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POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND JUSTICE



'SENT HOMEWARD TAE THINK AGAIN'

SCALE AND PERSPECTIVE REVISITED IN THE REFORM OF WOMEN'S CUSTODY IN SCOTLAND

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THE SCOTTISH PRISON SERVICE (SPS) has recently been criticised for undue prominence in shaping the debate on the future of women's custody in Scotland. Although it was perhaps unwarranted for critics to describe the innovative campus inspired design of Inverclyde as a 'super-max', SPS accepts our scale and perspective, not only on architecture and capacity, but also on the prevailing view, requires to be revisited. Contrary to popular belief, we do welcome constructive debate; we do accept that different views exist; we do want to engage in dialogue; and we do actually listen. SPS has been 'sent homeward tae think again' and we will do so.

However, as an Executive Agency of Scottish Government, SPS has a statutory obligation and a moral duty to those held in its care and the Service remains committed to playing a full and active part in the debate on how women are to be held in custody in 21st Century Scotland; to disengage, even partially, would constitute an abrogation of responsibility. We in SPS wish to continue to engage, consult, cooperate and collaborate with the wide range of statutory and voluntary interests involved in the rehabilitation of women convicted by Scottish courts. We are open to imaginative thinking and receptive to those who are equally ambitious for change.

Women in custody

That Cornton Vale was failing is not in question. Cornton Vale failed because at its peak it was holding well over 400 women in conditions designed in the mid-1970s for less than 200. Scottish Government Justice Analytical Services have produced persuasive evidence challenging some of the popular conceptions of the composition of the female population in custody (International Symposium, May 2015). The common assumption that all long term female prisoners are high risk and that all short term repeat offenders are low risk has been questioned. That has ramifications for future custodial arrangements.

It is recognised that female prisoners have particular needs in relation to lifestyle issues - employment, education, and economic circumstances; family and caring responsibilities; housing; experiences of abuse; drug and alcohol use; and mental health and self-harm. SPS' strategy on managing women in custody is predicated on the recognition and understanding that the presenting issues and needs of women

are fundamentally different from those of incarcerated men and we know their pathways into, and out of, offending differ from those of men.

The Scottish Prison Service takes account of these differences in the way women are managed in prison and in the services offered. Our strategy stresses gender sensitivity and responsiveness; trauma-informed care; the application of strengths, assets and desistance based approaches; and individual case-management. Our aim is to nurture the growth of self-esteem and self-confidence in the individual and our transformational change agenda was set out in the Organisational Review:

Our future Vision will focus on each individual in our care throughout their time in custody and beyond. By taking an individualised asset-based approach we will continue to address risks and needs but also build on an individual's strengths and potential. By doing this, we will empower those in our care to unlock their potential and transform their lives. This is a demanding agenda that should engage, challenge and motivate staff and offenders alike.

(SPS Organisational Review, 2013)

SPS is seeking to build on existing experience and knowledge of managing women in custodial settings in Scotland, but is also committed to learning from international research and good practice on what is known to be effective in improving the life chances of those in custodial care to reduce reoffending. A very successful International Symposium on Women in Custody was held in Edinburgh in May this year. Sub-titled *From Vision to Reality*, participants were asked to consider not only what comprised good practice in various jurisdictions, but also to re-conceptualise the very nature of what 'custody in the community' might look like. It was clear from the Symposium that there was no ready-made 'off the shelf' solution to these complex issues. However, there was a tremendous variety of practice from which to learn and to inform and shape what would be best suited to Scotland. On the basis of the ideas assimilated, the Cabinet Secretary announced in June that "a new small national prison with 80 places would be created, alongside five smaller community-based custodial units each accommodating up to 20 women across the country". (Michael Mathieson, June 2015)



Community custody units

These smaller community-based custodial units will provide local accommodation for women to serve out their sentence with access to intensive and focused support to help overcome issues involving alcohol, drugs, mental health and domestic abuse trauma. Where the units will be located is still some way down the line, but they will obviously be situated so that family contact, where appropriate, can be maintained and promoted.

That much we now know. So what will 'Community Custody Units' look like and more importantly what will they do differently?

It is still very early days, but a team from Scottish Government and SPS is currently involved in a demanding programme of engagement through internal and external consultation 'road-show' events to put form and shape into 'imagining' custody in the community. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity to build on core principles, re-examine citizenship, break down pre-conceived boundaries and shape public opinion.

Features of a new type of 'custody in the community' which have the potential to improve life chances and promote desistance are likely to include supportive relationships in a close-knit therapeutic environment; provision of pro-social modelling opportunities; the instilling of new skills, new narratives and new ways of being; and empowerment and a positive psychology to problem solving.

More evidence will obviously be required to learn about what works with women in such new settings. Monitoring and evaluation, measuring distance travelled within individual support plans and studies of comparative groups will help to inform models of change.

One thing is clear from the outset, the success of 'Community Custody Units' will be hugely dependent on a holistic approach from all partners involved in the rehabilitative process. Drawing from evidence that early and effective intervention has been successful with young people, a Whole System Approach for women, involving statutory and third sector organisations will need to be developed. An aphorism

to emerge from the May Symposium was that "no-one should let go until the next has picked up responsibility". (International Symposium, May 2015)

As we know, the desistance journey is not an event, but a complex process often characterised by ambivalence and vacillation. An individual's capacity and resolve for the journey can be limited, change pathways can become distorted or blocked and temptation and provocation can be challenging obstacles. Each individual faces a unique journey and 'Community Custody Units' will need to provide the foundations for desistance journeys through the provision of hope (being prompted or sustained by someone who believes in the individual); agency (discovering and exercising the capacity to act); social capital (opportunities, capacities and skills); and redemption (recovery, restoration and finding purpose).

It is recognised that imprisonment can have a disproportionately greater impact on women compared to men and, in particular, a woman's imprisonment is more likely to lead to the breakup of family and the loss of home and possessions. When reimagining 'custody in the community', a key priority will be to sustain core relationships and ties to that community, including work and family. Continuity of service and also of relationships between custody and the community will be critical and services which are available in prison also need to be available, and accessible, within communities if seamless reintegration is to be successful.

The effectiveness of opportunities to build strengths, skills and abilities in community custody will be diluted if they are not accompanied by the development of positive networks and the acceptance and recognition of citizenship in the community. If we are to put the brakes on the 'revolving door' through which so many women inevitably seem to return, we must strive to provide 'positive destinations' in the community setting. Equally importantly, SPS and partner agency staff will require to work in tandem to create and sustain such destinations with a flexibility and fluidity in working practice that for now, is not much in evidence. Traditional boundaries will require to be broken down, demarcation lines abandoned, possessive traits curtailed and a new collaborative ethos instilled and promulgated. The importance of highly motivated partnership working in this re-integrative activity cannot be over-emphasised. That commitment is hardly the impulse or action of an 'imperialist' disposition.

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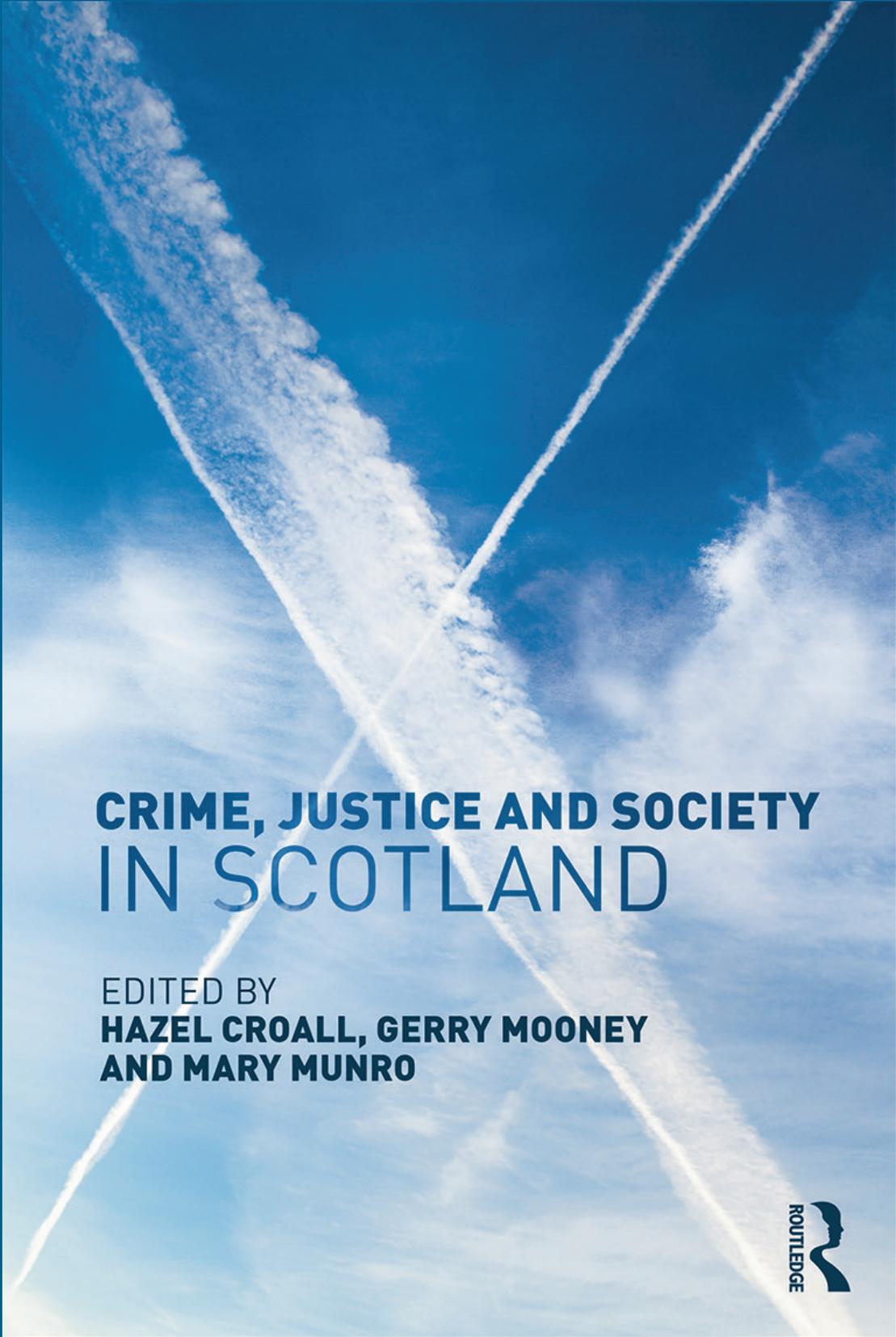
SPS Organisational Review (2013) Unlocking Potential: Transforming Lives

Statement from Michael Mathieson, Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Edinburgh, June 2015

International Symposium: From Vision to Reality – Transforming Scotland's Care of Women in Custody Edinburgh, May 2015

<http://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Publications/Publication-3592.aspx>

<http://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Information/Women-In-Custody.aspx>



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