

Letter to Mayor about progress on Safer Homes for Women Leaving Prison

Update on the London Assembly Motion of 3 March 2022

Key information

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Letter to Mayor about progress on Safer Homes for Women Leaving Prison

Dear Sadiq,

Re: March 2022 Motion 6 – Safer Homes for Women Leaving Prison

Thank you for your letter of 24 June 2022 responding to this motion, which I proposed at the London Assembly's Plenary on 3 March 2022.

I very much welcome your overall agreement with the motion and acknowledgement that the circumstances, needs and risks for vulnerable women are fundamentally different to those of men leaving prison. Your response has been circulated by the Homes for Women Leaving Prison initiative to many of the relevant stakeholders in this field, all of whom have welcomed it and are pleased to see both you and the London Assembly taking a leadership role.

The importance of this issue has been backed up two public reports published this year. In the introduction to the Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP & YOI Bronzefield by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (24 January and 31 January-4 February 2022), Charlie Taylor, HM Inspector of Prisons, said:

“Far too many women left the prison without safe and stable accommodation and this meant that some were reluctant to leave, preferring prison to the uncertainties of freedom. One had even slept in the gatehouse for two nights because she had nowhere else to go. Finding adequate housing and support for the many women with complex needs leaving Bronzefield must be a priority for the mayor of London, probation services and local authorities. Without stable, safe accommodation many women are liable to have mental health relapses, return to substance misuse and become involved in crime on release, creating more victims and, at great cost to the taxpayer, repeating the cycle and undoing the good work of the prison.” [1]

In July 2022, the House of Commons Justice Committee published Women in Prison – the First Report of Session 2022-23 assessing the performance of the Ministry of Justice into the priorities of the 2018 Female Offender Strategy. In section two, Women in the criminal justice system, it states:

“There has been a longstanding recognition, dating back to the 2007 Corston Report, that women who enter the criminal justice system, and those who go on to enter custody, are more likely to be complex and vulnerable individuals. We have heard how women often present with challenges such as substance misuse and mental health issues as well as complex histories of trauma and abuse, including domestic abuse. The 2018 Female Offender Strategy represented a welcome step forward in the Government’s recognition that a specific approach was needed to achieve outcomes for women. We are, however, concerned about the lack of progress the Government has made against the aims and objectives set out in the Strategy and note that the Female Offender Programme has lacked the investment needed to make the aims of the Strategy achievable in reality.”[2]

As you know, almost 60 per cent of female offenders have experienced domestic abuse,[3] which has an enormous effect on their housing options when leaving the prison. Women’s homelessness is both under-reported and under-targeted, although more work is being done on this. For example, Solace Women’s Aid carried out its first London Women’s Rough Sleeping Census during the week 3-7 October,[4] which should provide much-needed data on the extent of women’s homelessness. Additionally, London Councils has been highlighting the issue of women’s homelessness, including announcing that Against Violence & Abuse has launched a new women's homelessness programme, designed to improve London boroughs' housing and homelessness offers for women survivors of gender-based violence.[5]

The connection between domestic abuse, women’s homelessness and women in prison is an area that needs greater recognition and focus on. I acknowledge what you say in your letter

“that it is the local authorities that have responsibilities under the homelessness legislation to provide assistance when referrals are made to them under the Duty to Refer; as Mayor, I do not have the remit to act to address this issue directly.”

However, as Mayor, you could take leadership on agreeing and implementing a Women’s Prison Release Protocol.

Could you:

1. bring the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance into your work on the Protocol, and
2. write to the London Councils, Local Authority Leaders and Chairs/Cabinet leads of Housing Committees to agree a plan of delivery with them?

It is also essential that the G15 Housing Associations take part in these discussions over the Women’s Prison Release Protocol. Could you tell me what communication you have had with them on this?

As I’m sure you can appreciate, if a successful model can be created in London to support women in these uniquely problematic situations, it could be replicated in other cities and towns across the UK with long-term, far-reaching consequences.

Finally, could I ask you to provide a further update to me and to the campaigners in January 2023 on the plan for the delivery of all elements of the Safer Homes Motion.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Sian Berry

Green Party Member of the London Assembly

cc Sophie Linden, Deputy Mayor for Policing & Crime

Sem Moema AM, Chair of Housing Committee

Susan Hall AM, Chair of Police & Crime Committee

[1] Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP & YOI Bronzefield by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons 24 January and 31 January – 4 February 2022, published 11 May 2022, <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmprisons/inspections/hmp-yoi-bronzefield-3/>, accessed 29 Sep 2022

[2] House of Commons Justice Committee, Women in Prison – the First Report of Session 2022-23, published 19 July 2022, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/23269/documents/169738/default/> accessed 6 Oct 2022

[3] Female Offender Strategy, Ministry of Justice, published June 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719819/female-offender-strategy.pdf, accessed 6 Oct 2022

[4] London Women's Rough Sleeping Census, <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/our-partnerships/london-womens-rough-sleeping-census>, accessed 6 Oct 2022

[5] AVA Women's Homelessness Programme, https://avaproject.org.uk/womens_homelessness/?utm_campaign=13465662_Key%20Issues%2021%20Sep%202022&u, accessed 6 Oct 2022