



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Justice

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Reducing Offending Among Women  
2013-16: Revised Draft Strategy:

3 October 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Justice

### Reducing Offending Among Women 2013-16: Revised Draft Strategy

3 October 2013

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)  
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Stewart Dickson  
Mr Tom Elliott  
Mr Alban Maginness  
Ms Rosaleen McCorley  
Mr Jim Wells

**Witnesses:**

Mr Brian Grzymek	Department of Justice
Mr Paul Cawkwell	Northern Ireland Prison Service
Ms Yvonne Cooke	Police Service of Northern Ireland
Ms Jean O'Neill	Probation Board for Northern Ireland

**The Chairperson:** Officials from the Department, the Probation Board, the police and the Prison Service are here to outline the key elements of the revised draft strategy 'Reducing Offending Among Women 2013-2016'. The Department is seeking the Committee's view on the revised strategy, which the Minister aims to publish in November 2013.

At this point, I welcome our officials. I welcome Brian Grzymek, the deputy director of the reducing offending division in the Department of Justice (DOJ); Jean O'Neill, manager of the Probation Board's Inspire centre; Yvonne Cooke, head of healthcare, custody and reducing offending in the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI); and Paul Cawkwell, director of offender policy and operations in the Prison Service. The session will be recorded by Hansard. At this stage, I will hand over to you, Brian.

**Mr Brian Grzymek (Department of Justice):** Thank you for inviting us along today, Mr Chairman. We are here at Magee to update the Committee and seek its comments — now or later — on the draft refresh of our women offending strategy, titled 'Reducing Offending Among Women 2013-2016'. The number of women involved in offending behaviour in Northern Ireland is small — roughly 3% of our prison population and perhaps 10% of the Probation Board's caseload. It is much smaller, comparatively, than is the case in the rest of the UK. However, offending behaviour among women has a disproportionate impact on women offenders, their children and families, and the wider community. There is a particular stigma attached to offending behaviour among women. Women offenders talk about the deep sense of shame that they feel, and media coverage of cases involving some women offenders can be sensationalist and create a false impression of female offenders in Northern Ireland.

The vulnerabilities and life problems of female offenders, young or adult, are well known and often relate to family and relationship problems; a background of being in care; substance abuse; being a victim of physical or sexual abuse; financial pressures; and, from time to time, poor educational attainment. To address the particular needs of women offenders, the Minister of Justice published Northern Ireland's first women's strategy in 2010. Since then, good progress has been made, notably some early work with prisons and the establishment of the Inspire centre in Belfast. Inspire is now mainstreamed, and, over the course of the past year, we have started to develop similar practices in mid-Ulster and the north-west, which we think will take a wee while to complete.

The 2010 strategy gave the needs of women a clear profile and priority in the justice system. We have continued to develop our thinking to strengthen the approach. Last summer, the Minister asked the Department to carry out a refresh of the strategy through engagement with key stakeholders. At that time, he wrote to the Committee to advise members that that was taking place. We have deliberately described this approach as a "refresh". The underlying evidence base and issues relating to women offenders remain largely the same, but the current action plan has nearly run its course and needs to be extended and broadened. The underpinning strategic context has also advanced considerably, with major developments relating to the strategic framework for reducing offending, the prisons review, the youth justice review, the community safety strategy, the speeding up justice programme and work coming on stream focusing on vulnerable individuals.

The Minister is committed to maintaining a continuing focus on women offenders across the justice system as we advance his reform agenda. In progressing that approach, he is also mindful and fully supportive of the wider policy agenda across government, particularly relating to the Delivering Social Change agenda. The basis of the strategy remains fairly constant, and officials were able to access relevant feedback from other recent consultations. A further consultation on the strategy was therefore not seen as being necessary. However, we engaged very closely with key stakeholders and other interests in the process of reviewing the progress of the current strategy. From that engagement with the key interests, we have made a number of developments and improvements to our strategic position.

We held a number of stakeholder workshops; we facilitated workshops for the prison review team's ongoing work; and we held focus groups with women in Ash House and with girls supervised by the Youth Justice Agency. We have also worked closely with partners in prisons, police, probation, youth justice and the Belfast drop-in centre for commercial sex workers to develop and refine the strategy. We sought feedback on the draft action plans from voluntary and community sector partners and those who attended our various workshops. The main issues raised by stakeholders in the paper — I will not go into in detail, and no doubt you can ask me about them — recognised the specific needs and issues facing our young and adult women; sought to ensure that young and adult women have holistic support in the community; recognised in particular the importance of early intervention — in effect, seeing what we could do to head women off at the pass before they get sucked more deeply into offending behaviour; sought to improve the support provided to women in custody, particularly women who are vulnerable in various ways; recognised the need for the development of a separate women's facility; and, finally, recognised the importance of effective joined-up working between statutory, voluntary and community organisations. That is one of the strengths of the Inspire centre, which we are happy to talk about later on.

The new version of the strategy has a continued focus on recognising and addressing the particular needs of women. In keeping with our strategic framework, the long-term aim is to reduce offending through a focus on preventing women offending and reducing reoffending when they have already become engaged in the justice system. Fundamentally, our revised strategy is about adopting a different way of working with girls and women. We need to continue to develop and embed what we describe as a gender-informed approach throughout the justice system. That means taking account of the realities of women's lives, meeting their needs in a holistic way, and supporting them to build relationships built on trust and respect and so help them to make positive choices about how their life goes forward.

I am coming to the end now. Our actions can be summarised as focusing on prevention and early intervention strategies that will improve outcomes; continuing to put in place alternative measures to divert girls and women; providing child-centred interventions for young female offenders being supervised in the community or held in custody; rolling out the Inspire model aimed at reducing reoffending among women; establishing a new separate custodial facility and step-down accommodation specifically for women, with a prison culture and a regime focused on addressing their needs; supporting the women involved in prostitution to be safe to make choices about exiting that

trade; and ensuring a continued strategic focus on reducing offending among women that is supported by local research and awareness-raising.

That is all that I want to say by way of introduction. I welcome the Committee's comments on the draft strategy, and we are very happy to take on board any comments that you have now or in the coming weeks as we try to finalise the strategy. The Minister's aim is to have it on his desk in November, with a view to publishing it before the end of the year. That is where we are at. I welcome the opportunity to share our thinking with the Committee, and I am pleased to take questions or suggestions on how we can focus and refine our approach.

**Ms McCorley:** Thanks very much for the presentation. I have a number of questions, but I will ask a general question first. A lot of people hold the view that a lot of women who are in prison should not be in a prison, that they should be supported in some other way and that they ended up in prison largely because of social factors and abuse in their life. It seems as if they are further abused by the system, because they are in a prison and should really be receiving some other kind of treatment. Do you share that general view?

**Mr Grzymek:** Yes and no. Our prison population has half as many women as in the rest of the UK. Whereas the general criticism in England and Wales is that a lot of women are inappropriately in prison, our numbers are much smaller, and I suspect that we do not have the same number of women inappropriately placed. The reality is that anyone who is in prison has been sentenced to prison or is on remand, but they come in from the courts. Therefore, I cannot say that they are in the wrong place. Having said that, the question is whether there are better ways of dealing with them, and our strategy is saying that the extent to which we can become involved in early intervention and the extent to which we can work with women before they become fully involved in offending is where the success lies. Our vision is to move to a point at which fewer women go to prison and those who go in do so because that is the right place for them to go, and, when there, we work for them so that when they come out, they do not go back.

**Mr Paul Cawkwell (Northern Ireland Prison Service):** In shaping our thoughts on what a new female institution should look like, we spend a lot of time looking at prisons and women's centres across many jurisdictions. We have gone to Belfast and Dublin, and we have been to women's centres and two prisons in England. It is clear in our mind that we do not want a large facility and, in the context of future intent, something that is no bigger than the combined size of Ash House in different places. Our preference is to have much of that in step-down accommodation. We have no future designs and thoughts on trying to build up the female prison population, and you can read into that. We think that it is probably at its optimum size based on current information.

**Ms McCorley:** Tell me what step-down accommodation is.

**Mr Cawkwell:** We are not yet in a place in which we can build a new female prison, but we do not want to rest on our laurels. We have designed a building called Alderwood House, which we hope to move into. Initially, that would be on the basis of releasing women during the day to attend Alderwood House. In the longer term, we would also like to provide women with open accommodation on that site.

**Ms McCorley:** It is disappointing how low down the pecking order the new women's prison is. That shows that there is not the same emphasis placed on sorting out the needs of women. There is not the same urgency and desire. Women suffer because there are so few of them in prison. It is not fair. It has been quite a few years since women were removed from Maghaberry prison, and that was always temporary. It is away at the end of a list. It is very iffy terminology about how a new facility is coming about. It is as though the needs of women are second rate in the pecking order. It is probably because they do not give as much bother as men. That is wrong.

**Mr Grzymek:** I appreciate your view, but forgive me if I do not wholly agree with you. The reality is that the Department has a number of priorities in its capital development. We cannot do everything at the same time. Work is under way to try to develop a new centre. It may have taken us a bit longer than I initially thought that it might have done. It is about trying to make quite a different type of prison accommodation from we have at the moment. That will eventually go on to our capital development scheme. It takes time to get these things right. As Paul said, we are not saying that we will just stay where we are until we move on; rather, we are saying that there are things that we can do now that can make a difference. That might be that step-down approach, where some women can actually get outside the normal, traditional prison context already. It may be about what we can do working with

Inspire, where some women will leave the prison on day release. They will be prepared in advance for living back in the community. It is about what sort of provision and regime we provide in the prison to make sure that we are taking account of their needs.

The focus of our strategy is very much women-centric. It focuses much more on women's needs and how we address them. I would like things to move faster as well, but we have to live in the real world, in which there is finite resource. It takes time to build new prisons. The Minister is committed to moving forward. We are not a one-trick pony, and we are not saying that the solution is all about prison. We have to get a system that works better with women. If we can work with other Departments so that women who are vulnerable and on the margins of offending can be sent on a different trajectory, that is important. Where women commit serious offences, they may well need to be imprisoned, in which case it is for us to try to develop the best possible model. A lot of work is going into that. The thinking that we have is quite different from the square concrete box solution, which has been the situation in the past.

**Ms McCorley:** I wonder whether you want to comment generally on the very disappointing and damning report this week on the improvements in the prison.

**Mr Grzymek:** I will pass the hard questions to Paul. Generally, that was a disappointing report. Having said that, the Minister is committed to taking on board the comments from Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI). Those CJINI reports are very important, as they give us feedback about what is happening. In fact, that report comes from earlier this year. Since January or February, when that report came about, a number of developments have been put in place to address some of those issues. Paul, perhaps you will say a bit more.

**Mr Cawkwell:** Nothing that emerged from those reports came as a surprise. They echoed what Dame Anne Owers said in her report. There is the recognition that we are in a reform programme that takes four years. How the Department responded is probably a recognition of where we were at in February. Its statement could not have been more powerful. The management teams per se have gone and have been replaced from unit managers through to deputy governor and the governor, and there have been two new appointments at director level to support that work. That is a clear statement of intent to get things right.

I wish to highlight the fact that not everything was damning, particularly on the female side. There was a lot of good feedback in there. The report appreciated that staff/prisoner relationships were good and even praised the accommodation. It is just that it was in the wrong place. That was the sense that came from the report. We accept the criticism. We think it was valid, and I am pleased that there has been some recognition of the good work that has taken place there. There has been an awful lot of drive and energy at the centre since the report was published.

To conclude on your earlier points about step-down accommodation and the new prison, although we may not have money available in this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period to build a new prison, we are still spending money to improve the infrastructure at Ash House. We are still spending money to provide ourselves with a step-down facility, and we are getting women out to the Inspire centre.

**Ms McCorley:** OK. May I ask a question about life-sentence prisoners who are entitled to be released on parole? I am not sure what the system is for releasing life-sentence prisoners, but on a recent visit to the prison, one woman made a complaint. She brought up the fact that she was entitled to apply but needed to be accompanied, and because the system was unable to find somebody to accompany her, she was denied parole. Can you tell me something about the rules that govern parole for life-sentence prisoners?

**Mr Grzymek:** I will pass that one back to Paul.

**Mr Cawkwell:** I will answer that, and if there are areas that my colleagues can clarify, I would welcome that. In essence, the Parole Commissioners approve the point at which somebody is safe to return to the community. They like to see evidence that somebody's reliability has been tested, and so they will seek opportunities.

**Ms Jean O'Neill (Probation Board for Northern Ireland):** *[Inaudible.]* local management unit, and there is a range of assessments. I am not familiar with that particular case because, as you know, it is a very small number of women who are subject to life sentences and supervision, and there are

certainly a very small number in the community, but any of those who are released into the community are supervised through the probation service arrangements. I cannot comment on those.

**Ms McCorley:** Perhaps I can contact you.

**Mr Grzymek:** I used to sponsor the parole board, but now I am the policy lead for parole. That issue does not ring any bells with me, but if you write to me with details, I will see what I can do to find an answer and come back to you directly.

**Ms McCorley:** Unfortunately, I cannot remember the woman's name, but there are not many women there, so —

**Mr Grzymek:** Even if you can sketch out the details as you recall them and send those to me in the first instance, I will pass them on to the right person.

**Mr Cawkwell:** *[Inaudible.]* I will make a point of speaking to the *[Inaudible.]* prisoners on that unit to try to get to the bottom of that.

**Mr Wells:** You said that we have half the custodial rate for women here compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. When we were down at the women's unit, I noticed that the board indicated that quite a few of these ladies are from abroad and are mostly in for drug offences. When you take those folk out of the statistics, does that make the rate much lower? What is the proportion of prisoners that are not from Northern Ireland?

**Mr Grzymek:** I will start that answer, and I will then pass over to Paul. The truth is 8%. It varies a bit, because, as you know, we had some *[Inaudible.]* cannabis farmers living in various houses in Northern Ireland at one point, so we did have a bigger number than that, but, by and large, it is a small sprinkling. They generate particular problems, sometimes around interpretive services and things like that. Clearly, we have to treat everyone in our prisons in the same manner. They certainly can put some additional pressures on the system, but it is not normally a large number

**Mr Wells:** My next question is about perception, perhaps because of sensationalist press headlines. Is it right to think that, among the small number of women who do offend, their crimes are more serious than the average among males, or is it just that the press has homed in on four or five very high-profile cases?

**Mr Grzymek:** I would say that the press has homed in on four or five atypical cases. There tends to be a sensationalist approach to women offenders. Most women offenders are actually low-risk, and their crimes are not serious. Clearly, there have been a number of high-profile cases related to murders, but the reality is, although I do not have the figures in front of me, that the percentages are not much different from those for others. I do not know whether anybody else can add to that.

**Ms J O'Neill:** Of those whom we supervise through the Inspire model and in probation, the majority of women are assessed as being at low to medium risk of reoffending. That is reflected in levels of reoffending.

**Mr Wells:** You mentioned that some of the prisoners are in custody because of prostitution, and, of course, that is a live issue, given Lord Morrow's Bill.

**Mr Grzymek:** Very, very few women, if any, are in prison for prostitution. There may well be one or two women in for living off the industry, but I do not believe that there are any women in prison for prostitution.

**Mr Wells:** In your submission, you mentioned prostitution, and I wondered whether that was those who were controlling prostitution or those who were in prostitution.

**Mr Grzymek:** Prostitution is not a crime in Northern Ireland. Women go into prostitution for a variety of reasons. I think that, quite often, they are coerced or have made bad choices. The reality is that, although it is not a crime, we know that it is very often linked to criminal activity. As part of our strategy, we are aiming to see what we can do to help women who are in that industry to be safe and to make choices to leave that industry and perhaps go on to better forms of living.

**Mr Wells:** That issue was raised during the debate on the Bill. What is on offer to vulnerable women in particular who have been caught up in that trade and are looking to get out of it? What can the DOJ do to help those women?

**Mr Grzymek:** There is a centre in Belfast run by the health service that works directly with women in the commercial sex industry. As part of the strategy, we are going to produce more information and advice. Our aim is both to help women to be safe if they continue to make that choice about where they are working, and, if they want to move out, to give them assistance to do so. We will be doing that in conjunction with colleagues in the Health Department.

**Ms J O'Neill:** We find that women who enter into prostitution do so for various reasons, including issues related to drug misuse. Some women who have a high dependency on drugs enter into prostitution so that they can purchase them. It is not just about working with health agencies but with a whole range of agencies to offer such women a holistic approach to help them.

**Mr Wells:** Do you do any follow-up work to find out whether those initiatives are successful and whether women find alternatives to the street?

**Ms J O'Neill:** Absolutely. If any of those women are subject to a probation order, that lasts for a period between six months to three years, so a range of agencies meet the woman during that time, following up with reviews and ensuring that they are actually following the suggestions and advice that is offered.

**Mr Grzymek:** I think the important point is that, quite often, it is not just a single issue but a range of issues relating to a woman who is, in many ways, very vulnerable. It is about working on all those issues at the same time to bring about change, not just addressing prostitution without dealing with any drug dependencies or, in some cases, dealing with abusive relationships, which may often accompany it. Domestic violence and sexual abuse are often in there somewhere as well. Sometimes, working with the whole person is important if we are to make a difference to their lives.

**Mr Wells:** Another issue is cannabis farming. There is some evidence that people are trafficked to do that trade. It is a labour-intensive trade in which people grow cannabis in houses and try to cover the fact that they use huge amounts of electricity in doing so. Is there any evidence that some of the women who are in prison for cannabis farming were coerced into it?

**Mr Grzymek:** I do not have that information. It is an issue that comes and goes. I do not know whether Yvonne wants to say anything from a police perspective, but I think that there was a little spate of that. However, once the system caught onto it and the police were mindful of it, I think that cannabis farms have been less apparent in recent times. Is that the case, Yvonne?

**Ms Yvonne Cooke (Police Service of Northern Ireland):** Yes; that is the case. I do not have specific information with me. There have been periodic episodes of that, but I would not see that as involving a large number of women who are currently in prison.

**Mr Wells:** If you were convinced that the person was coerced or trafficked, would he or she be in prison?

**Mr Grzymek:** We have quite clear guidance. If someone is trafficked, they are treated differently unless they are a voluntary offender. That is true whether they are trafficked for commercial reasons or even for domestic service, which we know is another phenomenon. It is just as true for that matter as it would be if they were trafficked into the sex industry.

**Ms J O'Neill:** I would add that the golden thread throughout this strategy is examining the underlying causes and reasons. We want to understand what has happened in those women's backgrounds and whether they have been in abusive or coercive relationships or have mental health issues. Those issues are being examined when making decisions about the lives of those women and when assessing what support they will need from pathways in each institution and the Health Department. Those vulnerabilities are looked at because, at times, women who offend can be victims themselves. That is a significant element of the strategy.

**Mr A Maginness:** Mr Cawkwell, you spoke about the recent report into Hydebank, Ash House in particular, and said that a number of the issues were addressed after the inspection took place. I have

heard that on a number of occasions. I say this reluctantly: people and officials who deal with these types of reports say, "Ah, but we have already fixed that." It wears thin when I hear that. I am certainly not saying that you are incorrect, because I do not know enough of the detail, but the Department has to be very careful about saying that, because it is wearing thin. There is a need for robust prison reform here, and it seems to be rather slow and fragmentary. I would like you to bear that comment in mind.

Essentially, Ash House should not be there. There should be a separate women's facility. I understand the budgetary pressures and all the rest of it, but it is becoming increasingly obvious, particularly in light of the report by Criminal Justice Inspection, that you need to separate the women's facility from the Hydebank young offenders' complex. That is absolutely essential. I would like to see some sort of indicative date or objective set by the Department on that, rather than saying that you are committed to this but you do not know when it will happen. That is on the never-never, and I do not think that is acceptable to the women in those circumstances.

You are quite right that the report says some very good things about the way that women are being treated in prison. There is no doubt about that. The emphasis of the Department is on treating women not in a prison or in a custodial setting but through alternative methods, and I welcome that. I would like to hear from Ms O'Neill about the success of the Inspire project and the references that were made to rolling it out across Northern Ireland. What would that mean in practice?

**Ms J O'Neill:** I am delighted with the success of the Inspire project. When we set out the strategy in 2010, the aim was to pilot the Inspire model. The model began in greater Belfast and has now been mainstreamed through the Department of Justice. The Inspire model is a partnership between statutory agencies, and voluntary and community agencies in the women's sector. It is about recognising the experience and expertise of all those sectors, and coming together. Up to now, all those agencies were working in parallel but not together. The Inspire model is for a partnership approach, looking at how women come into the criminal justice system.

I asked for a copy to be sent to the Committee of a paper that tells the stories of five women and how they came into the criminal justice system. Inspire is a partnership model to address those issues. You were quite right, Rosaleen, when you mentioned the characteristics of women who come into custody. I assure you that the same sort of issues face women in the community as well.

The model is working in the greater Belfast area, and we are rolling it out. We commenced that process in the mid-Ulster area and the north-west. It is about bringing together local agencies to find out what resources are in those areas. The big difference is in the numbers. We work with about 460 women on probation or subject to statutory orders. The majority are in the greater Belfast area — around 200 — and the rest are much smaller numbers. There are 20 women subject to probation orders in the mid-Ulster area and about 50 in the north-west.

It does not require the same physical structures because there are resources. My colleague came with me just this morning to have lunch at the Derry Women's Centre, which, alongside voluntary agencies, is putting programmes into the community for women subject to probation orders. We are not looking for huge additional resources. We have put together a business case for the roll-out, which is part of the prison reform measures. We hope that decisions will be made on that soon.

**Mr Grzymek:** From the Department's perspective, as the Committee probably knows fairly well from speaking to my colleagues, the Department is not in a good place at the moment financially. We are looking at that business case. We have not yet found the money to have a full roll-out. However, we have put some money in to fund a worker who is working in mid-Ulster and Derry. That is already generating good work.

The reality, as Jean quite correctly said, is that the majority of women offenders are probably already getting support from Inspire in the greater Belfast area, where almost half of women on probation are. The rest tend to be in small pockets. We will not want to build day centres for those women. What we are looking to do, though, is to work creatively with some key players, such as that women's support service in Derry, where using their resources in programmes and support makes a big difference.

Interestingly, women who are former offenders who go into those centres are not that different from the women who go there otherwise. They probably would have gone into those centres but, typically, those women offenders have been marginalised and do not feel a part of the community or the system in their locality. Creating those links goes beyond probation and supervision. You are giving people new hope. We spoke to one woman who went through that process in Derry. She said that, before



she completed a 10-week course, she had locked herself in the house and would not come out. However, she was speaking to us — strangers from Belfast. She had the confidence to do that and she said that the course had transformed her life. That was a woman who clearly had absolutely no confidence. She had never seen that centre as having anything to do with her before she went through that course. She said that she was involved with a craft project in the local library and that the course had changed her life. That is what we are trying to do. The roll-out has started, and we will have it completed over the course of this strategy.

**Mr A Maginness:** What is the level of success in preventing reoffending?

**Ms J O'Neill:** The initial evaluation of the Inspire model was undertaken by the London South Bank University, which found a significant number of reports of a decrease in offending, which was good. Certainly, when we looked at our assessment tool for predicting reoffending, there was a significant decrease. The Department of Justice is looking at reconviction rates, but it is still early yet. It has been only four years. That work is ongoing, and we hope to be able to report back on that. Having worked with women on an individual basis, I can certainly say that we have been able to break that cycle with some who would have ended up in going back into custody. Indeed, some of those women have not only broken that cycle, but are now actually helping other women. They have done things like producing a video. They actually go into prisons and talk to other women. They help other women to actually make that link to engaging with the programmes that are in the community.

**Mr Grzymek:** It is that transformative approach that we are trying to build and maintain.

**Ms Cooke:** One of the important things around that is prevention. In the Police Service, when we see women starting to come into custody, we link with partners in services that those women may need, such as for mental health, low self-esteem, addictions, abusive backgrounds, domestic violence, and so on. The very powerful bit is actually the work that we can do at the front end to try to prevent those women with vulnerabilities whom we know are getting involved in those offending cycles.

**Mr McCartney:** Thank you very much for your presentation. I want to expand on the earlier discussion on the Inspire model. The vision of the previous strategy was to find and deliver effective pathways out of crime. If the Inspire programme — the Department, I assume, has assessed it — is delivering on that objective, we need to ensure that, in a year or two, it is rolled out. That certainly needs to happen before three years have passed.

**Mr Grzymek:** Absolutely.

**Mr McCartney:** I understand that, like all Departments, there is a degree of financial and funding pressure. However, if you come to the conclusion that it is working, you have to look and see how you relieve pressures in other places. In other words — and it goes right across the board to any particular piece of work — if women offenders are not going to court, there is less cost to the courts, etc. We discussed that issue earlier. The Department should ensure that the Inspire programme is rolled out. Have you any view on that?

**Mr Grzymek:** Absolutely. I am certainly a strong advocate for Inspire in the Department. It is our intention to roll that out. I have to fight for money for my corner of the Department, just like everybody else does. I would say, of course, that Inspire tends to be at the back end: actually helping women who have already offended to reposition themselves so that they do not go on to further offences. At the front end, the Department is also working with the Department of Health and others to see what we can do to direct and divert people before they become involved. There are two important areas there. One is the Delivering Social Change agenda. The Department is very active and supportive of that scheme, which is, obviously, driven by OFMDFM. That is about looking at early intervention. We are very supportive of early intervention as a mechanism because we recognise that many women whom we see in prison and under supervision are actually vulnerable offenders. They are vulnerable people. Their vulnerability did not start when they got into the justice system; it started way before that. If government can put more resources into early intervention, not only will that help those people generally in their lives, but it will have a beneficial effect in fewer women and, indeed, offenders in general, coming into the justice system.

Inspire is an important part of the picture. However, we have to see it as a tapestry. Often, it is about what we can do at the front end, working with other Departments. That certainly emerged from the Owers review. Tomorrow, Yvonne and I are off to the first meeting of the joint group of the

Department of Health and the Department of Justice to develop a common strategy on offending. That is a step in the right direction because it is about how we join different agencies and bodies together. That is where we will get the real gains in reducing offending, rather than reducing reoffending. Inspire is very much about taking offenders and helping them not to reoffend. However, we have got to work at both ends.

**Mr McCartney:** Jean mentioned that, if the Inspire project is rolled out in mid-Ulster and Omagh, it might be somewhat different.

**Mr Grzymek:** It will.

**Mr McCartney:** That gives you opportunities.

**Ms J O'Neill:** It does indeed. In mid-Ulster, for example, we work with First Steps in Dungannon, Positive Steps in Cookstown and the Learning Lodge in Magherafelt, so we are working with projects that are already well established. When I say that it will be a different model, I do not mean that we actually need an Inspire building, because there might be only three or four women. The biggest challenge is transport and travel, because you might have one woman coming from Armagh and somebody else coming from Cookstown. That is a challenge.

I am aware that there is an appetite and a willingness for the groups to work together. The model is an integrated one, so a woman would be far better going to some of the projects in Cookstown than coming to a Probation Service office in Armagh. People ask me about the Inspire model and why we work with women who offend. We do it to challenge and to change behaviour. There are no soft options here. When you are on probation, there are standards to be met. Women have to be seen once a week. Sometimes, they say that it is actually easier to go into custody because nobody asks you questions. Any time that any of us tries to change, it takes time and a lot of patience and support.

**Mr McCartney:** The point that I was trying to make — maybe I did not make it very well — is that your contact with other groups means that you have impact on women who are not in the system.

**Ms J O'Neill:** Yes; absolutely.

**Mr McCartney:** They see the pitfalls, and that creates a barrier. The women's centre in Derry is a good example. It deals with people who could become vulnerable in other circumstances, but the centre gives them a pathway even before they are in the system. When the Inspire model knits in with that, it will have a double effect.

**Ms J O'Neill:** I would add that, because women are mothers and have families, we often see those who have done some work in the projects at the centres go home and start to do literacy programmes in particular, because those are very much linked to employment. That gives them self-esteem, gets them out of the house and helps them contribute to the community. That often has a huge knock-on effect because, when they are stable, they suddenly get access to their children. It also an impact with social services, schools, and all the rest of it. It has a wider effect than on just the woman herself.

**Mr Grzymek:** It is not just about working with offenders. It is sometimes about working with the women who run the women's centres. I spoke to one of the women from the Derry women's centre today, and she said that, in the past, they would really have been quite a bit nervous about offenders, because they did not really know about them. As part of Inspire, we give people some training, and once that has happened, they are actually much more confident about how they deal with those women who, historically, would not have come into the centres. That has actually transformed their thinking, because, of course, they recognise that women offenders are not any different from the other vulnerable women who come into the centres. It is not just about working with the women. Sometimes, it is about raising people's understanding about the background of offenders, and that opens up new pathways and opportunities.

**Ms J O'Neill:** We have an Open College Network programme that we deliver to all the women's centres and groups so that they have an understanding of what the issues are. That has proved very successful.

**Mr McCartney:** It provides a place to go for people who feel vulnerable.

**Ms J O'Neill:** Yes, and you need to support the women who provide that service as well.

**The Chairperson:** The only point that I would question is on page 21 of your draft strategy, dealing with alternatives to prosecution. It states:

*"considering amending legislation to reinforce the need for courts to consider whether a community sentence, rather than a short custodial sentence, might offer more effective rehabilitative opportunities to the offender (provision included in Fines & Enforcement Bill)".*

I do not see the need for that, and I have made that point to David Ford. That Bill has not got through the Executive. The Lord Chief Justice wants his judges to make sure that they are doing their job right, and he can tell him that. I do not see the need for legislation on that, because the Lord Chief Justice can issue a direction, a practice notice, or whatever, to judges. I would have thought that they all look at custody as the last resort. That seems common sense to me. I do not understand why we need to legislate to tell the judiciary what is common sense. It is up to the Minister whether he includes that bullet point. It is an issue that I have raised with him.

**Mr Grzymek:** We will take on board and consider your suggestion. I would say, of course, coming from the Department, that there is quite a lot of evidence that very short sentences do not work. The person is not in long enough to get any of the benefits from programmes but they are there long enough to become familiarised with prison. I quite like the idea of prison being a deterrent, but deterrents do not work once you have been there. There may well be a cadre of people that we can just manage to keep out of prison and give the sort of support that Inspire offers, and turn them round. I would much rather try to keep people out of the justice system if we can. If we can keep them out of prison and give them an alternative that helps them not to reoffend, it saves the public purse, is beneficial for the individual and brings a cessation to their offending that much sooner. We will clearly take on board that point and look carefully at the drafting when we finalise the strategy.

**The Chairperson:** It is a discussion that we have had before with representatives of the Department when they have come to the Committee, and I have made the point before. We looked at the number of people who were in prison for less than three months, including people who had assaulted police officers. I questioned why on earth some they were getting only three months for some of those offences. If short sentences are a problem, give them longer ones so that they get rehabilitated properly in prison. However, I have had that debate. I make the point because it is in your draft strategy and it will lead to more discussion that I do not think is necessarily helpful.

**Mr Grzymek:** I will look carefully at that and no doubt talk to the Minister about it. We are happy to accept any other points or comments from members outside this meeting if they feel that there is something that we can do to make the strategy better.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you very much for your time.