

**MAYOR OF LONDON****Sian Berry AM**Chair of the Housing Committee  
C/o [Stephanie.Griffiths@london.gov.uk](mailto:Stephanie.Griffiths@london.gov.uk)**Our ref:** MGLA201021-5897**Date:** 21 December 2021

Dear Sian,

Thank you for your letter of 20 October about housing for women leaving prison. I apologise for the delay in replying.

I am grateful to you and your colleagues for your hard work in investigating and capturing the observations of London boroughs on the 'Duty to Refer' process, under the Housing Act 2017.

Your recommendations are most helpful, and I have responded to each one in turn in the attached Annex.

However, before I do so, I need to emphasise that I share the ongoing concerns about the number of women released from prison who have no fixed abode. These women are, in effect, being released from prison vulnerable, homeless and without accommodation. This is totally unacceptable.

Homelessness, unstable accommodation and a lack of suitable, safe housing, not only jeopardise the rehabilitation of women but increase their risk of victimisation of serious crime, such as domestic and sexual abuse.

It leaves them prey to economic coercion, exploitation by organised criminals and subject to drug and alcohol abuse as a means of coping with their chaotic lives. It impacts their mental and physical health. Without a safe place to call home – that gives women a solid foundation on which to build crime-free lives, they are unable to rebuild positive relationships with their children, find work, open a bank account, access local services or resettle back into their communities. It also exacerbates both gender and ethnic disparities in the Criminal Justice System.

I find this deeply troubling, so that is why, in October, I submitted a [Supplementary Written Response, focussing on the housing and accommodation needs of women](#), to the Justice Select Committee on Women in Prisons. I would welcome your views on its contents.

I hope that my responses to your recommendations, provide assurance that women offenders continue to be a joint strategic priority for myself and partner agencies.

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I appreciate the valuable role played by both yourself and members of the Housing Committee that looked at the housing needs of women offenders. If you would like further information on London's Blueprint for a Whole Systems Approach to Women in Contact with the Criminal Justice System, and its work on accommodation and housing, please contact Mary John-Baptiste by email at [mary.john-baptiste@mopac.london.gov.uk](mailto:mary.john-baptiste@mopac.london.gov.uk).

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sadiq Khan', with a small number '2' written below the name.

**Sadiq Khan**  
Mayor of London

Annex.

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## Annex

### Mayor of London's response to the recommendations of the London Assembly Housing Committee's investigation on housing for women leaving prison

#### Introduction

The Mayor of London's response to the recommendations below sets out his response to the London Assembly Housing Committee's recommendations on housing for women leaving prison. This follows on from the Chair of the London Assembly Housing Committee, Sian Berry AM's letter to the Mayor of 20 October 2021, in which she requested a response on how the Mayor would take forward the Housing Committee's findings and recommendations:

#### **Recommendation 1**

**That the Mayor support the calls for a review of the duty to refer, as outlined in the 2020 'Safe Homes' report, and advocate for this in your discussions with government.**

The Mayor supports this call and the Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime has been instrumental in leading partners from across the statutory and third sector, to establish *the London Blueprint for Women in Contact with the Criminal Justice System*. This partnership has collaboratively produced an Action Plan which makes a specific commitment to:

*'Develop and draft a Prison Release Protocol for London that is in line with Homeless Reduction Act & 'Duty to Refer'.*

As part of the Blueprint for London Delivery Group, the Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison Initiative reviewed the contents of the Homeless Reduction Act and the 'Duty to Refer'. They are nearing completion of a Women's Prison Release Protocol for London, worked up in consultation with both Lambeth and Southwark Councils, which are recognised as having an effective system in place, and HMP Bronzefield.

The Prison Release Protocol will outline the essential features for the provision of appropriate services including accommodation for women with complex needs that are leaving prison. The Mayor sees the merit in this approach and will consider the protocol in full once it is drafted.

#### **Recommendation 2**

**We also recommend that, in the short term, you work with the Prison Service to improve administrative processes to ensure that referrals to local authorities are timely, accurate and informative, and to provide women with the facilities (including computers and phone calls) they need to engage with local authorities prior to release.**

The Mayor has jointly commissioned with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ)/HM Prison and Probation Service, a Pan London Women Offender Service aimed at meeting a range of women's rehabilitative needs, including accommodation. It scales up best practice and expands the existing footprint of women's support services across all of London's 32 boroughs.

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Within this, the MoJ and HM Prison and Probation Service have recognised the gap in accommodation provision for women leaving Bronzefield prison and have identified additional funding for a Housing Advocate to be based within the prison estate. This post will not only provide direct one-to-one in-prison housing support to women but will enable joined-up effective administrative systems to be developed between prison, probation, local authorities and housing charities.

Moving onto the second part of your recommendation, whilst the Mayor supports the use of technology for women offenders to access rehabilitative support, advice and information e.g. completing housing applications online or attending virtual housing and accommodation appointments, he also recognises the challenge that in the short-term initial commissioning and implementation costs would require substantial investment and compete with other budgetary demands. Government investment in digital technology will, we suspect, continue to focus on court modernisation.

### **Recommendation 3**

**We recommend that your forthcoming Police and Crime Plan recognises that women leaving prison may have a mix of vulnerabilities that puts them at heightened risk of abusive relationships and/or homelessness, and that access to safe and secure homes is a key aspect of rehabilitation following release from prison. The Police and Crime Plan should set out measures to address this through collaboration with relevant partners.**

Section 5.3 and 8.1 of the Mayor's Police and Crime Plan sets out his commitment to continued collaborative partnership working through London's Blueprint for a Whole Systems Approach to Women in Contact with the Criminal Justice System (CJS). We are committed to working together to improve outcomes for women who have already encountered the CJS or are at risk of doing so. We recognise that these women, often have multiple and complex needs specific to their gender and that some are the most vulnerable in our society. We are addressing the needs of these women through the provision of Women's Centres and gender-specific, holistic trauma-informed support services that are tailored to the individual needs of the woman.

The Blueprint Action Plan specifically prioritises accommodation and housing, setting out measures on progress and delivery. Our joint support for effective early intervention, diversion, alternatives to prison custody and Through the Gate support aims to prevent and reduce reoffending, allowing women to turn their lives around for the benefit of their victims, their families, wider society, and for the women themselves.

### **Recommendation 4**

**We recommend that you advocate for a review of sentencing for women, with particular emphasis on implementing alternatives to short-term sentences.**

The Mayor will continue to lobby and make representation to the Government for such a review. A recent example of this is his [submission to the Justice Select Committee on Women in Prison](#), which emphasises the importance of credible alternatives to custodial sentences.

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In the meantime, the Mayor's Office Evidence and Insight Team monitors data on the sentencing of women. The data reveals that a significant proportion of women are sentenced to short-term imprisonment for low-risk first time offences, such as theft.

Credible and robust alternatives to custodial sentencing are available, but we need to ensure that magistrates and judges are made aware of these and they must form part of a structured programme that magistrates and judges can refer women into. Crucially, these alternatives to custodial sentencing must provide the opportunity for women to be provided with the treatment they need to address the underlying causes of their offending behaviour, in the community, where they can also access other support. An example of this is the Mayor's investment in the South London Community Sentence Treatment Requirements Pilot. Here, women offenders that have mental health, alcohol or substance problems are sentenced to a community order that provides access to a health care treatment package of support.

When considering alternatives to women being given short-term sentences, the Mayor advocates the increased use of police Out of Court Disposal, in appropriate circumstances. Rehabilitative conditions being attached to police cautions, provide opportunities to divert low-level, first time women offenders away from court prosecution and into women's wrap around support services aimed at addressing the complex needs and underlying causes of the woman's offending behaviour, which is inclusive of housing and accommodation. In London, we are trialling a Female Offender Diversion Pilot whereby the police issue a Conditional Caution that requires the woman to attend a Mayor's Office for Policing And Crime commissioned wrap around support service, where a key worker is assigned. This service includes access to an experienced support Housing Adviser.

## **Recommendation 5**

**In the absence of changes to short sentences, we recommend that you call on the Prison Service to introduce a process to refer women at risk of homelessness on short sentences to local authorities at the commencement of their sentence, or as soon as possible after they enter prison. This would better enable the local authority to conduct a needs assessment and identify suitable accommodation for the day of release.**

This is being explored by the London Blueprint Delivery Group on Housing and Accommodation. Its composition of representatives from the MoJ, HM Prison and Probation Service, three women's prisons, London Councils and G15 (group of London's largest housing associations), the Safe Homes for Women Initiative and the Prison Reform Trust, are best placed to examine and action this.

## **Recommendation 6**

**We recommend that you facilitate a mechanism and forum for London boroughs to share examples of good practice in housing women leaving prison and where boroughs have developed innovative approaches these can be replicated across London's local authority housing services.**

There is existing and innovative good practice operating in London boroughs regarding housing and accommodation for women leaving prison. We are also working with boroughs across London in the re-commissioning of the service for Women in Contact with the CJS, which includes referral pathways for each borough and specialist housing advice and support, both in prison and in the

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community. We need to applaud and share that good practice Pan-London. The Mayor is therefore minded that a communications strategy be developed by London Blueprint Delivery partners.