

The Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP

Ministry of Justice

102 Petty France

London, SW1 9AH

CC: Alex Chalk MP, Justice Minister

25 July 2021

Dear Secretary of State and Lord Chancellor,

We are writing to express our grave concern about the impact of the proposed 500 new prison places for women, announced at the end of January this year.

The proposals fly in the face of the Government's own evidence and criminal justice strategy which admits most women should not be in prison and commits to reducing the women's prison population, as well as re-offending rates.

There is well established evidence that community settings rather than prisons are more successful at addressing the root causes of women's offending, so often including experiences of trauma, domestic abuse, mental ill-health, debt, homelessness and harmful substance use.

Most women enter prison for sentences of six months or less, with prison sentences more likely to increase re-offending rather than reduce it. We are also concerned about a rise in self-harm for women in prison, which is now at the highest level in a decade.

The harm of prison affects not only women, but their families and children, as women are more likely to be primary carers and the majority of women in prison have children under the age of 18.

We know 95% of children have to leave their home when their mother goes to prison. Parental imprisonment is a recognised adverse childhood experience, with the risk of significant negative impact on children's long-term health and wellbeing, their school attainment, and later life experiences, including life expectancy and the likelihood of being imprisoned themselves.

It's even more concerning that these plans include accommodation for children to visit mothers overnight in prison, where a much more sensible and humane approach would see mothers released in the community to spend the night with their child.

We refute the Government's claim that additional places are needed to prepare for a projected rise in the prison population due to hiring more police officers. Not only does this completely undermine its own strategy on women, but experts from across police, probation, prisons and service providers agree that it doesn't have to be like this. Where schemes that divert women away from the criminal justice system before reaching court exist, there is a proven reduction in imprisonment and re-offending rates.

There is another way. The UK has a network of local services embedded in communities working alongside women to address their needs, including Women's Centres, which provide an anchor to help stop women being swept up into crime. The Government has recognised these are more effective at rehabilitation and can choose to invest in them instead.

We urge the Government to rethink these plans, and take the common-sense approach already outlined which has broad support, before more families and communities are unnecessarily torn apart.

We are ready and willing to work with Government to achieve the aim of its strategy to radically reduce the number of women in prison, but these new prison places thwart this goal.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Kate Paradine, CEO, Women in Prison

Alphonsine Kabagabo, Director, Women for Refugee Women

Kathy Evans, Chief Executive, Children England

Frances Crook, Chief Executive, The Howard League

Gill Walton, Chief Executive, Royal College of Midwives

Farah Nazeer, Chief Executive, Women's Aid Federation of England

Polly Neate CBE, Chief Executive, Shelter

Sarah Hughes, Chief Executive, Centre for Mental Health

Katie Lomas, National Chair, Napo, the Probation and Family Courts Union

Anne Fox, CEO, Clinks

The Rt Hon Baroness Corston of St George

Campbell Robb, CEO, Nacro

Deniz Uğur, Deputy Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition

The Rt Hon the Lord Bradley of Withington

Estelle du Boulay, Director, Rights of Women

Ian Lawrence, General Secretary, Napo, the Probation and Family Courts Union

David Challen, domestic abuse campaigner

Penelope Gibbs, Director, Transform Justice

Deborah Coles, Director, INQUEST

Pavan Dhaliwal, Chief Executive, Revolving Doors Agency

Harriet Wistrich, Director, Centre for Women's Justice

Suzanne Jacob, CEO, SafeLives

Angela Cairns, Chief Executive, Unlock

Fiona Dwyer, CEO, Solace

Jemima Olchawski, CEO, Agenda Alliance

Nina Champion, Director, Criminal Justice Alliance

Laura Seebohm, Executive Director, Changing Lives

Amy Gibbs, Chief Executive, Birthrights

Alice Dawnay, Founder & CEO, Switchback

Janet Dalrymple, CEO, Safer Places

Pippa Goodfellow, Director, Alliance for Youth Justice

Charlotte Day, Chief Officer, Bedford Women's Centre

Joy Doal, CEO, Anawim

Vivienne Hayes, Chief Executive, Women's Resource Centre

Dr Liza Thompson, CEO, SATEDA

Khatuna Tsintsadze, Co-Director, Zahid Mubarek Trust

Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director, UK Women's Budget Group

Joeli Brearley, CEO, Pregnant Then Screwed

Naomi Delap, Director, Birth Companions

Janey Starling, Co-Director, Level Up

Seyi Falodun-Liburd, Co-Director, Level Up

Rose Dowling, Chief Executive, Leaders Unlocked

Chris Price, CEO, Pecan

Marchu Girma, CEO, Hibiscus

Hannah Shead, CEO, Trevi

Lisa Dando, Director, Brighton Women's Centre

Angela Everson, CEO, WomenCentre

Stef Martinsen-Barker, CEO, Cambridge Women's Resource Centre

Jackie May, Chief Executive, Women's Centre Cornwall

Kellie Ziemba, CEO, Kairos Women Working Together

Niki Scordi, CEO, Advance

Sara Swire, CEO, New Dawn New Day

Rokaiya Khan, CEO, Together Women

Natasha Finlayson, CEO, Working Chance

Niki Gould, Head of Women's Community Services, Nelson Trust

Helen Pankhurst, Convener, Centenary Action Group

Caroline Allouf, Co-ordinator, Tricky Period

Jenny Adjene, Co-Founder, Hip Hip Hooray (Social Enterprise)

Sandra Brown MA, Chartered FCIPD Chair of Trustee Board, Stepping Stones Luton

Sofia Buncy, National Coordinator, Khidmat Centres

Gemma Fox, Managing Director, North Wales Women's Centre

Kate Lill, Women Prisoners' Caseworker, Prisoners' Advice Service

Anna Herrmann, Joint Artistic Director, Clean Break

Helen Mills, Head of Programmes, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies

Naima Sakande, Women's Justice Advocate, APPEAL

Lauren Nickolls, Senior Project Manager, Maslaha

Cyrene Siriwardhana, Legal and Policy Advisor, Surviving Economic Abuse

Sara Garton, Head of Client Services, Nottingham Women's Centre

Emily Reynolds, Campaigns and Communications Manager, Wish

Nicole Guy, Centre Manager, Stockport Women's Centre