



**RESPONSE TO DRAFT STRATEGY FOR THE  
MANAGEMENT OF WOMEN OFFENDERS IN NORTHERN  
IRELAND**

**May 2009**

## **Introduction**

Include Youth promotes best practice with young people in need or at risk. We achieve this through the development and promotion of resources, the provision of training, information and support of practitioners and organisations. We also undertake activities aimed at influencing public policy and policy awareness – both locally and nationally.

Include Youth promotes the development of positive choices and opportunities for vulnerable and challenging young people in the community, residential care or custody.

Include Youth promotes the use of community alternatives to care and custody for children and young people.

Amongst the young people at risk with whom, and on whose behalf, Include Youth works are young people from socially disadvantaged areas, those with a learning disability, those with special needs, those who have been truanting, suspended or expelled from school, those from a care background, those who had a negative parenting experience, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs or alcohol, undertaking unsafe sexual behaviour or other harmful activities, or of being harmed themselves.

Include Youth runs the Young Voices project, a participation project for young people who have been involved or are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, with the aim of supporting these young people to become involved in decision-making processes which impact on their lives. Currently the Young Voices Project supports young people in two groups – one drawing its members from the Greater Belfast area, and the second based in the Juvenile Justice Centre, Bangor.

Include Youth manages the LACE (Looked After Children in Education) Project which is a multi-agency partnership with the aim of promoting better educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

The Give and Take Scheme aims to improve the employability and increase the self esteem of young people in need or at risk from across Northern Ireland. The Scheme works with approximately 135 young people from a care or criminal justice background. The Scheme aims to support young people to overcome particular barriers that prevent them from moving into mainstream training or employment and towards independent

living. 75% of people on the Scheme are care experienced and we have strong partnership with all Trusts, YJA, PBNI and Careers service. The Scheme provides essential skills training (ICT, English and maths) to all of the young people.

In addition, Include Youth runs the YOYO Practitioners Forum, which draws together professionals from a range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations working directly with young people in need or at risk, and meets on a quarterly basis.

## **General Comments**

In preparing our response we have drawn heavily on the content of Dr Linda Moore and Professor Phil Scraton's response and would wish to concur with the recommendations they have outlined. Our response is also grounded in evidence found in our forthcoming publication, Include Youth's Manifesto for Youth Justice: Background Paper (Haydon, 2009, [www.includeyouth.org](http://www.includeyouth.org)). We have also included direct quotes from the young people we work with.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the draft strategy and whilst we applaud the many positive aspects contained within it, we are disappointed that the proposals are not as far reaching as they could have been. We also welcome the commitment made by the Minister to develop a range of more creative and constructive alternatives to custody for women. We are pleased to see an acknowledgement that the problems underlying women's offending are multi-faceted and that the causes of women's offending are directly related to issues such as poverty, mental illness, abuse and addiction. We support the intention contained within the Ministerial Foreword to develop ways of supporting women to address these multiple problems outside of the custodial sanction. However, we are of the opinion that the proposals do not sufficiently reflect this commitment to an overarching and structural approach. We are also disappointed that the recommendations from the Corston report and the findings from other relevant research carried out by the inspectorate and the NIHR have not been adequately reflected.

# **Specific Comments**

## **Chapter Three**

### **Women Offenders – Sentencing Patterns**

We welcome the commitment to keep under 18 year olds out of prison. However, we have experience with working with 18- 21 year olds and would stress the need to address the situation of this age group in relation to the prison system. There is an urgent need to address the specific needs of young women in this context.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Strategic Strand 1: Providing Alternatives to Prosecution and Custody**

On the whole we are supportive of the recommendations in this section but would welcome more detail on specific aspects. We concur with the need to address the wider context of women's lives, in particular their experiences of living in poverty, living with mental health difficulties and the wider impact these issues have on their families and children. We believe that there is a need for further research into the context of women's lives and a greater understanding of the causes of offending, particularly in the Northern Ireland context.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Strategic Strand 2: Reducing Offending**

#### Pathway 1: Accommodation

We are disappointed that there are no statistics or research provided on the accommodation for women who have offended or are at risk of offending in NI. The document does not suggest a way forward in relation to women's accommodation needs. Scraton and Moore (2007) indicated the need for much more variety and greater provision of accommodation for young women in conflict with the law, especially for those with mental health needs and alcohol addictions and women coming out of prison. There is a general need for more information on the specific accommodation needs of women. In Include Youth we can see both the positive impact securing safe and permanent accommodation can have on a young woman's life, as well as the damaging effects insecure and inappropriate accommodation can have. Many of the young women we work with have experience of moving accommodation frequently, within hostels or the care system.

*“When I was 16 I was living in a hostel and I just got told ‘your room’s been changed because there’s a new person coming in’. They took all my stuff and put it in a different room, just on the floor – all my personal stuff – without even telling me or asking me.”*

These changes in circumstance can have a dramatic impact on a young woman’s self esteem, their ability to secure and participate in education, employment and training opportunities.

### Pathway 2: Education, Training and Employment

We concur with the recommendation that there needs to be more research on the education and training needs of women, particularly given the positive impact entering education, training and employment can have on patterns of offending. Accessing the right type of support can give young women the incentive not to repeat offending behaviour and to make a new start.

*“I’d want to show them that I’ve wised up – got a job or done an exam – prove them wrong.”*

We are deeply concerned by the insufficient educational provision for women in Hydebank Wood and would reiterate many of the concerns raised by the Prisons Inspectorate and Criminal Justice Inspectorate (NI). We welcome the proposal that there will be increased joint working between the Department of Education and the Department of Employment and Learning.

Include Youth’s Give and Take Scheme has demonstrated what a dramatic difference an individual needs led approach can have in relation to the delivery of training and employment programmes. On the Scheme each young person is supported to agree an individual work placement, training, social and vocational development programmes and a mentoring relationship. The programme is implemented at a pace and level which suits each individual young person and which takes into account the context of their often chaotic lives.

*“The placement got me out of bed and gave me something to do.”*

We support the establishment of a mentoring programme within the women's prison to help prepare women offenders for work and to create job opportunities in the community and on release from prison. Access to pre- and post-release support in the areas of education, training and employment are vital if we are to help reduce re-offending rates.

*"You need to get a placement, have someone give it to you, give you a chance. No-one wants to – 'cos you've done crime."*

We would emphasize the need to address the childcare needs of women entering such programmes.

### Pathway 3: Health

We welcome the transfer of the lead responsibility for healthcare to the DHSSPS. We also welcome the commitment in the draft strategy to 'explore the options for developing services to deal more effectively with the health of women offenders, including mental health issues and personality disorder'. However, we do not feel this section goes far enough to address the enormous need with regards to women's mental health. We would question the ability of the prison to deal with these complex health needs and would suggest that these women must be treated from outside the prison administration. Women with serious mental health care needs should be removed from the prison system.

### Pathway 4: Alcohol and Substance Abuse

The young people we work with have reiterated the fact that alcohol and drug abuse can lead on to offending behaviour.

*"People start stealing, mugging, doing robberies, to get money to pay for drugs."*

This emphasizes the need for the incorporation of prevention and treatment programmes for alcohol and substance abuse in a co-ordinated, multi-agency, long term specific strategy.

We welcome the commitment to develop new services for those deemed at high risk and would stress the need for these services to take cognisance of the impact of early trauma and abuse on the likelihood of a young women becoming involved in alcohol and substance abuse. As a vital component in early intervention we would support the development and implementation of post abuse services for young people.

### Pathway 5: Finance and Debt

We agree that there is an increasing and urgent need to address the impact of poverty and debt on women's offending. In these increasingly financially challenging days we would suggest that there needs to be much more research conducted on the impact of poverty and debt. We would recommend linking in with agencies that specialise in this area, to take guidance from them on how families can best be supported.

### Pathway 6: Children and Families

We support the recommendation to further develop the NIPS Strategy for women offenders in custody and agree that ways must be explored to enhance the range of family services, including identifying improvements in relation to visits, particularly child-centred visits. We recently conducted consultations with children and young people on the subject of family visits and how they could be improved. This report was submitted to the NIPS in March 2009. The report drew attention to the importance of maintaining contact with children while in prison and highlighted many ways in which visits could be made more child friendly. Maintaining contact with their children is a vital component for offenders in coping with being in prison and looking forward to being with their children again is the one dominant factor in getting through.

*"It would break my heart if I didn't have contact with him, it keeps me going. One day I'll get out, and he'll be there, or I'll just go and pick him up from school...I don't know how I'm going to do it yet, I haven't decided."*

*"It's important to see your kids coming up to see you to make your day better, to help you make it through the day, be strong for them. Like to show you're in jail but you're still there for them."*

The suggestions emerging from this report were as follows:

- The need for more privacy during visiting.
- The need to relax the security arrangements for children visiting relatives in prison.
- An improvement in play facilities for visiting children, in particular, the need for an outside play area and a facility specifically for older children.
- An effort to make the general atmosphere of the visiting room more family friendly.
- Mothers in particular would welcome the opportunity to engage in everyday normal family activities with their children, such as feeding and changing. They are very

supportive of the idea of a caravan being provided to enable closer and more private family contact.

- Longer telephone calls and financial assistance to make phone calls.

*“You just can’t do the mummy things, like putting him to bed, making him dinner, helping with homework – it’s my sister that’s got to do all that.”*

We also believe that criminal justice staff would benefit from training on the impact of imprisonment on mothers and children.

#### Pathway 7: Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviours

We welcome the proposal to develop gender specific offending behaviour programmes and to research best practice in this area. We would stress the need to take into account the reasons for offending behaviour in women in developing these programmes. In our experience the reasons for offending are very often borne out of necessity and the need to support a family in extremely difficult circumstances.

#### Pathway 8 : Supporting Women who have been abused, raped or have experienced domestic violence

We agree with the proposal to provide greater support for women who have suffered abuse, both in custody and in the community. Many of the young people we work with in Include Youth have experience of abuse and domestic violence and we would strongly advocate for greater provision of services, including mental health services, for children and young people who have suffered abuse. In our experience we have found that girls and young women in particular have been victimised and there is an urgent need for therapeutic intervention for those who have experienced trauma and abuse. The failure to meet the mental health needs of children and young people who have experienced abuse and the subsequent road to custody for some is an indictment to our society.

#### **Restorative Interventions**

We support the development of restorative interventions and strategies to prevent offending. These interventions promote positive outcomes for children and families and we would wish to see this work further supported and developed.

## **Gender- Specific Research**

We agree that there needs to be research undertaken on the causes and impact of offending of women. However, while we support an international literature review on the research evidence on reducing offending being conducted, we are of the opinion that this needs to be supplemented with an independently commissioned research project on women's offending, which should include a qualitative element.

## **Chapter 8: Strategic Strand 4 – Developing a Gender-Specific Approach to the Management of Women in Custody**

We continue to be concerned about the welfare of women accommodated in Ash House. In particular, we would draw attention to the concerns raised by Professor Phil Scraton in written evidence to the NI Affairs Committee inquiry, stating that the prison service is a 'dumping ground' for mentally ill women and the environment in Ash House increases the likelihood of mental ill health. We believe that women with mental health needs should not be imprisoned but rather should be accommodated in therapeutic facilities in the community. With the current shift in responsibility for healthcare this is an ideal opportunity to address the under provision of mental health care within the prison.

We agree that a new women's prison unit should be built within the Hydebank Wood estate. All new staff should have experience of gender-specific provision and the unit should have appropriate education and healthcare provision.

## References

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