

Women’s Prison Release Practice Briefing: Improving accommodation outcomes for women in contact with the criminal justice system.

This practice briefing was prepared by the [Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison initiative](#) through consultation with the London Blueprint Delivery Group for Women in Contact with the Criminal Justice System and with support from the London Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime. It reflects arrangements in place in London in December 2022. It is being published as a resource to support joint work by national and local agencies throughout England and Wales to ensure women prison leavers have safe and suitable¹ accommodation.



Contents

Introduction	2
Key partners	2
Local authority duties and the ‘duty to refer’ homeless people	3
Recent developments in criminal justice and housing	4
Why a distinct approach is needed for women	5
Checklist: what to look out for when considering women’s housing and support needs	8
Process in London for addressing women’s housing needs from point of arrest to post-imprisonment	10
Recommendations for strengthening joint practice	14
Appendix: examples of what works well in London and elsewhere	17

¹ In this briefing, ‘safe and suitable’ accommodation means accommodation that addresses women’s gender specific needs and is suitable for the individual concerned and her dependants.

Introduction

About this briefing

This briefing is the result of consultations between the Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison Initiative, members of the London Blueprint Delivery Group and other local experts. The London Blueprint Delivery Group, which is coordinated by London's Mayoral Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), consists of frontline statutory and non-statutory agencies who signed up to [London's Blueprint for a Whole System Approach to Women in contact with the Criminal Justice System \(2019-2022\)](#) (the London Blueprint). The consultations were aimed at helping London agencies map existing provision, identify gaps and consider areas for improvement, in order to meet their objectives on women's accommodation.

The briefing is not official guidance from any of those consulted. It is a unique resource intended to help strengthen joint practice by agencies throughout England and Wales who seek to improve accommodation outcomes for women leaving prison.

The briefing should be read alongside the Ministry of Justice's [Female Offender Strategy](#), the [Farmer Review for women](#) and the cross-government [Concordat on Women in or at risk of contact with the Criminal Justice System](#). It also draws on the [Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison briefing](#), HM Government's [Prison Release Protocol Research Report](#), the [Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities](#) and the [Strategy for Ending Women's Homelessness in London](#) published by Connection at St Martin's and Solace Women's Aid. HM Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) staff can also refer to their internal Supporting Guidance for Homelessness Prevention Teams & Practitioners: Accommodation Services for Women.

We aim to give an overview of all parts of the system and factors to be aware of when commissioning or delivering accommodation-related services to women in contact with the criminal justice system. We explain why a distinct approach is needed for women; set out agencies' roles and responsibilities; provide examples of what works well; and recommend the adoption of over-arching aims and governance for assessing progress. We hope this will be useful for anyone involved in work to improve women's accommodation outcomes, including commissioners, prison governors and resettlement leads, local authority housing teams, housing providers, police officers, probation practitioners, third sector women's specialist services and government departments.

Acknowledgements

The briefing was written by Katy Swaine Williams with assistance from Dr Jenny Earle, Sarah Jane Vernon and Sarah Tubbs, funded by Barrow Cadbury Trust. We are grateful for the input provided by all London Blueprint Delivery Group members, particularly the London Boroughs of Lambeth, Hammersmith & Fulham and Tower Hamlets, and staff at HMP & YOI Bronzefield, HMP Send, HMP Downview, London probation services, St Mungo's, the Metropolitan Police Service, London Councils, NHS England, Together for Mental Wellbeing, Hibiscus Initiatives, Housing for Women, Advance, Pecan and Women in Prison. MOPAC has supported the project from its inception.

Key partners

Ensuring women leaving prison have safe and suitable accommodation depends on key agencies working effectively together within a complex framework and challenging set of circumstances. The statutory roles played by local authorities and HMPPS are key. It is essential for all agencies to work closely with third sector women's specialist services, while recognising that statutory responsibilities remain with statutory agencies. Leadership and guidance are needed from central government, as well as investment in accommodation and frontline services that reflects the full cost of meeting demand. Key partners include:

- Local authorities in the region and surrounding areas (housing and social care)
- Social housing providers
- Private landlords
- Women’s specialist services
- NHS England and Liaison and Diversion services
- Police
- HM Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) and senior leaders in women’s prisons from which women resettle to the local area
- HM Courts and Tribunals Service
- Police and Crime Commissioners
- Ministry of Justice (MoJ)
- Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC)
- Department for Education (inc. Chief Social Worker for Children and Families)
- Department for Work and Pensions.

Local authority duties and the ‘duty to refer’ homeless people

Duty to refer

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017² introduced a duty on specified public authorities to refer service users who they think may be homeless or threatened with homelessness to local authority homelessness/housing options teams. This ‘duty to refer’ applies to prisons and probation services, requiring them to notify local authorities of anyone at risk of homelessness on release from prison. This is usually carried out by the Community Probation Practitioner (CPP). It is recommended for the referral to be made in good time for the local authority to meet its housing duties.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to ‘take steps to prevent homelessness’ and ‘take steps to relieve homelessness’, regardless of whether an individual is ‘intentionally homeless’ or in ‘priority need’. They are responsible for responding to referrals within a reasonable timescale and have a duty to make an assessment to establish the person’s:

- Eligibility
- Homelessness
- Priority need
- Local connection.

This assessment should be undertaken before a person’s release from prison wherever possible. The local authority has a statutory duty to provide accommodation if the conditions are met, and to develop a housing plan with the applicant.

The local authority is responsible for conducting a thorough assessment and gathering supporting information to determine housing options for the applicant. This may include requesting information from the referring agency to assist in speeding up the assessment process, such as relevant risk information and medical information to inform housing suitability, and confirmation of identity and eligibility. However, provision of a risk assessment by the prison or probation service is not a legal requirement and may not be possible. This should not be a block to applications or to providing accommodation.

² See the legislation [here](#) and the government’s Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities [here](#).

Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities

The [Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities](#) Chapter 23 gives guidance on providing services to people with an offending history.³ Paragraph 23.3 of the guidance summarises the distinct needs faced by women in contact with the criminal justice system and explains the need for a multi-agency, holistic and gendered response.

The guidance requires housing authorities to collaborate with probation services and other relevant partners to prevent people leaving custody, or living in the community, from becoming homeless; and to develop effective referral and accommodation pathways involving all relevant agencies to provide appropriate jointly planned help and support to prevent homelessness.

The guidance explains the need for targeted advice and information to help individuals in contact with the criminal justice system, highlighting [Section 179\(2\)\(a\) of the Housing Act 1996](#) which requires local authorities to provide information and advice to meet the needs of people released from prison or youth detention. It recommends that housing advice be made available to people whilst in custody, and that housing authorities collaborate with prisons releasing offenders to their districts, and with probation providers, to provide accessible advice on housing options.

The guidance notes that housing authorities' duty to help secure accommodation for any applicant threatened with homelessness on leaving custody, applies irrespective of priority need (para 23.19). Where activity to prevent or relieve homelessness is unsuccessful and the authority needs to assess whether the person has a priority need for accommodation and is owed the main housing duty, the guidance emphasises that **a person who is vulnerable as a result of having served a custodial sentence, been committed for contempt of court or remanded in custody has a priority need for accommodation**. Further guidance is provided about assessments of vulnerability, intentional homelessness and local connection, and in relation to suitability and accessibility of accommodation.

Overcoming challenges for women

Ensuring women leaving prison have safe and suitable accommodation requires national and local agencies to focus on overcoming barriers such as:⁴

- Short prison sentences that result in women losing their accommodation;
- The need to rehouse women with their children where they are a primary carer;
- The need for many women to relocate due to domestic abuse;
- Challenges accessing housing assessments prior to release, in part due to the dispersed nature of the women's prison estate; and
- A chronic lack of suitable, affordable housing, including for women with complex needs.

Recent developments in criminal justice and housing

The consultations on which this briefing is based took place during a time of transition, with the introduction of the Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) system in women's prisons completed in 2021, the reunification of probation services, and transfer of resettlement services to new providers. A new Women's Commissioned Rehabilitative Service (CRS) was launched in London in December 2022, which continues and extends specialist provision for women involved in offending in the capital (see page 17 for further information about this service).

³ See also: DLUHC (2018) [Homelessness Code of Guidance for local authorities, Chapter 23](#) (updated July 2021), para. 23.3

⁴ [Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison Initiative \(2020\) Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison: October 2020](#)

The government has established a commitment to ending rough sleeping, and the MoJ's [Prisons Strategy White Paper](#) sets out the government's vision that no-one subject to probation supervision is released from prison homeless. Several initiatives have been introduced, during and since the Covid-19 pandemic, in pursuit of this aim. The government explains how it intends to improve women's housing outcomes in its response to the House of Commons Justice Committee's inquiry into Women in Prison.⁵

Accelerator prisons and strategic housing specialists

Following implementation of the 'accelerator' prison project⁶, including at women's prison HMP New Hall, the MoJ is now in the process of introducing 48 Strategic Housing Specialists in prisons, including one in every women's prison.⁷

HMPPS' Community Accommodation Service Tier 3 (CAS3)

HMPPS has introduced a new transitional accommodation service providing up to 12 weeks' accommodation and support for those leaving prison at risk of homelessness. Originally launched in five probation regions, the service is being rolled out across England and Wales, with delivery in London to commence early in 2023. The service will increase the availability of temporary accommodation and support for sentenced women leaving prison (not remanded or unsentenced women). The service design and specification are intended to take account of the needs of women, including those with complex needs, with accommodation for single gender usage.

Accommodation for Ex-Offenders Scheme (AFEO)

The MoJ is working with DLUHC to develop a pathway from prison to settled accommodation, to support homeless prison leavers into private rental tenancies. The scheme operates via central government grants to local authorities who successfully apply for funding. It is available for anyone who left custody within the last 12 months, so can be used by those released on licence and by those moving on from Approved Premises (now known as CAS1), Bail Accommodation and Support Services (now known as CAS2) and CAS3 accommodation.

Why a distinct approach is needed for women

Women in prison in numbers

Women represent only 4% of the prison population. Women were sent to prison on 4,932 occasions in the year to March 2022, either on remand or to serve a sentence.⁸ Most women are imprisoned on short sentences, and for non-violent offences. Data analysis about women's imprisonment in local areas is available via the Prison Reform Trust's [local data resource](#).

According to government figures, less than half (47%) of women left prison with settled accommodation in the year to March 2022. One in 10 were homeless or rough sleeping, and accommodation status was unknown for one in six women (16%).⁹ Data published by HM Inspector

⁵ [House of Commons Justice Committee \(2022\) Women in Prison: Government's Response to the Committee's First Report, Fourth Special Report of Session 2022-23, HC 802](#), response to Recommendations 33-36.

⁶ The project was introduced to design, implement and test new initiatives and roles across sixteen prisons, working across some key reducing reoffending pathways (including Education; Employment; Accommodation; and Substance Misuse).

⁷ [House of Commons Justice Committee \(2022\) Women in Prison: Government's Response to the Committee's First Report, Fourth Special Report of Session 2022-23, HC 802](#), response to Recommendation 33.

⁸ [Prison Reform Trust \(2022\) Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?](#)

⁹ [Ministry of Justice \(2022\) Table 4. Accommodation at Release. Community Performance Annual: update to March 2022](#), cited in [Prison Reform Trust \(2022\) Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?](#)

of Prisons and Independent Monitoring Boards give a different perspective.¹⁰ For example, according to the most recent inspection of HMP & YOI Bronzefield, about 65% of sentenced women did not have sustainable accommodation on release (lasting longer than 12 weeks).¹¹

Reducing women’s imprisonment and improving outcomes

The government’s Female Offender Strategy aims to achieve:¹²

- **Fewer women coming into the criminal justice system** – with a focus on early intervention and diversion where appropriate.
- **Fewer women in custody** – by shifting the emphasis to effective community orders that can reduce reoffending.¹³
- **Better conditions for those in custody** – improving family ties, reducing self-harm, improved resettlement support including stable accommodation.

Implementation of the strategy depends on local whole system approaches to women’s offending, including early intervention, diversion at the point of arrest and use of community sentencing. This approach is founded on research and practice, including the landmark Corston Review in 2007 which concluded that a distinct criminal justice approach is needed for women because of the different drivers of their offending, and their distinct needs, circumstances and characteristics.¹⁴ The Secretary of State for Justice is required under section 10 of the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014 to state that arrangements for women’s supervision or rehabilitation comply with the public sector equality duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) and to identify arrangements intended to meet the particular needs of ‘female offenders’.

The whole system approach is intended to divert women away from the criminal justice system where appropriate and reduce reoffending, through joined up, holistic and gender responsive support which recognises women’s distinct needs, including experience of abuse.¹⁵ Agencies in many local areas have agreed a joint vision and framework for their work towards a whole system approach, such as the [London Blueprint](#).

Spotlight on supported housing

Some women leaving prison require supported accommodation but do not meet the requirement set by some local authorities for a local connection. This means they may be offered unsuitable accommodation and become homeless again. In London there is a shortage of suitable supported accommodation for women with complex needs and at risk of rough sleeping, as well as barriers to accessing existing provision. It would be helpful for local schemes like the Pan-London Reciprocal Agreement to include supported accommodation as a transfer option.

Ensuring women have safe and suitable accommodation is fundamental to the whole system approach. Achieving this requires close partnership working between women’s specialist wrap around services, specialist housing providers and statutory services, using a gender-specific

¹⁰ [Prisons: releasing women into safe and secure housing, Hansard Vol. 820, Col. 640, debated on Monday 21 March 2022](#)

¹¹ [HMIP \(2022\) Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP & YOI Bronzefield, 24 and 31 January - 4 February 2022, para. 1.43](#)

¹² Ministry of Justice (2018) [Female Offender Strategy](#)

¹³ A women-specific Mental Health Treatment Requirement service operates in South London and will be launched in North London in January 2023, creating a pan-London service.

¹⁴ [Home Office \(2007\) The Corston Report: A Report by Baroness Jean Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System](#)

¹⁵ [Ministry of Justice \(2018\) A Whole System Approach for Female Offenders: Emerging evidence](#)

approach.¹⁶ This must include close engagement with local authority social care and housing teams, and health services.

Spotlight on migrant women

Women leaving prison with no recourse to public funds face additional barriers to finding safe and suitable accommodation. Local authority housing teams have legal duties towards these women, and it is advisable for them to adopt a proactive approach to prevent unnecessary delays and costs of involving solicitors. Avoidable expenses include the cost of keeping children in local authority care while their mother waits for suitable accommodation. Further challenges arise where women leaving prison are at risk of immigration detention and must obtain suitable, Home Office approved accommodation to be granted immigration bail. If this is not provided, women can spend significantly longer in prison as a result.

Strategy for ending women’s homelessness in London

The [Strategy for Ending Women’s Homelessness in London](#), launched in March 2022 by Connection at St Martin’s and Solace Women’s Aid, highlights how women experience homelessness differently from men, and are often overlooked by the services and systems set up to help.¹⁷ It underlines the importance of ensuring women’s needs and experiences are considered from the start when planning, commissioning and delivering services, focusing primarily on ‘women who have been repeatedly failed by systems, pushing them into highly precarious and dangerous housing situations and resulting in the development of high levels of need’.¹⁸ Women in contact with the criminal justice system often fall within this group. Actions called for in the strategy include:

- A comprehensive gender-informed approach
- Better partnership working with related sectors
- Disaggregated data collection and gender-informed understanding of homelessness
- An intersectional understanding of women’s homelessness.

To prevent homelessness, the strategy calls for:

- Accurate, safe and accessible advice and support
- Women’s safe drop-in spaces
- Immediate access to single-sex accommodation
- Support for women with no recourse to public funds and complex immigration status
- Specialist support for women who have had children removed from their care.

The strategy emphasises the need for safe, suitable and specialist single-sex accommodation and wrap-around, multi-agency, trauma-informed support. Second-stage and move on accommodation and support, particularly mental health services, are necessary adjuncts.

Spotlight on rough sleeping and temporary accommodation

Temporary accommodation provision varies greatly from borough to borough, often comprising unsupported B&B placements and accommodation out of borough. This is not likely to be safe or suitable for women leaving prison, who will usually require single-sex accommodation with access to specialist support.

¹⁶ See also: DLUHC (2018) [Homelessness Code of Guidance for local authorities, Chapter 23](#) (updated July 2021), para. 23.3

¹⁷ [Solace Women’s Aid & Connection at St Martin’s \(2022\) A Strategy for Ending Women’s Homelessness in London](#)

¹⁸ [Solace Women’s Aid & Connection at St Martin’s \(2022\) A Strategy for Ending Women’s Homelessness in London](#)

Rough sleeping is harmful and dangerous for anyone, and carries additional risks for women.¹⁹ Some women-specific rough sleeping services are available in Brent and North London. Solace and Standing Together's [VAWG Housing First](#) projects in Westminster and Islington are open to women sleeping rough who have experienced gender-based violence.

Checklist: what to look out for when considering women's housing and support needs

- **Women are much more likely than men to be primary carers of children.** An estimated 17,000 children are affected by their mother's imprisonment each year, and only 9% are cared for by their father while their mother is in prison.²⁰ The fear of losing their children to the care system is a significant barrier to seeking help, including in relation to domestic abuse. Lack of suitable housing should never be – but sometimes is - a barrier to women having care of, or contact with, their children.
- **Women in contact with the criminal justice system are highly likely to be victims/survivors of violence against women and girls (VAWG).** Nearly 60% of women in prison are victims/survivors of domestic abuse and for many this is a driver of their offending.²¹ Women are at significantly higher risk of VAWG and sexual exploitation compared to men, including prostitution, and this can be both a cause and a consequence of homelessness. This includes situations where women are driven to use accommodation where they are at risk of abuse and sexual exploitation, to avoid the dangers of street homelessness.²² A recent report by Solace Women's Aid warns that housing outcomes for survivors of VAWG are not improving and are likely to get worse.²³
- **Women-only services and accommodation** are an essential part of addressing women's housing and support needs.
- **Problematic substance use and mental health needs:** Women in prison are more likely than men to be experiencing problematic substance use and mental health needs, usually linked to histories of trauma and abuse.²⁴ Access to trauma informed services is vital.

¹⁹ [University of York, Centre for Housing Policy \(2018\) Women and rough sleeping: a critical review of current research and methodology](#)

²⁰ [Prison Reform Trust \(2022\) Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment? Pp. 2 and 5. The Prison Reform Trust's Child Impact Assessment project aims to ensure children are listened to at every stage of their mother's journey through the criminal justice process. For more information go to the Prison Reform Trust website and click on Projects/Women in prison.](#)

²¹ [Ministry of Justice \(2018\) Female Offender Strategy.](#) See also: Gelsthorpe, L. et al. (2007) Provision for Women offenders in the community; [Centre for Women's Justice \(2022\) Double Standard: ending the unjust criminalisation of victims of violence against women and girls](#); [Prison Reform Trust \(2017\) 'There's a reason we're in trouble': Domestic abuse as a driver to women's offending.](#) Of 173 women screened at HMP Drake Hall by the Disabilities Trust, 64% reported a history indicative of brain injury and for most this was caused by domestic violence (The Disabilities Trust (2019) [Making the link: Female offending and brain injury](#)).

²² [Solace Women's Aid & Connection at St Martin's \(2022\) A Strategy for Ending Women's Homelessness in London](#)

²³ Solace Women's Aid (2022) [Priority Need for Housing for Survivors of Domestic Abuse: One Year On](#)

²⁴ [Prison Reform Trust \(2022\) Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?](#)

- **Distance from home:** Women are imprisoned further from home than men – on average 63 miles away, but often considerably further - creating additional challenges for resettlement.²⁵
- **Short prison sentences:** Women are much more likely than men to be imprisoned on short sentences, disrupting accommodation while making it difficult to access effective, timely support. Measures to prevent loss of tenancy or build-up of rent arrears are vital.
- **Remanded women:** A large proportion of women are held on remand. Probation has no statutory responsibility for remanded prisoners, although CRS provision has now been extended to remands. Remanded women are subject to unpredictable release dates which make it difficult to plan accommodation post-release.
- **Women are more likely to be ‘hidden homelessness’:** Homeless women can be missed by services, as they are more likely than men to stay in unsettled temporary accommodation, where they may be at risk of VAWG including sexual exploitation. According to [research](#) by London Councils, almost two-thirds of homeless people living in temporary accommodation in London are women.
- **Women are at greater risk of poverty and debt:** Fewer than 1 in 20 women (4%) are in employment six weeks after release from prison, compared with 1 in 10 men (10%). Half of women who have been involved in the criminal justice system, including conviction, caution or prison sentence, are claiming out-of-work benefits two years later, compared to just over a third (35%) of men.²⁶
- **Black, Asian, minoritised and migrant women experience additional barriers** to resettlement as a result of intersectional discrimination and insecure immigration status, including those with no recourse to public funds and trafficking victims. The Tackling Double Disadvantage Action Plan, published by a partnership led by Hibiscus, sets out recommended actions to address this.²⁷
- **Young women and care leavers, LGBTQ+ women and disabled women** all have distinct needs requiring specific consideration.²⁸
- **Women in couples or co-dependent relationships** need distinct consideration. St Mungo’s Homeless Couples and Relationships Toolkit offers guidance.²⁹

²⁵ [Prison Reform Trust \(2022\) Why focus on reducing women’s imprisonment?](#)

²⁶ [Prison Reform Trust \(2022\) Why focus on reducing women’s imprisonment?](#)

²⁷ [Hibiscus Initiatives \(2022\) Tackling Double Disadvantage: Ending inequality for Black, Asian, minoritised and migrant women – 10-point action plan for change](#)

²⁸ See for example: [Agenda/AYJ \(2022\) “We’ve not given up” – Young women surviving the criminal justice system; Prison Reform Trust \(2019\) Out of the shadows: women with learning disabilities in contact with or on the edges of the criminal justice system](#)

²⁹ [St Mungo’s \(2020\) Homeless couples and relationships toolkit](#)

Process in London for addressing women’s housing needs from point of arrest to post-release from prison

We summarise below the process followed by statutory and non-statutory agencies in London (as at December 2022) from point of arrest to imprisonment and after release, to help ensure that women in contact with the criminal justice system have safe and suitable accommodation. This overview primarily covers the process followed in HMP & YOI Bronzefield and is not comprehensive. It is intended as a starting point in capturing and sharing examples of what works well, and identifying and addressing gaps in provision.

1. Point of arrest

Police are not subject to the duty to refer under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, but may make a housing referral if they come into contact with a woman who needs housing and has given her consent. They may also refer women to **Liaison and Diversion services** (which will try to see as many women brought into police custody as possible) or **women’s specialist services** for an assessment.

The aim here should be to identify women who need help to obtain or maintain safe and suitable accommodation or (if entering custody) to terminate a tenancy if necessary to avoid accruing rent or mortgage arrears. Agencies should ensure any referrals are made in good time and have traction, so that women receive the help they need. Support services’ assessments should take account of all relevant needs, including any impact on children. They should provide support and advocacy to address identified needs, including liaison with local authority housing departments and, where appropriate, health and social care agencies, and welfare benefits agencies.

On receipt of a referral, **local authority housing teams** should provide advice and assistance to anyone who needs housing advice in their area, including those who are homeless or whose tenancy may be at risk. They should aim to ensure the woman’s housing needs are met in a timely fashion based on available options.

2. In court, pre-sentence

If a pre-sentence report (PSR) is ordered by the court, a **Probation Service** report writer will interview the defendant and should highlight relevant accommodation issues. The writer should also follow the ‘duty to refer’ process if required. **Not all women are sentenced with a PSR**. If a court duty probation officer is in court and is informed that there is a housing issue, they should notify the allocated probation officer about the housing issue after sentencing. Where possible, this work should be done in conjunction with **women’s specialist services** and **statutory agencies**. However, there are currently no specialist providers for women’s services based in London’s courts. Existing specialist women’s provision in London is based on referral post sentence (including, but not only, under London’s women-specific Mental Health Treatment Requirement), and in some boroughs through the Police Diversion Pilot.

The **Probation Service** are responsible for completing a housing referral where necessary. Where there is a risk of custody, this includes ensuring the woman has access to advice and help to prevent the accrual of rent or mortgage arrears for existing accommodation, helping her to maintain or release any accommodation as appropriate, following MoJ ‘duty to refer’ guidance.

Liaison and Diversion (L&D) services have one or more workers in each London court. Where the client has no fixed abode or is at risk of eviction, the L&D worker will try to do a housing referral and

then either follow up themselves or hand over to another organisation if the woman requires longer term support (see box below).

Local authority housing teams should provide advice and assistance to anyone who needs housing advice in their area at whatever stage of proceedings, so referrals at this stage should be encouraged.

Liaison and Diversion services have one or more workers in each court with different specialisms, some of which include women and homelessness. The role of L&D services in the courts is to provide information to the judiciary, prosecutors and defence lawyers to help inform criminal justice decision making on bail/remand and sentencing. They will also provide practical support in relation to matters such as housing needs, either themselves or through a referral to another organisation. Where a housing need is identified (e.g. the client is NFA or at risk of eviction), the L&D worker will try to do a housing referral and will then either follow up themselves or hand over to another organisation if the woman requires longer term support. They may hand over to a community L&D worker (who can offer support for up to 3 months) or women's specialist services (who can offer longer term support), depending on the individual circumstances.

3. Induction and duration of stay in prison

See pages 3-4 above for a summary of **local authorities'** statutory duties in responding to a referral of a woman in prison who is threatened with homelessness on release.

All sentenced women in prison are supported by a **Prison Offender Manager (POM)**. When they have less than 10 months to serve, they are allocated to a **Community Probation Practitioner (CPP)** with continued support from the POM until release. These practitioners should work together to address any housing needs. This may include fulfilling the 'duty to refer'. Prison officers and POMs/CPPs should be aiming to:

- Offer support / facilitate provision of support by other agencies to meet women's housing needs and liaise with other agencies as necessary (including children's social care).
- Ensure services are accessible to women while in prison and ahead of their release.
- Ensure preparation for release begins well in advance of the release date.
- Facilitate the process of making a homelessness application whilst in custody. Enable local authorities to make assessments before release so that plans can be put in place, rather than deferring action until the woman presents at the local housing authority post-release.
- Ensure all relevant information is passed on in the event of a woman's prison transfer.

For sentenced women, at the 12-week pre-release point, the case will be handed over to a **Probation Service pre-release resettlement worker** who will complete a pre-release resettlement plan in which accommodation needs should be identified. The CPP is responsible for CRS referrals and the 'duty to refer' process for any woman facing homelessness on release, with support from the pre-release resettlement worker. The resettlement worker must offer tenancy sustainment advice and advocacy to all women 12 weeks prior to discharge from custody.

For both sentenced and remanded/unsentenced women, the prison is tasked with completing an initial assessment of resettlement needs (Basic Custody Screening Tool 1 (BCST1)) within 48 hours of

women's reception, and the pre-release team should complete a BCST2 within the following five working days.

As part of the London Women's CRS service, the provider will have a specialist housing worker based within the prison to assist with accommodation needs for referred London sentenced women due to be released within the next 14 days and those who are unsentenced. Community based CRS providers will also provide in-reach support around accommodation needs for referred women with accommodation needs. CAS3 provision, however, will not be available to remanded and unsentenced women.

4. Final preparation for release

For **sentenced women**, within the last 12 weeks of custody, the CPP will work to identify any housing needs, complete the 'duty to refer' process if appropriate, and notify the relevant local authority of anyone at risk of homelessness and her circumstances. Across London there are different 'duty to refer' processes, on which probation staff (including court staff and those with caseloads) have been briefed by London Probation Homelessness Prevention Team in conjunction with councils and partners (Single Homelessness Project and St Mungo's).

The relevant local authority is usually determined by local connection, although women may choose to approach alternative local authorities where risks are highlighted in their home borough (such as domestic abuse). Depending on arrangements in the prison, a woman may be supported by a member of the prison resettlement team or a specialist agency providing in-reach support. This may include an application to the local authority via the main housing route, an application for supported housing, or help to try and secure private rented accommodation.

The link between housing and reducing reoffending

For all agencies involved in pre-release support and planning, understanding the link between lack of safe, suitable accommodation and women's reoffending should inform and motivate a collaborative effort to resolve any housing difficulty.

Please see above (pages 3-4) for a summary of local authorities' responsibilities in responding to 'duty to refer' referrals. Management of referrals varies according to different local authority housing teams. In Lambeth, referrals are overseen by the prison release navigator (see page 17).

Availability of accommodation remains a barrier in all London boroughs. Establishing **priority need status** and overcoming a finding of **intentional homelessness** remain significant barriers to finding accommodation. The [Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities](#) offers useful information for local authorities on what to take into account when making assessments for prison leavers.

The lead providers of **resettlement** services for women returning to London are **Women in Prison and Advance**. Dependent on demand on resources, the amount of notice of a woman's release and other factors, women may have virtual or in person meetings before release and face-to-face or phone-based support at the prison gate upon release. Through the Covid-19 pandemic, services have been delivered through a mix of face to face and virtual support.

Women in all **prisons** are referred to local authorities via the 'duty to refer' and to women's specialist services for additional accommodation support to what their CPP can provide, as well as resettlement support and mentoring. There is ongoing work to improve links with local authorities, including by **Housing for Women**, which has temporary accommodation in Lewisham.

Prison staff in **HMP & YOI Bronzefield** have monthly Public Protection meetings to discuss MAPPA 'nominals' that are due for release in the coming quarter. There is also a weekly '**Early Days in Community**' (**EDIC**) meeting where they discuss the women being released the following week. They request attendance at these meetings of resettlement workers, housing specialist services and internal prison partners (e.g. problematic substance use colleagues) to ensure that each woman has a resettlement plan and that prison staff know what it is.

The above information is only a summary and does not cover all the activity which may be undertaken under the Women's CRS and by the pre-release team.

5. Day of release

To facilitate the best possible outcomes on the day of release, all those involved in the process should aim to:

- Avoid releases on a Friday or after 5pm wherever possible, including through timing of court hearings and prison transport to and from court. Releases at these times present significant difficulties for resettlement, particularly for women facing the risk of homelessness, domestic abuse or sexual exploitation. Avoiding such releases is not always possible to address at local level, particularly in light of the court backlog.
- Address women's emergency accommodation needs where Friday and late afternoon releases cannot be avoided, to reduce the risk that women will have to wait overnight or over the weekend for local authority housing offices to reopen.
- Ensure women have support on the day of their release, to help ensure they have safe and suitable accommodation and transport to get there.
- Acknowledge the various obligations on a woman on their day of release – such as reporting to probation - so that accommodation arrangements can fit in alongside these.
- Liaise with other agencies as necessary (such as DWP for a Universal Credit or Housing Benefit claim and children's social care).

Resettlement services delivered by **Women in Prison and Advance** will operate as described above. **Local authority housing teams** must fulfil their duties as set out on pages 3-4 above. They should liaise with probation, housing advocates and any support workers to help inform housing options and together ensure support in the meantime.

6. In the community, post-release

At this stage, frontline agencies working with women post-release should aim to:

- Identify any need for assistance to obtain or maintain accommodation (such as mental health, domestic abuse or substance misuse services).
- Ensure women have support to meet those needs and liaise with other agencies as necessary (including children's social care).

The **Probation Service** are responsible for the supervision of **sentenced women** on licence and post sentence supervision (PSS) in line with the Offender Rehabilitation Act. London Probation provides accommodation advice and guidance services through the Women's CRS, which includes a distinct accommodation pathway. Probation services work closely with local authority housing options services, including operational of Duty to Refer practice as set out in the Homelessness Prevention Act 2017.

Recommendations for strengthening joint practice

Mapping local provision, sharing what works and identifying areas for development

In a complex area of policy and practice, an obvious starting point for agencies is to map local provision, including relevant organisations and their roles, and local services that are or could be involved in supporting women to find and maintain safe and suitable accommodation.

This could include reviewing what opportunities exist at each stage of women's journey through the criminal justice system to identify and address any housing needs, from the point of arrest to post-release from prison, and the roles and responsibilities of relevant agencies at each stage. This may help to identify what works well, as well as barriers and gaps in provision.

Ensuring effective strategic oversight

It is key to ensure that strategic leads in all relevant policy and practice areas are aware of the needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system and are taking account of these as part of a strategic approach. This may require awareness raising amongst agencies and departments that do not usually take part in Local Criminal Justice Boards or for whom this group of women does not have a high profile. This should include senior leads in homelessness prevention, health and social care services and teams working to tackle domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG, including Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) and serious violence reduction teams.

Establishing shared aims

Success inevitably depends in part on establishing and working towards shared aims. In London, this takes the form of a commitment in the London Blueprint, to ensure women in contact with the criminal justice system have safe and suitable accommodation. Having agreed that *'all women in London who are in contact with the criminal justice system or at risk of such contact are entitled to receive a holistic, trauma informed, woman-centred approach throughout the criminal justice process and in the delivery of early prevention and intervention services'*, the signatories to the Blueprint agreed:

We will work towards establishing a shared approach across London, working closely with local authority housing departments and London Councils, to address the housing needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system, including preventing homelessness and resettlement on release. This will include:

- a. Working together to intervene earlier and more effectively to prevent women being made homeless, in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and Code of Guidance;*
- b. Aiming to ensure that all women are resettled into safe and suitable accommodation, either long term or including a realistic plan for achieving long term accommodation; and*
- c. Aiming to ensure that all women have access to tailored wrap around support to meet their emotional, health and practical needs upon resettlement.*

Identify the outcomes you want to achieve

Through this project we identified ten outcomes that we recommend agencies consider working towards, to ensure women in contact with the criminal justice system have safe and suitable housing:

1. Gender-informed, joined-up commissioning and service provision

- (a) All agencies have a shared understanding of the need for gender-informed and trauma-responsive commissioning practice and service provision. Regular multi-disciplinary inter-agency training for frontline workers and senior managers helps to ensure this. This reflects an intersectional approach recognising the needs of Black, Asian, minoritised and migrant women.
- (b) Effective systems are established for the early identification of women who are potential victims/survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG, and victims/survivors of trafficking, and provision of support.
- (c) This work is closely aligned with work by other departments and agencies to address women's housing needs, including women affected by VAWG, pooling resources where appropriate.

2. Monitoring housing outcomes for all women

Key partners work together to identify baseline data and measure progress, ensuring the data relied on reflects women's diversity and accommodation outcomes as accurately as possible.

3. Timely and effective local authority response

Every local authority in the area:

- (a) offers a timely response to housing referrals on behalf of women in contact with the criminal justice system, preferably through a single point of contact;
- (b) provides a single point of contact with responsibility for advising on the more complex cases, and identifying and tackling barriers to women being safely accommodated on release from prison, including migrant women with no recourse to public funds and/or seeking immigration bail; and
- (c) with support from prisons and referring agencies, aims wherever possible to conduct pre-release housing assessments for imprisoned women seeking to resettle in their borough.

4. Earlier assessment and support

An effective process is implemented to identify every woman who lacks, or is at risk of losing, safe and suitable housing at:

- (a) the point of arrest and
- (b) upon any criminal court appearance

and to offer her a referral where required, for an assessment of housing needs and provision of housing support and advice, usually via a women's and/or housing specialist service.

5. Support throughout imprisonment and post-release

An effective process is implemented to identify every woman in prison, whether sentenced or remanded, who lacks, or is at risk of losing, safe and suitable housing, and to offer timely and holistic support with her identified needs, from induction to support pre-release and on the day of release, and for at least three months after release, usually from a women's and/or housing specialist service. Role allocation, lead responsibility and legal duties of all agencies providing support are clear at each stage.

6. Capacity and flexibility for unpredictable/short-term release dates:

An effective joint strategy is implemented to address the challenges of unpredictable release dates for remanded women and women serving very short sentences/fixed term recalls, and to avoid Friday and post-5pm releases wherever possible.

7. Strategy to overcome affordable housing shortages (council and private rented):

With leadership from central and local government and in collaboration with housing providers and women's specialist services, an effective strategy is implemented to ensure that safe and suitable accommodation is available for all women in contact with the criminal justice system in the local area. This must include provision of women-only housing and support services.

8. Overcoming other common barriers to housing:

With support from relevant experts - including local authority housing teams – agencies routinely work together to identify and share solutions to common barriers to successful housing applications for women released from prison, such as:

- Overcoming 'intentional homelessness' status, lack of 'local connection' or past problems in supported accommodation
- Lack of ID
- Lack of bank account
- No recourse to public funds.

9. Reuniting families

Learning from the [Farmer Review for Women](#) and through close collaboration between local authority social care, children's services and housing teams, as well as women's specialist services and criminal justice agencies, successful practice is shared and implemented to ensure that women are never prevented from being reunited with, or establishing contact with, their children due to a lack of safe and suitable accommodation.

10. Governance and communication

Implementation of improvements in practice and measurement of progress is a standing agenda item at multi-agency meetings supporting the whole system approach to women in contact with the criminal justice system, reporting to the Local Criminal Justice Board and/or Reducing Reoffending Board. Regular lines of communication are maintained with other relevant groups focused on housing and tackling VAWG.

Appendix: examples of what works well in London and elsewhere

Whole system approach for women in contact with the criminal justice system

As in other regions such as Manchester and the West Midlands, London's network of wraparound support services for women in contact with the criminal justice system uses a relationship-based approach to offer life changing, holistic support in a safe space. This is essential to improving women's accommodation outcomes. London benefits from women's specialist services in all boroughs. The services currently in place are similar to those detailed in the [London Blueprint](#) (July 2019) but were extended in 2021/22 to cover the whole of London. They have since been further extended to include remanded and unsentenced women under the new Women's CRS provision launched in December 2022, co-commissioned by MOPAC, the MoJ, the London Borough of Lambeth and NHS England, with Women in Prison and Advance continuing as the lead service providers.

The new London Women in the Criminal Justice System service, or Women's CRS, continues to offer women holistic support to reduce reoffending, support health outcomes and safeguard them from violence and abuse. The service is provided in women-only spaces across London and through in-prison support with housing for women about to be released back to London. The service is available to women supervised by London Probation as part of community sentences and on licence following prison release. Referrals can also be made from a wide variety of local partners, including VAWG agencies, Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs), Intensive Offender Management (IOM) teams and Youth Offending Services (for girls aged 15-17).

The service includes a new health advocacy strand for all women, including those on remand, sentenced in custody and those in the community, with the Reconnect Pathfinder service merged into the overall specialist provision (see further below). Unsentenced and remanded women at HMP Bronzefield will be offered in-prison support for accommodation, housing, benefit and debt and health advocacy. The Metropolitan Police Service's (MPS) Female Diversion Pilot is being absorbed into the new service, so that women diverted via Out of Court Disposals will have access to the same specialist provision. The diversion pilot currently operates in some boroughs and the MPS aims to extend it throughout the capital.

Lambeth Borough Council – Single Persons Housing Coordinator & Prison Release Navigator

In Lambeth Borough Council's housing team, there are two roles involved in dealing with criminal justice cases. Although these roles are not solely focused on women, this has been found by London agencies to be a relatively effective model for ensuring women have safe and suitable accommodation on leaving prison.

The Single Persons Housing Coordinator is the main point of contact for referrals. The Prison Release Navigator advises on the more complex cases and tries to identify barriers to people being accommodated on release from prison, whether on the side of the local authority or within the prisons. It is not always possible to overcome the barriers identified; one of the main issues is the shortage of affordable accommodation.

Lambeth's Prison Release Navigator usually becomes involved when women are approaching release. However, she aims to work as flexibly as possible to prevent homelessness; if someone is referred and needs help, it will be provided regardless of what stage of the criminal justice process the woman is at. The navigator has worked with remanded women in cases where a housing advisor or probation officer has referred someone they think may be released imminently from prison or

court. If the release date is not known then it is difficult to provide housing options, but where assistance can be provided it will be.

Lambeth will carry out pre-release assessments by telephone or video link when they are able to arrange this with the prison. It is not always possible depending on circumstances within the prison and whether the referral was received in sufficient time.

Not everyone who is assessed is offered accommodation. This will depend on whether Lambeth has reason to believe the person is in priority need of emergency temporary accommodation, or if they meet the criteria for Lambeth's supported housing services. Lambeth can usually only provide an emergency temporary accommodation address on the day of release, or possibly the day before.

Lambeth provides a supported housing assessment form for prison housing advisors to complete if they think the woman would meet the criteria for that service. However, the local authority still needs to carry out the housing assessment either when she is in custody or after release. Those that do not meet the priority need or supported accommodation criteria will be assisted to find other accommodation, including in the private rented sector, which can take longer.

Liaison and Diversion (L&D) services: Reconnect Pathfinder (ran up to November 2022)

The Reconnect Pathfinder began as a pilot in HMP & YOI Bronzefield in October 2020 and ran up to November 2022. It now forms part of the holistic Women's CRS for both sentenced and remanded/unsentenced women resettling to London.

For the pilot, the prison was asked to identify a sub-group of women that might benefit from support to bridge healthcare needs from custody to the community. Remanded women were identified, as not having a release date means they are harder to support and at that time they were not included in the probation resettlement package. To be eligible, women had to be over 18, returning to a London borough, have a health or social care need, and have a fixed release address or be somewhere on the housing pathway.

While the primary focus of the Reconnect scheme was healthcare, the L&D worker also addressed any identified housing need either themselves or through referral to another organisation. Women were referred to the Reconnect service by Prison Offender Managers (POM). This worked particularly well when a single POM had been delegated the task of gathering and making referrals.

The service was extremely flexible. Women were seen by their allocated Community Link Worker (CLW) in prison or in the community, depending on where they were. When there was sufficient notice of a court date, the CLW arranged to be there to support their client before and after the hearing, along with the women's service keyworker where applicable. If insufficient notice prevented their attendance the CLW would then try to link up with court-based L&D workers and follow up afterwards.

From December 2022 the Reconnect service is no longer known by that name and has been absorbed into the new, holistic London Women's CRS Service for women resettling from any prison to London. Sentenced and remanded/unsentenced women with a health need are identified in prison and, if referred, are supported to access statutory healthcare services via the Health Advocacy Pathway. Women on bail or acquitted can also access this service. The holistic service also provides support as outlined above in relation to accommodation needs for referred London women.

Housing First

Housing First is an internationally evidence-based model, which uses independent, stable housing as a platform to enable individuals with multiple and complex needs to begin recovery and move away

from homelessness. It offers intensive, flexible and person-centred support. Some women-only Housing First projects are outlined below.

Solace and Standing Together: Solace offers [women-only Housing First services](#), in partnership with [Standing Together](#), in Westminster and Islington. Standing Together's [Housing First for Women Experiencing VAWG Toolkit](#) is a reference guide for local authorities, housing providers and specialist domestic abuse services who are interested in setting up a similar project.

Single Homeless Project: SHP's [award-winning Project Kali](#) is another Housing First initiative. It works in partnership with women's specialist services to deliver a pan-London service for women who experience homelessness and have a history of offending. The project offers a choice led approach which respects individuals' decisions. This enables workers to respond directly to women's complex needs, to end any involvement in offending and support them into their own accommodation. See their one-year evaluation [here](#).

London Borough of Tower Hamlets: LB Tower Hamlets' Housing First scheme has accommodated five women over the last year (as well as eight men), some of whom have had some involvement in the criminal justice system. The early signs of the scheme are good, with reports of better outcomes around the women's health, reduced substance use and feelings of more hope for the future. The primary aim of the scheme is to alleviate rough sleeping; contact with the criminal justice system is something the council will be asking the referral panel to consider.

[Greater Manchester Housing First](#) is a multi-agency pilot project commissioned for three years by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority with funding from DLUHC that aims to provide safe, secure homes for more than 400 people who are homeless or at risk of being homeless across the region, including women.

Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA)

DAHA aims to improve the housing sector's response to domestic abuse through the introduction and adoption of an established set of standards and an accreditation process. DAHA works alongside partners to create innovations in practice and pilot new approaches such as the Whole Housing Approach. More information and resources are available on the DAHA [website](#).

Advance's Whole Housing Approach

Advance's [Whole Housing Approach](#) supports survivors of domestic abuse and their children to ensure the accommodation they have is safe, including private housing, social housing, hostels or refuges. The aim is to increase safety and choice for women and their children and reduce the use of costly emergency support and ensure that where practical, survivors remain in their own homes.

Housing for Women

Housing for Women (HfW) is a registered charity and independent housing association based in London. It champions female empowerment by providing and promoting affordable homes for women and gender-specific support services.

Housing Pathway Coordinators: HfW's two housing pathway coordinators (HPCs) provide housing law training, second tier housing advice and casework support to keyworkers at Women in Prison and Advance, to support them to deliver high quality housing support to women affected by the criminal justice system. The HPCs also build relationships with key partners including local authorities, the Probation Service and non-statutory services, including accommodation providers. Through their relationships with key workers, the HPCs identify failures or gaps in existing pathways

and then work with external partners to improve these. The HPCs also develop joined up ways of working by instituting regular meetings with partners and encouraging co-location of services. The HPCs have designed and delivered training for local authority staff on how to provide effective support to women affected by the criminal justice system, using a gender and trauma informed lens. They have also recently developed training for probation staff on how to deliver housing support to women leaving custody. The HPC role is likely to change in the coming year.

ReConnect service: HfW's ReConnect service³⁰ provides supported accommodation for women leaving prison dealing with problematic substance use and complex needs, many of whom have experienced trauma and abuse in their early lives. Combining housing and holistic support, they help women to bring about positive changes in their lives, improve their emotional well-being and prevent future re-offending. On-site staff help residents to access local substance use treatment services and mental health services, as well as GPs and counselling. They aim to provide women with a period of stability and routine so that they can re-orientate their lives, establish wider support networks and support their transition from prison into the community.

ReUnite (not currently operating): [ReUnite](#) was a unique pan-London project at HfW, helping to reunite women released from prison with their children. ReUnite worked with mothers leaving prison who would otherwise be homeless. It addressed the catch-22 of mothers being made homeless when imprisoned, then struggling to regain care and custody of their children upon release because they don't have adequate family housing. Supported accommodation was provided with space for group work and therapeutic services with dedicated support for children; and a floating support service to help women in the community find long term accommodation. The ReUnite programme ceased operation in 2022 due to a loss of funding.

The Sanctuary at the Marylebone project

The [Marylebone Project](#) provides a life-changing service for homeless women and is the largest and longest-running centre of its kind in London and the UK. It offers a women-only space where vulnerable women at risk can feel safe, and not alone in dealing with the crisis they are facing. Centre Advice workers can refer women to their Resettlement Team or directly into one of their Emergency Beds within the organisation's residential arm. The Sanctuary aims to provide:

- 24/7 service to serve as a haven for homeless women
- Support and guidance from specialist advisors
- A safe place accessible day or night
- Food, clothing, showers and laundry facilities.

Pan-London Housing Reciprocal

Coordinated by Safer London, the [Pan-London Housing Reciprocal](#) is a voluntary collaboration between local authorities and registered housing providers in London, which prevents those fleeing violence or abuse from becoming homeless. The agreement allows them to move to a safe area of London without losing their social tenancy. Properties in safe areas are offered or requested, and the system is centrally managed to make sure that moves happen smoothly. The purpose of the scheme is to prevent homelessness in cases of:

³⁰ This is unrelated to the Liaison and Diversion Reconnect Pathfinder described above.

- Domestic abuse and other VAWG such as including sexual violence and exploitation (including prostitution and trafficking), so called 'honour' based violence, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and stalking
- Hate crimes
- Where people are at risk of harm from gangs or serious youth violence
- Other high risk community safety reasons – including issues affecting people with mental health needs.



Supported by Barrow Cadbury Trust, Registered Charity: 1115476