

2nd March 2011

Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders

Green Paper – Response from Commonweal Housing Limited

We welcome the opportunity to express our views on the Government's proposals on effective punishment, rehabilitation and sentencing of offenders.

Commonweal Housing is a unique charity. Our vision is: 'Developing innovative housing solutions to social injustices, capturing the learning and achieving replication of proven successes'

We use our resources to support and develop, in partnership with others (charities and housing associations), new and innovative role model pilot solutions to different forms of social injustice.

We are proactive, strategic partners in developing the role model, with our project partners being responsible for delivering the front line service.

We then use some of our resources to commission an independent, external evaluation to test if our solution really is a role model and working as we hoped. If proven, we then play our third role of campaigning, promoting and lobbying others to replicate the successful model elsewhere, wherever a need exists.

Since 2007 we have spent over £3M with a further £5M earmarked for projects over the coming 2 years.

We have run projects and our developing new projects for a range of client groups such as:

- Young people exiting young offenders institutions
- Homeless mothers leaving prison enabling them to be re-united with their children
- Young people leaving care
- Former street sex workers
- Single homeless people moving on from hostel accommodation

Our flagship project to date has been **Re-Unite** – an innovative and successful project meeting the housing and support needs of homeless mothers leaving prison. This independently evaluated role model project is successfully reducing reoffending and helping the children to avoid a lifestyle of anti social behaviour and interactions with the criminal justice system.

As a result of this focus on the issues surrounding women in the criminal justice system we will limit our responses to those areas and in particular around question 14 in the consultation – *'In what ways do female offenders differ from male offenders and how can we ensure that our services reflect these gender differences?'*

The key differences surround the nature of the offences and surrounding issues:

- The majority are convicted for less serious offences.
- Tendency for women offenders to have multiple and more complex problems especially around high rates of poly-drug use and histories of domestic and sexual abuse
- The impact of sentences upon women are disproportionately greater – ratcheting up of the sentence for any given crime often due to re-offending and where women are imprisoned this is frequently further from home and therefore having a disproportionately greater impact.
- The consequences of such disproportionate sentencing impacts manifest themselves in ways leading to significant additional costs (financial and moral) for society. Notably in shocking levels of self-harm; unmet mental health needs and most worryingly when considering long-term costs for society – the separation of mothers from their dependent children.

In particular, **Commonweal Housing** would wish to stress the impact of sentencing options on children of women offenders and the significant adverse consequences for the wider society of imprisonment where this is not an absolutely necessary option.

- 17,700 children pa affected by imprisonment of a mother
- 96% of children leave the previous family home if their mother is imprisoned
- Huge disruption for many children often requiring changes of school and break up of other social support networks
- Where more formal care arrangements are required, there is a huge additional cost to the public purse.
- Average sentences for women offenders are very short but still long enough to lead to potential loss of their home in many cases

The **Re-Unite** model helps to pick up the pieces of those broken relationships and we call upon the Government to ensure that resettlement support and advice focuses on this at the earliest opportunity should women receive custodial sentences. However we would also seek to have such housing and support options as a key part of potential diversionary options. **Commonweal Housing** is keen to develop the successful **Re-Unite** model, currently a post imprisonment option, as a possible diversionary option and / or community disposal where appropriate.

It is widely understood that accommodation and parenting responsibilities are key aspects of helping women address behaviours and minimising re-offending (more so than male offenders where employment is a greater factor). Therefore **Commonweal Housing** encourages the Government to adopt the position set out by Baroness Corston that sentences in the community should be the norm for women convicted of non-violent offences, and that alternatives to custody should be designed to allow for the specific needs of women such as childcare responsibilities. Allied to this, attention to the use of remand is needed:

- **Commonweal Housing** welcomes the proposal to assume no custodial remand if the sentence for the crime would not be a custodial one.
- We call for this to be extended to assumption against remand for any charge carrying a likely sentence, if convicted, of less than 12 months

Finally, **Commonweal Housing** encourages the Government to consider

- Use of wider range of conditional orders for non custodial disposals such as issues around positive parenting, ensuring children are attending school in addition to any other conditions such as drug treatment, anger management etc... i.e. encouraging sentencers more fully to consider the needs of the children wherever possible / appropriate.

We would be very happy to expand on any matters in this response with representatives of the Ministry of Justice.

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