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WOMEN AND JUSTICE ARE WE MAKING PROGRESS?

A New Vision for Women in Custody

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THE COMMISSION ON WOMEN OFFENDERS was established in 2011 to find a more effective way of dealing with women who offend in Scotland. Its report, 'the Angiolini Report,' made 33 far reaching recommendations, six of which were for the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) to address (see references and commentary elsewhere in this issue). It provided the opportunity for the Scottish Prison Service (SPS), along with Scottish Government, to take positive action in introducing an alternative approach to supporting women in custody in Scotland. The Commission not only provided the catalyst and mandate for reconsidering the female custodial estate, but also for ensuring that the whole criminal justice system worked in a collaborative and cooperative way to address the complex needs of women offenders.

In light of the Commission's emphasis on the need for a reformed approach to the management of women in custody and the deteriorating conditions at HMP and YOI Cornton Vale, urgency and determination provided the impetus for a new women's facility to be built at Inverclyde. In addition, a regional unit was to be designed for 100 women adjacent to HMP Edinburgh to provide facilities in the East of Scotland. Both the new prison at Inverclyde and the regional unit at Edinburgh were in addition to the 50 places in HMP Grampian, which had opened in 2014.

Whilst working to deliver gender specific, fit for purpose prison facilities for women in Scotland, SPS delivered all of the remaining recommendations in the early years post Angiolini. SPS Chief Executive Colin McConnell took personal responsibility for championing and driving change within the organisation. Video conferencing facilities for women were introduced and gender specific training products were developed and delivered for new and existing staff who worked with women. More recently a Women in Custody Course has been developed and piloted, comprising a 21 week modular programme of workshop delivery and reflective practice. The course covers topics such as trauma, gender responsiveness and routes into custody.

In January 2015, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice announced that HMP Inverclyde would not be built as it 'did not fit with his vision of how to address female offending' and that

proposals needed to be revised to include options for smaller regional and community based facilities. He commented that "whilst it is for the Courts to decide who receives a custodial sentence, I believe that too many low level female offenders are sent to prison. I want to take a new approach in dealing with these types of offenders and provide them with the best possible support to help turn their lives around."

Following that announcement SPS and Scottish Government consulted with key partners across Scotland and included 'user' voice sessions with women in and out of custody. To ensure Scotland was learning from academics, researchers and expert practitioners, an International Symposium was held in May 2015. This event was attended by 58 experts from the UK, Europe and Canada to ensure that thinking reflected the message of achieving a 'bolder, more radical and ambitious approach in Scotland'.

In June 2015, following extensive consultation, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice unveiled new plans for a smaller national prison which would accommodate 80 women. Alongside this five smaller, community based custodial units each accommodating up to 20 women would be built across the country. This revised approach was considered more consistent with previous expert reports which recommended that prison should only be used where it could be most effective; in managing serious crime and protecting the public. Colin McConnell stated in Scottish Justice Matters (November 2015 issue) that "SPS had been sent homeward tae think again and - we will do so". Subsequently, the Womens Strategy Team was tasked with making the vision of community-based custody a reality.

Work to develop the new National Facility on the site of Cornton Vale and 'Community Custody Units' (CCUs) was launched with further, more focused consultation across the country as SPS worked with partners and women to ensure the models being developed met the various and wide ranging needs of women. The aim was to develop trauma informed, therapeutic facilities that could deliver the targeted support necessary to address underlying issues such as alcohol, drugs, mental health, domestic abuse and trauma which are known to contribute to chaotic lifestyles and offending behaviour.

In determining the future strategy for the management of women in our care, SPS has undertaken visits to other facilities for women, drawn on the research evidence base available on women in custody and taken cognisance of the views of women offenders themselves. This has enabled the design of the new facility to reflect good practice and deliver environments which will contribute to wellbeing for those who live and work there. Custodial facilities will be located as close as possible to local communities, services and families, supporting recovery and re-integration. Of course, these objectives are being balanced with the need to ensure security for both the local community and the women that live in the facility.

Launch of the enabling phase of the strategy saw over 100 women transferred to HMP and YOI Polmont in August 2016 to help facilitate the redevelopment on the Cornton Vale site. This move was possible due to the significant downward trend in the numbers of young men being held in custody, a trend in which the 'Whole System Approach' is considered to be a major contributing factor.

As recently as July 2017, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice visited HMP & YOI Cornton Vale to start the demolition process and outline the progress being made within the female custodial estate. This provided a very clear message that 'there was no turning back' on the progressive plans announced in 2015. There was also broad recognition that the strategy being developed would benefit women as they returned back to their communities. The approach will assist them to get their lives 'back on track'. In particular, the plan to provide a secluded space called 'The Retreat' was welcomed as a safe space for women to take time out, receive one to one counselling, art therapy and spiritual support.

At the same visit, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice also announced the locations of the first two Community Custody Units, the first of which will be in Glasgow and the second in either Fife or Dundee. These locations were identified following analysis of the home locations of women, consultation with Local Authorities and over 200 site visits using pre-determined criteria to assess suitability for access to transport and local services.

The work being undertaken to identify a site in Glasgow is well advanced and dialogue is continuing with both Fife and Dundee Councils to determine suitable sites for consideration in these Local Authorities. Service delivery models are being developed in partnership and initial engagement has commenced in Glasgow, with a similar approach anticipated in the east of Scotland once a decision has been made regarding location. This is where the really exciting work begins for SPS and partners, as we work together to provide the necessary continuity of service between community and custody that will deliver the critical support women need to work through the underlying and substantial issues that most face.

One of the major challenges for SPS has been to re-imagine custody within the community context. However, this has also presented opportunities to re-examine what we currently do, break down pre-conceived boundaries and shape public opinion. The future model of custody management - focuses on a co-production approach and require SPS and partner agencies to work seamlessly with women in their care so as to



The Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Michael Matheson MSP visiting HMP & YOI Cornton Vale as demolition work gets underway

develop case management pathways that are person centred, utilise and develop strengths and support the desistance journey. Jointly we aim to help women to enhance self-esteem and self-confidence through promoting supportive relationships which give them the hope that not only their future can be different, but with help and support it will be. Our activities and interventions will give women the opportunities to learn new skills and build capacities within a therapeutic environment, as they begin to make the transition back into the community, with staff on hand to continually reinforce the positive support many women tell us has been lacking in their lives so far.

The first two community custody units will be opened in 2020, as will the new national facility. A phased and evidence based approach will be taken to the sourcing, building and operation of the remaining CCUs, allowing SG, SPS and partners to be responsive to the changing profile of the female population and learn lessons from the initial phase of the community custody units.

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