing, with a collaborative approach across a range of agencies facilitates rehabilitation and re-integration into communities.

The rehabilitation and reintegration of women offenders requires a holistic approach best delivered through coordinated multi-agency working both in custody and in the community. By building on existing structures such as the co-located Probation and Prison Service Unit, the Integrated Sentence Management programme, Community Support Scheme and Community Return programmes, shared knowledge and practices, better opportunities and outcomes can be achieved for women offenders.

Improve outcomes for women offenders through strengthened strategic alliances.

- a) Establish a steering committee on women offenders initially comprising the Irish Prison Service and Probation Service with a view to extending representation to other key players such as mental health, addiction services, accommodation providers, education, training and employment agencies and relevant NGOs.*

- b) Extend the remit of the Probation Service/Irish Prison Service co-located unit in Haymarket to enhance and develop tailored services for women and their families.*

- c) Co-ordinate existing in-reach services to women in custody with a view to targeting improved outcomes and reintegration.*

- d) Strengthen strategic alliances to deliver services which support the children and families of women offenders.*

- e) In accordance with the actions identified in the National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (2010 – 2014) explore how interventions with perpetrators can be maximised to ensure better outcomes for women.*

- f) In line with the housing led approach to resolving homelessness, strengthen links with relevant statutory and voluntary services.*

“Female centered options”

3. DEVELOP A RANGE OF OPTIONS WHICH PROVIDE AN EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE TO CUSTODY, ENHANCE REINTEGRATION AND REDUCE REOFFENDING.

Established partnerships with community based projects across the country both support and add value to the work/interventions with women offenders in custody and the community. This could be enhanced and further developed to provide a range of creative and innovative responses that support rehabilitation and reintegration.

Several programmes tailored for women with a history of offending have been initiated in the community. Building on these initiatives, we will enhance the effectiveness and range of community options available for women offenders on Probation supervision, Community Service, Community Return and other post-release orders.

The ‘one stop shop’ approach with a range of supports and services provided in one location has been adopted in the United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland. Plans are advanced to increase the provision of supported accommodation and situate interrelated services for women on one site in the North Dublin area. Services including specialist addiction and mental health services, education and training, as well as therapeutic programmes to be co-located on site.

A partnership approach has been central to the development of the Women’s Centre initiative. Partners include Dublin City Council, Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, the Health Service Executive, City of Dublin Education and Training Board and non-governmental organisations such as De Paul Ireland and Novas Initiatives, as well as the Probation Service and Irish Prison Service. Strong community links will also be forged.

Develop a range of options which provide an effective alternative to custody, enhance reintegration and reduce reoffending

- a) In conjunction with partners develop a one stop shop which will provide supported accommodation and a suite of tailored services for women offenders referred from the community or leaving custody.*

- b) Develop, pilot and implement gender-informed practice and programmes for women in the community and in custody, individually or in a group setting.*

- c) Introduce restorative and reparative initiatives tailored for women offenders in the community and custody.*

- d) Develop women-specific Community Service and Community Return options.*

“Working better together”

4. ACTIVELY PROMOTE AWARENESS AND CONFIDENCE AMONGST KEY STAKEHOLDERS OF THE SIGNIFICANT ROLE OF COMMUNITY SANCTIONS IN THE REDUCTION OF RE-OFFENDING BY WOMEN.

We are committed to the delivery of services for women offenders that are, effective in reducing the risk of re-offending, bench-marked against best practice and one in which our stakeholders are confident. Key to our work with women offenders is collaboration with our stakeholders, including those in the Criminal Justice Sector such as the Judiciary, the Courts Service and An Garda Síochána. We also work with other government Departments, Agencies and relevant Authorities as well as partners in the community and voluntary sector.

Raising awareness is vital to ensure the needs of women offenders are addressed in the most appropriate and proportionate manner, whilst also maintaining a balanced approach to addressing the risk of re-offending and risk of potential harm posed to others.

Communication which is clear, informative and targeted will be critical to the successful implementation of this strategy. Input from women who have been or are currently involved in the Criminal Justice System is vital to informing our knowledge. By increasing understanding of the multi-faceted and complex nature of women’s offending, we will jointly achieve better outcomes for women who become involved in the Criminal Justice System.

Actively promote awareness and confidence amongst key stakeholders of the significant role of community sanctions in the reduction of re-offending.

- a) Involve Service Users in the development and implementation of gender -informed approaches through active participation in focus groups, research and customer feedback.*

- b) Develop a plan to communicate consistently with other key stakeholders within the Criminal Justice System.*

- c) Raise awareness of female offending with other key stakeholders within the Criminal Justice System by facilitating familiarisation visits to gender-informed community based projects, initiatives and the Dochas centre.*

- d) Raise awareness among staff, through training and other means, of best practice in working with women offenders.*

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