

NORTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL

SOCIAL WORK DEPARTMENT

Social Work Committee : Operations and Services Sub Committee August 1998	Subject : Scottish Office Document :
From : Jim Dickie, Director of Social Work Prepared by : Jim Scullion, Co-ordinator, Criminal Justice	Women Offenders :- A Safer Way A Review of Community Disposals and the use of custody for Women Offenders in Scotland

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to :-

- Seek approval from the Social Work Committee to forward comments to the Scottish Office in relation to the review of community Disposals and the use of custody for women offenders in Scotland.

2. BACKGROUND

In December 1997, the Scottish Office Minister for Home affairs directed the Prisons and Social Work Inspectorates for Scotland to review and make recommendation about community disposals and the use of custody for women offenders in Scotland.

This followed the suicide of a convicted prisoner in HM Institution Cornton Vale, the seventh such death at Scotland's only female Prison in 30 months. This was seen as unacceptable, as only one other suicide had occurred in Cornton Vale previously, nine years earlier. Five of the prisoners who had died had been on remand and two had been convicted and sentenced to prison.

A team from the Prisons and Social Work Services Inspectorate carried out the reviews inviting local authorities, voluntary agencies and other key groups to submit information and views about female offenders. The document "A Safer Way" reflects the comments received and also the relevant literature and research material.

3. CONTENT OF THE REPORT

The report explores the issues which surround offending by women, including health, social and economic factors and also how women offenders are dealt with within the Criminal Justice System.

The report :-

- Examines the nature of women's offending in Scotland and the social and personal circumstances of women in Cornton Vale which houses 96% of female prisoners in Scotland.
- Highlights the many fundamental differences between men and women offenders and explores the penalties imposed.

- Examines the points in the Criminal Justice process where decisions are made about how women are dealt with.
- Considers the opportunities to influence decisions at each stage.
- Considers the availability, suitability and effectiveness of services in the community.
- Considers possible ways forward.

The paper explores present arrangements within the Criminal Justice process, and makes conclusions and recommendations which will affect service to female offenders.

The main conclusions are:-

- Women's offending and their needs are often different to those of men.
- The number of women offenders sent to prison could and should be reduced.
- Although recognizing that the public must be protected from violent crimes, it is highlighted that less than 1% of female convictions are for violent offences.
- Women's offending frequently relates to drug abuse and is often rooted in poverty. The offences committed eg. prostitution may make them more susceptible to fines Up to 52% of female prison admissions are for fine defaulters.
- Community Service is used less frequently for women.
- A high population of women offenders suffer from a history of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Many are vulnerable to suicide attempts, with imprisonment becoming the final trigger for acts of desperation.
- More women offenders than men will have dependent children living with them and these women are likely to be lone parents.
- No one reason for suicide emerges from recent Fatal Accident Inquiries, but a history of drug abuse and withdrawal problems shortly after being locked up is, with few exceptions a common factor for remand and convicted prisoners.
- The only relatively sure way to reduce the number of suicide attempts in custody is to reduce the number of women being imprisoned by a twin-track strategy of :-
 - More options in the community, with the provision of bail information and support, supported accommodation, diversion from custody and deferred sentences.
 - Fewer prison places by adapting Cornton Vale accommodation to support more permanent double cells and bed sits, providing mutual support for vulnerable women.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Review Team recommends that :

- The Scottish Office should examine whether increased services are required, particularly in the West of Scotland, to support court decision-making about the use of bail.
- The Scottish Office should consult with the courts and local authorities on what more could be done to reduce the numbers of women defaulting on their fines and those being received into custody as a result.
- An interagency project should be set up in Glasgow under the direction of a high level steering group to bring together all the main partners in the Criminal Justice system, to resolve at a local level the issues identified in the report.
- All local authorities should review their arrangements to ensure that criminal justice social work services are tailored to work with women offenders, and report the outcome of their reviews to Social Work Services Inspectorate by the end of November 1998.
- Information currently collected by The Scottish Office, local authorities and others, should separately identify data relating to women offenders. The Scottish Office should collate and publish statistics on women offenders from the year 2000 onwards.
- The Scottish Office should consult on how to ensure that, by the year 2000, young women under 18 years of age are not held in prison establishments; and on how and by when to achieve the same for males under 18. Young people under 18 who require a custodial sentence should be held in secure accommodation.
- The Scottish Prison Service should forthwith revise its estates strategy for women and implement a number of other measures, via the following :
 - Making permanent the recently introduced initiative of doubling up some prisoners, by adapting buildings at Cornton Vale.
 - Creating facilities for women offenders from the West of Scotland at HMP Kilmarnock. The existing facilities at Inverness and Dumfries could be reviewed with a view to modest expansion.

5. COMMENTS

The "Safer Way" report highlights the need for multidisciplinary and multi-agency examination of existing services for women offenders.

It is important to note that North Lanarkshire Social Work Department is currently undertaking a review of Criminal Justice Services in relation to Women Offenders. The outcome of this review is to be reported back to the Scottish Office by the end of November 1998. It is envisaged that this review, in addressing the conclusions and recommendations of the report, will highlight the requirements, needed to offer this client group an appropriate and worthwhile service. It is felt that to improve the service to a satisfactory standard, there will be personnel and financial implications. However, this will be addressed more fully at the end of the Departmental review.

As the issues raised within the report go much wider than the Criminal Justice system, the local review will examine female offending and the consequences throughout all aspects of Social Work.

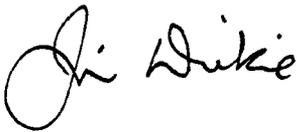
Social Work welcomes the Safer Way document and the recommendations contained within it, which point the way to more effective assessment and intervention with this client group.

The recommendations also support the concepts of care and community safety.

6. RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is asked:-

- To approve the comments made as suitable to forward to the Scottish Office
- Approve that a report be provided to the Committee at a later date to inform it of the results of the review of services to Women Offenders in North Lanarkshire.



Jim Dickie
Director of Social Work

July 22nd 1998

For further information contact John S Scott, Principal Officer, Criminal Justice (01698 332029)