

Prison Reform Trust response to Policing 2026 Serving a Changing Scotland: our 10 year strategy for policing in Scotland – May 2017

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. The Prison Reform Trust provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Penal Affairs Group and has an advice and information service for people in prison.

The Prison Reform Trust's main objectives are:

- reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime
- improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families.

www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Introduction

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) welcomes this consultation and the steps already taken by Police Scotland to prevent people unnecessarily becoming involved in the criminal justice system. In particular, three of the five approaches identified in the '10 year Strategy for Policing in Scotland', namely *Protection, Prevention and Communities*, reflect elements of the PRT programme [Transforming Lives, reducing women's imprisonment](#). We are pleased to have worked with Police Scotland concerning the specific needs of women in contact with the police, which is demonstrated in our response to this consultation.

Response

Scotland has one of the highest rates of female imprisonment in Northern Europe, which has increased by 46% in the ten years since 2003–04.¹ Evidence shows that many women prisoners are also victims of abuse. Many report having experienced emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse as a child, almost half report a history of domestic violence, and their offending is often related to coercive and abusive relationships and financial pressures.

¹ Prison Reform Trust (2017) Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment in Scotland?, London: Prison Reform Trust

Through its community triage and diversion services Police Scotland is uniquely placed to support preventative work and early intervention for women in contact with, or on the edges of the criminal justice system – whether as victims, alleged perpetrators, or both. Community triage services help to identify mental health and other needs when a person first comes to the attention of the police, and can make referrals into local services, as necessary. Strong links between community triage services and women’s centres, support for families, and timely responses to the specific needs of women can help prevent offending, protect women and communities, and limit the negative generational impact of a mother’s contact with criminal justice services.

With the support of Police Scotland, PRT held a seminar in March 2017 to consider the further development of community triage, especially how best to respond to the needs of women and individuals with learning disabilities. The seminar provided opportunities to showcase existing community triage projects, and positive partnership working between Police Scotland and NHS Scotland, and to share relevant practice from across Scotland, England and Wales.² The event helped to further develop links between community triage and third sector partners, and to learn more about the specific needs of women and people with learning disabilities who come into contact with the police. A report from this event is forthcoming.

The ‘10 year Strategy for Policing in Scotland’ notes that one in four people experience mental health conditions, with 157 incidents being created every day on the vulnerable persons database relating to poor mental health. It has long been recognised that high numbers of people who come into contact with the police have multiple health and social care needs, which can have a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing, and some may be in crisis. We especially welcome ‘protection’ and ‘prevention’ as key priorities of the Strategy, particularly the focus on protecting vulnerable people, addressing inequality and continuing early intervention.

For women, multiple needs can include, but are not limited to, domestic violence, family support, debt, inadequate and/or unsafe housing, substance misuse, and trauma. An effective response to people with multiple needs requires professional services to integrate support around the individual. Early intervention models, such as community triage, can help to identify and address a person’s needs at an early stage. A multi-agency approach to community triage, with strong referral routes into local statutory, third sector and specialist services can help coalesce support around the individual and enhance opportunities and best outcomes for the individual concerned, their family – especially where children are concerned – and the wider community.

Women’s Centres such as The Willow Centre and the 218 Centre have reported success in working with women in contact with, or on the edges of, the criminal justice system. For example, in response to women’s mental

² Evidence of effective practice from England and Wales can be found in Prison Reform Trust’s recent publication—[Fair Cop? Improving outcomes for women at the point of arrest \(2017\)](#)

health needs, a diversionary project run by The Willow Centre for women with a clinical diagnosis of depression who found it hard to engage with mainstream mental health services, and who were at risk of entering the criminal justice system, reported that 77% of those who completed the intervention no longer met the criteria for a diagnosis of depression.³ An independent evaluation of the 218 Centre showed that police-recorded offending by women who engaged in support provided by 218 was reduced by 21%, alongside significant decreases in substance misuse, and improvements in their health and wellbeing.⁴

Partnership working underpins effective community triage arrangements, and we are pleased to note the priority given to collaboration across and between public services, communities and the voluntary sector. Effective partnership working is especially important for families affected by parental offending and imprisonment. It is estimated that around 65% of women in prison in Scotland are mothers.⁵ The negative impact on children of parental imprisonment is more pronounced when a mother is imprisoned, as they are more likely to be the primary carer than the father. The impact on children of parental imprisonment can be traumatic: they are twice as likely as their peers to have poor mental health and are more at risk of poverty, poor health, and insecure housing and finances, and involvement in the criminal justice system. Effective early intervention can help break the damaging generational impact of a mother's contact with criminal justice services, and cycles of disadvantage for children.

Involving women as equal partners in developing new and improved responses to their needs is important. For example, working with 'lived experience' of contact with the police to design and deliver services that meet their needs and builds on their strengths, is likely to be more efficient and effective than services designed without their unique insight and experience.

The Scottish Women's Group on Women's Offending, of which PRT is an active member, comprises organisations and individuals that seek equality for women across the criminal justice system, and a sharper focus on women with mental health and learning disabilities and/or experience of sexual abuse, addiction and substance misuse, as well as support for their families. In pursuing the '10 Year Strategy', we would therefore encourage the development of community triage and diversion services that respond to the specific needs of women and individuals with learning disabilities, and look forward to sharing our forthcoming report with Police Scotland. We welcome the recent launch of the Scottish Government's Mental Health Strategy which includes funding for additional mental health workers in police stations. This will help meet the Government's commitment to *"improving the service*

³ Prison Reform Trust (2017) Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment in Scotland?, London: Prison Reform Trust

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Wilson, T. (2015) International review of custodial models for women: key messages for Scotland, Edinburgh: Scottish Government

*response across health, social work and justice and reduce the likelihood that women are unnecessarily taken into the justice system.*⁶

For further information about women's offending and imprisonment, including drivers to offending and possible solutions, see the PRT publication, [Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment in Scotland?](#)

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⁶ Scottish Government (2012) The Scottish Government Response to the Commission on Women Offenders, Edinburgh: Scottish Government