



Scottish Government Debate:
Recommendations from the Commission on Women Offenders

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the report of the Commission on Women Offenders, and the renewed focus it gives to efforts to improve treatment of women in prison and reduce re-offending. As well as our services working directly with women offenders, many of our services deal with large numbers of children of prisoners, although this is not the specific remit of the service. For example Hopscotch, our Dundee based service for the children of substance missing parents, has found that over half the children they work with are the children of prisoners.

We therefore welcome the commissions finding that children of women prisoners are often adversely affected by parental imprisonment. As the report highlights, approximately 30 per cent of children with imprisoned parents will develop physical and mental health problems, and there is a higher risk of these children also ending up in prison.

Although prevention and early years intervention were not part of the Commission's remit, the commission strongly supported prioritisation of evidence-based support for parents and young children. The commission found that parenting programmes and intensive family support have been shown to reduce conduct disorders in children, and reduce the likelihood that such children will experience future problems with offending behaviour. The committee also identified offender mentoring and support services, such as Barnardo's Scotland's Women in Focus service in South-West Scotland can deliver particular benefits to women in the criminal justice system. More details on women in focus can be found at the end of the briefing.

In addition the commission found that female prisoners have significantly higher rates of poor mental health compared to both the general female population and male prisoners. This can make young women particularly vulnerable to exploitation on release from prison, because of the lack of ongoing support in the community.

The commission also found that practitioners, especially from the third sector, were concerned about the short-term and fragmented nature of funding, especially for women-specific interventions. In addition they found evidence that that women often respond more positively to staff in the third sector than the statutory sector and that interventions received in prison are often not followed up in the community.

Key conclusions from the report for Barnardo's Scotland

- We welcome the recommendation that any new national prison for high-risk women offenders to include a separate unit for young women, a purpose built mother and baby unit and a family-friendly visitor centre with an outside play area for children. However any new national prison must be limited to high risk offenders, and we support the conclusion that most women prisoners on remand or serving short-term sentences should be held in local prisons.
- The report identifies some key principles for effective services for women in prison, which we very much support, including:

- i) Services must be proactive and persistent in engaging with women, bringing services to women rather than expecting them to access conventional pathways to support.
 - ii) Services must adopt an outreach approach and be flexible in working with women at a range of times and locations.
 - iii) Multi-agency and multiprofessional services should be co-located as far as possible.
 - iv) Services should encourage healthy family functioning especially between mothers and children.
 - v) Services should build and maintain community links.
- We welcome the recommendation that the redesign of services includes intensive mentoring support for women. This has been shown to be very effective by our Women in Focus service. The quality of the relationship built with the female offenders is critical to the success of any intervention.
 - However, the most important issue addressed by the report is the appropriateness of custodial sentence for many of the women who end up in prison. As the report states *"women who have been repeatedly convicted of committing lower level offences their offending is often the result of significant underlying issues, such as drug or alcohol addiction and mental health problems, that could be better addressed in the community."* We therefore support the alternatives to imprisonment set out in section 4 of the report, and believe that concerted action to turn round the recent rises in the female prison population is the key to improving outcomes.
 - Finally we hope this report leads to a greater acknowledgement of the particular needs of children of prisoners as part of wider work to improve services for vulnerable children in Scotland.

Women in Focus – mentoring women offenders to reduce re-offending

Barnardo's Scotland's Women in focus service works with young women offenders from East, North and South Ayrshire and Dumfries & Galloway to reduce their levels of reoffending and reconviction; reduce the levels of breached Community Based Orders and help them make a positive contribution to their local community. Women serving Community Based Orders are referred to Women in Focus by their local Criminal Justice Supervising Officer. The service helps young women to comply with their orders by giving them constant support and practical help via a mentor, whose support includes work to support them in complying with their order; help in avoiding reconviction; information about budgeting and developing improved social skills to enable them to sustain family links. Through this package of support women are in a stronger position to regain control over their lives. Women who have completed their Community Based Orders with the support of Women in Focus have significantly reduced their offending behaviour and increased their opportunities to contribute towards their own communities.

About Barnardo's Scotland

Barnardo's Scotland works with more than 10,000 children, young people and their families in 98 specialised projects in communities across Scotland.

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