



HOUSE OF LORDS

Library Note

Debate on 31 January: Women's Justice Board

This Library Note aims to provide background reading for the debate to be held on Thursday 31 January:

“To call attention to the case for the setting up of a Women's Justice Board”

It briefly highlights previous calls for the establishment of a women's justice board and sets out the Government's responses to such calls. It goes on to summarise Baroness Corston's view on the establishment of a women's justice board, as expressed in her March 2007 report on women in the criminal justice system, and notes the Government's response in December 2007.

Chris Clarke
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1. Introduction

There have been significant calls over recent years for the establishment of a women's justice board. It has been argued that a women's justice board, resembling in many respects the Youth Justice Board, should be established so as to provide a strategic framework for identifying and prioritising the specific needs of women within the criminal justice system. The proposal was first presented in a Prison Reform Trust publication in 2000 and proponents of a women's justice board have since included the former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Woolf, and the former Chief Inspector of Prisons, Lord Ramsbotham. This Library Note begins by briefly highlighting such calls for the establishment of a women's justice board and notes the Government's responses.

In March 2007, Baroness Corston published a Home Office commissioned report into the treatment of women in the criminal justice system in which she considered the case for the establishment of a women's justice board. This Library Note summarises Baroness Corston's recommendations on this specific issue and the Government's subsequent response in December 2007. Finally, this Note briefly highlights some of the wider reaction to the Government's response to Baroness Corston's report.

The broader context for debate over the merits of establishing a women's justice board resides in widespread concerns about the use of imprisonment for certain women offenders and the extent to which women's needs are being catered for within the criminal justice system. David Hanson, Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, delivered a speech to the Fawcett Society last year in which he set out some of the problems that needed to be tackled:

Sadly too many women are in custody. Between 1995 and 2005 the women's prison population increased at a rate nearly 3 times higher than that of the men's. Not because of an increase in the numbers of women offenders nor as a result of an increase in the severity of offending. But because courts were using custody more frequently and for less serious offences than before. Whilst the proportion is dropping the number is still too high...

The factors which affect why women offend are as many as they are complex - drug misuse, mental health problems, housing, childcare difficulties, history of abuse to name but a few. Short prison terms can exacerbate these problems leading in some instances to a spiral of serial offending. And so if we are to reduce re-offending then we need to address these problems.

That will only come by tackling them safely and effectively - and as far as possible in the community rather than in custody. The long term effects of short term imprisonment can be far more significant and detrimental for women than other groups. It can have the effect of feeding rather than stopping the cycle of crime. Imprisonment can cause huge disruption for children who, when the mum is the sole carer, are often put into care. It also can lead to huge problems with rehabilitation for the offender. Shockingly one third of women prisoners lose their homes and their possessions whilst in prison...

(David Hanson MP, speech to the Fawcett Society, London, 25 July 2007)

2. Calls for the establishment of a women's justice board

Justice for women: The need for reform - the report of the Committee on Women's Imprisonment, chaired by Dorothy Wedderburn and published by the Prison Reform Trust in 2000, first specifically recommended that a national women's justice board should be established. It stated in its conclusions:

The National Women's Justice Board should be established forthwith as a separate authority, charged with the development and implementation of policy for women offenders, consistent with the principles enunciated above. The Board should control its own budget and management structure and should possess powers to commission from other relevant agencies – including the Prison Service, the NHS, local authorities and voluntary bodies – the services required to provide the necessary programmes of supervision, rehabilitation and reintegration.

It should also be charged with the establishment and management of:

- (i) a network of local Women's Supervision, Rehabilitation and Support Centres to provide an effective supervision and rehabilitation service to offenders who are serving community sentences;
- (ii) a national system of geographically dispersed custodial units to replace the existing women's prison system, taking advice from, among others, the existing Prison Service. These should be linked to the Women's Supervision, Rehabilitation and Support Centres through the sharing of rehabilitative and other services where appropriate and as a pathway for sentence planning.
- (iii) in the inevitable transition period before all these custodial units are in place, the remaining women's prisons.

Firm plans should be available within two years for implementing these recommendations.

(Justice for women: The need for reform - the report of the Committee on Women's Imprisonment, 2000, p. 79)

Lord Woolf, in a speech given in January 2001 when he was Lord Chief Justice, argued that a women's justice board should be established which was similar to the Youth Justice Board:

There should be a Board responsible for women in the criminal justice system. Its responsibilities in relation to women should be similar to that of the Youth Justice Board. It should regard its primary responsibility to be to contain the growth of the women prison population.

(“The Woolf Report: A Decade of Change?”, Address to the Prison Reform Trust, London, 31 January 2001)

A debate in the House of Lords in June 2006 heard widespread calls for a women's justice board to be established. Introducing the debate, Lord Ramsbotham spoke to a motion calling attention to the case for a women's justice board to oversee the treatment of and conditions for women in the criminal justice system. The former Chief Inspector of

Prisons for England and Wales (1995-2001) argued that a woman's justice board was required because the needs of women were different to those of men:

My case for the appointment of a women's justice board, already recognised by the Government as I have just quoted, boils down to this. The needs of women of whatever age who come into the hands of the criminal justice system are different from those of men, as are the domestic pressures with which they have to cope, including family responsibilities. If they are to be helped to live useful and law-abiding lives, those differences need to be recognised and appropriate treatment and conditions provided. There are far too many women in prison and far too many are held far too far away from their domestic and family responsibilities.

(HL *Hansard*, 29 June 2006, cols. 1392-93)

In his speech, Lord Ramsbotham quoted a paragraph from a thematic review of women in prison that he had carried out in 1997 in which he stressed the importance of developing a coherent national strategy which met the distinct needs of women prisoners:

"Central to this report is our strongly held view that the women's prison system ought to be managed, as an entity, by one Director, with responsibility and accountability for all that happens within the women's estate. As is pointed out over and over again, there is an urgent need for a thorough analysis of the needs of women prisoners, and a national strategy for implementing and managing policies appropriate to satisfying them. The present system of geographical management works positively against the all-important consistency that the treatment of such a separate group of prisoners requires. Our recommendations are, I hope, clear and unambiguous, and are put forward for examination by the Prison Service in the context of their own strategic review of the estate. But they also have an underlying purpose, which is to encourage the Prison Service to make better arrangements for the separate management of the fast-rising numbers of women in prison, and to provide regimes appropriate to their needs, not merely to adapt those designed for men. This does not require another policy desk, it requires someone charged with implementing policy, as well as assessing, obtaining and allocating the necessary resources of staff, money and facilities".

(HL *Hansard*, 29 June 2006, col. 1391)

Support was voiced throughout the debate for the establishment of a women's justice board. For example, Lord Dholakia argued that, "a women's justice board with responsibility for commissioning provision for women offenders could set standards to ensure that provision met women prisoners' particular needs" (col. 1396). The Earl of Listowel reiterated his support for "an improved strategic focus on women in custody" (col. 1399). Viscount Bridgeman contended that the Youth Justice Board had proved itself able to "straddle different agencies" and as such it should be seen as "a template for a women's justice board" (col. 1414).

3. The Government's Position

As Lord Ramsbotham alluded to above, the Government had previously seemed to indicate its support for the establishment of a women's justice board. Responding to a debate in the Lords for the Government in 2004, Lord Rooker had recognised the case for a women's justice board in the following terms:

When noble Lords read this debate in *Hansard*, they will see that what I am basically describing is the women's justice board, which was advocated but has not yet been created by the Home Office. I supported it from this Dispatch Box when I was a Home Office Minister. It has still not been brought about, but I think that we are doing it in all but name. The proof will be in the pudding. It is not my job to make policy on the hoof. Nevertheless, that recommendation was made and it has widespread support, but it has not been put into operation by the Home Office.

(HL *Hansard*, 28 October 2004, col. 1481)

In a written answer published in February 2006, however, the Minister of State, Home Office, Baroness Scotland of Asthal, announced that there were no plans to create a women's justice board as a programme already in place provided for a strategic focus on women offenders:

There are no current plans to create a national women's justice board. The women's offending reduction programme already provides the framework for the development and implementation of specific policies and practice affecting women at every stage of the criminal justice process. Additionally, a key feature of the National Offender Management Service will be the use of end-to-end case management that will ensure a co-ordinated response to meet the needs of all offenders through the criminal justice process. We will continue to examine what further or other changes need to be made in order to better respond to the needs of women within the criminal justice system.

(HL *Hansard*, 1 February 2006, col. 52WA)

Responding to the debate initiated by Lord Ramsbotham in June 2006, Baroness Scotland of Asthal reiterated that there were no current plans to create a women's justice board, arguing that "attempting to go down that route could risk marginalising women further". She told peers that:

The original call for a women's justice board, similar to the Youth Justice Board, was made in a recommendation by the Prison Reform Trust, as the noble Lord, Lord Ramsbotham, indicated. Dorothy Wedderburn's report of 2000 clearly set that out. It has been repeated variously...

The noble Lord, Lord Ramsbotham, Juliet Lyon and Her Majesty's Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers, among many, have raised this issue. Concern was focused on the need to prioritise women offenders' needs with effective management and provision of adequate resources. We, too, recognise and share the concern that the distinct needs of women in the criminal justice system must be met, but there are no current plans to create a women's justice board.

I was asked to say why. There is currently no separate framework in law for women as there is for young offenders. We have a different structure.

Attempting to go down that route could risk marginalising women further, when what is needed is to mainstream the provision that we give women and ensure that under the national offender management structure sufficient priority is given to service provision for, and management of, women offenders.

(HL *Hansard*, 29 June 2006, col. 1416)

4. The Corston Report

On 13 March 2007, Baroness Corston published a report on women in the criminal justice system, *The Corston Report: A report by Baroness Jean Corston of a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system*. The review had been commissioned by the Home Office in 2006 as a result of calls for a public inquiry following the deaths of six women at Styal prison between August 2002 and August 2003. Home Office Ministers determined that an independent review would be more appropriate as it was believed that a public inquiry would not uncover any facts that had not already come to light through investigations into the deaths and the full public inquests. Announcing the review in 2006, Home Office Minister, Baroness Scotland of Asthal, had elaborated on the purpose of the review as follows:

The review will be focused on those women in whom a multitude of risk factors coexist and which could lead them to harm themselves in prison. This could, for example, encompass women with serious mental illness or serious drug addictions; women with other mental health problems such as personality disorder, which can be exacerbated by prison and increase their vulnerability; and those women who are persistent low-level offenders, living chaotic lives. It will look at provision for such women at each occasion they come into contact with the criminal justice system—for example, at police stations, at court, on remand, on sentencing, during sentence in the community, in prison and on release.

I stress that the review will complement rather than replicate the work under way and will seek to build on the vast amount of work and knowledge that already exists. For example, WORP [women's offending reduction programme] aims to provide a more appropriate and joined-up response in the community to the particular factors that impact on women offenders. The Together Women Programme will trial an integrated approach to routing women to appropriate services to meet their needs at various stages of their offending history. The Baroness Corston's review will seek to build on this work, focusing on identified gaps in provision.

Part of the review will profile the characteristics and histories of some of the women who have died in custody in recent years (particularly those at Styal) and look at the pathway through the criminal justice system that led them to that point...

(HL *Hansard*, 28 March 2006, col. 65WS)

Baroness Corston's March 2007 report included a chapter entitled, "Who's in charge? The need for visible leadership and a strategic approach", in which she considered the

case for the establishment of a women's justice board. She stressed the need for a coherent national strategy for women in the criminal justice system, stating that:

...given their small number, their differential needs from the male majority population, their marginalisation at every stage of their contact with criminal justice agencies, the geographical spread of women's prisons and mostly remote locations, women's location out of home areas, and frequent movements across geographical boundaries, I believe that regional commissioning for women must be directed by strong, visible, effective and strategic national leadership at the highest levels. Direction must be in accordance with a well-planned and resourced national strategy for women in the criminal justice system, which all relevant ministers must sign up to and actively promote. A national framework must do more than set aspirational standards; it must monitor progress, have assured, long-term ring-fenced funding and clear lines of accountability.

(The Corston Report: A report by Baroness Jean Corston of a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system, March 2007, p. 38)

Baroness Corston, however, argued that a national women's justice board, precisely mirroring the Youth Justice Board, was not the appropriate vehicle for achieving this strategic architecture:

Dorothy Wedderburn in her report for the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) *Justice for Women* published in 2000 called for "the immediate establishment of a statutory commissioning body – the National Women's Justice Board – charged with producing a plan for action within the next two years". This recommendation has had widespread support over the intervening years...

In my judgment a 'Women's Justice Board' which replicates the Youth Justice Board in all respects is neither necessary nor desirable.

(pp. 38-39)

Instead, Baroness Corston recommended the establishment of a cross-departmental commission, which would be governed by an inter-departmental ministerial group, and argued that valuable lessons could be learnt from the Youth Justice Board:

But I do believe that there needs to be a strategic top level cross-departmental commission, headed by someone very senior – director level – with authority to direct work in hand relating to women in the criminal justice system, supported by sufficient staff from the various departments and agencies involved. The commission should be governed by a new inter-departmental ministerial group, as described above. Like Wedderburn I call for the immediate establishment of such a commission for women. I do not consider that it would need two years in which to draw up an action plan, as Wedderburn suggested. This could be done in an afternoon with the right people sitting round the table. Indeed, the Women's Offending Reduction Programme (WORP) (see paragraph 4.39 below) would make a very good starting point. The commission needs to hit the ground running. A women's commissioner role does not need to be enshrined in statute, at least initially. This would lead only to further procrastination when what is needed is immediate action. Much can be achieved without establishment on a statutory basis as the appointment of the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman has demonstrated. Nor do I accept that the lack of a discrete framework in law for women (as exists for young people) prevents a women's commission from being

established and I believe that the Youth Justice Board can be used as a model in so far as parallels can be drawn and useful lessons learnt.

I would add that I do not rule out the need for a separate sentencing framework for women at sometime in the future, indeed, the statutory duty from next April to take positive action to eliminate gender discrimination and promote equality under the *Equality Act* might require this in due course. However, I accept that now is not the appropriate time to make such a recommendation.

During my review I have received widespread support for the creation of a new structure of this kind, which many people working with women in the criminal justice system see as essential to direct and drive forward a strategic agenda for disadvantaged women. At the public event that I conducted on 31 October several speakers emphasised the need to ensure not only that such a structure is set up but also that it must be maintained and supported at the highest levels if it was to succeed. It must not be allowed to wither away as has the Programme Board of the Women's Offending Reduction Programme (see paragraph 4.39 below).

There are a number of other factors that I believe support my conclusion that there needs to be a Commissioner for Women who offend or are at risk of offending appointed as a matter of urgency, which I outline in the following paragraphs. First, if we are to see an end to deaths in custody of women inappropriately located in prison, as many of the women who have died in recent years were, provision must be made to meet their well researched and documented but largely unmet needs. The practice of marginalising the small proportion of women in a system designed and structured for men must cease. I am concerned that, without the safeguard of strong, visible direction of issues relating to women in the criminal justice system, provision for women is likely to continue to be inconsistent and to depend on the level of priority and strength of leadership afforded locally and the depth of local understanding about women's needs. The nature of facilities for women - a small number of geographically spread prisons; the arbitrary re-rolling of women's prisons to cater for the demands of the growing male prison population; the lack of provision of suitable approved premises, especially for bail and particularly in rural areas; distance from home and families; frequent cross border transfers; and the wish of some women to settle away from their home areas on release in order to escape previous harmful relationships have resulted in women in the criminal justice system persistently being marginalised and their needs unmet. Without a proper central structure, regionalised provision of services is likely to lead to further dilution of expertise in women-specific agendas at a time when what is needed is a central point of excellence and a champion for women to drive agendas forward.

This situation is reminiscent of what the Audit Commission found in its report *Misspent Youth* in 1998 in respect of youth justice, where there was no integrated system with shared aims and objectives, little strategic overview and a division of responsibilities and financial accountability. That report found a system preoccupied with processing rather than trying to change behaviour. The processes were inefficient and expensive with little being done to tackle the causes of youth crime as the same young people were processed through the courts again and again. The report, which of course led to the creation of the Youth Justice Board (YJB), recommended that efforts to prevent re-offending needed to be coordinated between the myriad of agencies involved through a strategic approach building on the framework of existing local structures. Youth

justice needed a focal point of leadership and delivery. The YJB has subsequently been central in shaping and coordinating the complex web of agencies involved and has brought leadership, coherence and consistency to youth justice. I believe that it is now time to do the same for women by establishing a strategic commission with power to make things happen, visibly overseen by an over-arching cross-departmental ministerial group. I strongly so recommend.

(The Corston Report: A report by Baroness Jean Corston of a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system, March 2007, pp. 39-40)

In summary, Baroness Corston made the following key recommendations regarding leadership and the need for a strategic approach:

I recommend the immediate establishment of an Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group for women who offend or are at risk of offending to govern a new Commission and to drive forward the Commission's agenda within their individual departments. Ministers from the Home Office, DCLG, DH, DfES, DCA, DWP and HM Treasury should sit on the Group. There should be close links between the new Group, the Inter-Ministerial Group for Reducing Re-offending and the Inter-Ministerial Group on Domestic Violence. The Group should be led by the Home Office Minister initially but transferred to the DCLG Minister within three years because the focus of the Group is more closely aligned to the community agenda.

I recommend the immediate establishment of a Commission for women who offend or are at risk of offending, led at director level, with a remit of care and support for women who offend or are at risk of offending. This must be a cross-departmental structure, which incorporates the Women's Offending Reduction Programme; sits initially within the Home Office but transfers to DCLG within three years; and is staffed by a multi-agency team from the Home Office, DCLG, DH, DfES, DCA and DWP. Staff should also be seconded from relevant NGOs and voluntary agencies. Within three years the Commission should transfer from the Home Office to DCLG.

The Inter-Ministerial Group for Reducing Re-offending should re-examine its aims and ensure that its approaches properly address specific issues relating to women's criminality.

(The Corston Report: A report by Baroness Jean Corston of a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system, March 2007, p. 48. For greater detail, please see pp. 79-82)

5. Government response to *The Corston Report*

On 6 December 2007, the Government published its response to Baroness Corston's report, *The Government's response to the report by Baroness Corston of a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system* (Ministry of Justice, Cm 7261). In a written ministerial statement, the Government announced that it had been possible to accept almost all of Baroness Corston's 43 recommendations and gave a commitment to produce a detailed delivery plan within the next six months that would provide the mechanism by which all of the commitments identified in the response would be implemented (HC *Hansard*, 6 December 2007, col. 96WS). On Baroness Corston's

key recommendations relating to governance arrangements and strategy, the Government responded as follows:

Recommendation 7

I recommend the immediate establishment of an Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group for women who offend or are at risk of offending to govern a new Commission and to drive forward the Commission's agenda within their individual departments. Ministers from the Home Office, DCLG, DH, DfES, DCA and DWP should sit on the Group. There should be close links between the new Group, the Inter-Ministerial Group for Reducing Re-offending and the Inter-Ministerial Group on Domestic Violence. The Group should be led by the Home Office Minister initially but transferred to the DCLG Minister within three years because the focus of the Group is more closely aligned to the community agenda.

Response

The Government accepts this recommendation in principle. It is important to have cross-departmental ministerial governance to ensure a co-ordinated approach to tackling issues for women who offend or are at risk of offending. The existing Inter-Ministerial Group (IMG) on Reducing Re-offending will provide governance to drive forward the Government's Response to the Corston Report. It will be responsible for issues relating to the management of, and services for, women offenders and provide oversight of progress towards delivering the commitments in the Government's Response, resolving cross-departmental issues at ministerial level where necessary.

The IMG will also deal with issues for women at risk of offending, subject to further consideration of the governance structures supporting the new National Crime Reduction Board, including responsibility for cross-departmental work on domestic and sexual violence. Whether women at risk of offending would be more appropriately dealt with under these arrangements as a crime reduction issue will be reviewed.

The Reducing Re-offending IMG is currently co-chaired by Ministers from the Ministry of Justice and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. It also includes Ministers from Department of Health, Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions, Communities and Local Government, and HM Treasury. The Solicitor General, Vera Baird QC MP, and the Government Equalities Minister, Barbara Follett MP, have also recently been invited to attend the IMG and will bring additional impetus and expertise to the implementation of the Government's Response to the Corston Report.

Although not a specific recommendation in her Report, Baroness Corston also suggested the need for a high profile 'Champion' for women in the criminal justice system who would have the profile and authority to help drive forward the necessary changes to achieve the improvements for women her report calls for.

The Government agrees with this suggestion and considered that this role would be most effective if undertaken by a minister with responsibility for criminal justice issues. Maria Eagle MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary-of- State at the Ministry of Justice, will therefore be the ministerial Champion for women in the criminal justice system. She will also convene a sub-group to the Inter-Ministerial Group on Reducing Re-offending, which will include the Solicitor General, Vera Baird QC MP and the Government Equalities Minister, Barbara Follett MP. This sub-group will ensure that actions to address issues for women are given the

necessary priority and will drive forward implementation of the Government's Response to the Corston Review, reporting to the IMG as the governing body.

Recommendation 8

I recommend the immediate establishment of a Commission for women who offend or are at risk of offending, led at director level, with a remit of care and support for women who offend or are at risk of offending. This must be a cross-departmental structure, which incorporates the Women's Offending Reduction Programme; sits initially within the Home Office but transfers to DCLG within three years; and is staffed by a multi-agency team from the Home Office, DCLG, DH, DfES, DCA and DWP. Staff should also be seconded from relevant NGOs and voluntary agencies. Within three years the Commission should transfer from the Home Office to DCLG.

Response

The Government accepts this recommendation in principle. The Government has agreed to the establishment of a new cross-departmental Criminal Justice Women's Unit headed by a senior civil servant to drive forward the work on behalf of the Minister. The Unit will consist of a core team of people drawn from the Ministry of Justice with representatives from the other key departments with responsibility for delivering the commitments in this Government Response, including the Government Equalities Office and Department of Health. The Unit will monitor progress and report to the IMG.

A 'virtual' strand to the Unit will also be developed where individuals from other departments and non-government organisations where appropriate, would be invited to contribute proportions of their time to working on issues in the Delivery Plan. It will be important, for example, for the 'virtual' strand of the Unit to include input from the Attorney General's office on the role that prosecutors play in identifying opportunities for women to be diverted wherever possible from the criminal justice process, or dealt with using community alternatives to custody. This input will assist in the objective of identifying women at risk as early as possible and ensuring that they are given access to the most appropriate interventions and support in the community.

The Government considered a range of options for where such a 'Women's Unit' would be best located in the light of the recent Machinery of Government changes which took place after the Corston Report was published. These options included the Home Office; another government department such as Communities and Local Government; and the Ministry of Justice. Taking into consideration the new Ministry of Justice's remit on penal policy and the focus on developing non-custodial sentences that offer tough, safe and effective alternative punishments, the Government has decided that the Ministry of Justice is the most appropriate department to lead on taking forward the Government's Response to the Corston Report. Whilst the Home Office has a clear role to play in the wider work looking at women at risk of offending and issues around prostitution and domestic and sexual violence, it is not the most appropriate lead department as it does not have responsibility for offender management and there is a clear need for the Government's Response to focus on reducing women's offending and effective offender management for women, which now falls to the Ministry of Justice.

Baroness Corston recommends that the Women's Unit should transfer to the Department for Communities and Local Government within three years. However, recent Machinery of Government changes have meant that the, then,

Women and Equality Unit, which sat within the Department for Communities and Local Government when the review was conducted, has since moved to the newly established Government Equalities Office. As a result of this, there are no longer the direct links between the women and equality work and the community cohesion agenda which there were at the time of the review. The Government considers that creating a new 'Women's Unit' in another government department where responsibilities lay outside the criminal justice field would not be effective at tackling the main issues related to women's offending.

Recommendation 9

The Inter-Ministerial Group for Reducing Re-offending should re-examine its aims and ensure that its approaches properly address specific issues relating to women's criminality.

Response

The Government agrees with this recommendation. The Inter-Ministerial Group on Reducing Re-offending drives forward the Government's cross-departmental strategy to reduce re-offending and aims to promote good practice and provide solutions to issues preventing progress. The main challenges for the Group include increasing employment; preventing homelessness; and improving offender health. In addition, the Inter-Ministerial Group on Reducing Re-offending will now also provide governance for the work on implementing the Government's Response to the Corston Report, with responsibility for cross-departmental issues relating to women's offending. It will also be supported by the sub-group convened by Maria Eagle MP as the ministerial Champion for women in the criminal justice system (see response to Recommendation 7).

(The Government's response to the report by Baroness Corston of a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system, December 2007, Cm 7261, pp. 18-21)

The Government has committed to fulfilling the above pledges over the next six months (p.12).

6. Reaction to the Government's Response to *The Corston Report*

Initial reaction to the Government's response to *The Corston Report* has taken a broad view of the Government's proposals and how it intends to take forward Baroness Corston's recommendations. Above all, concerns have been expressed about the availability of resources and the timescales (Government's response, p. 12) for the implementation of the main actions. For example, Paul Cavadino, Chief Executive of Nacro, the crime reduction charity, stated:

This is a wasted opportunity. It holds out little hope of early action to reduce the enormous amount of unnecessary human suffering caused by women's imprisonment.

We need urgent steps to replace large and remote women's prisons with small units nearer their homes, combined with determined measures to limit the use of prison sentences for women.

Instead we have a series of cross-governmental strategic reviews which, though welcome in themselves, do nothing to meet the need for urgent action.

Small local units for women prisoners should also be entirely separate from male prisons, not tacked on as an afterthought to the large 'titan' prisons announced in light of the Carter review.

(Nacro press release, 'Corston response a wasted opportunity for action on women's prisons', 6 December 2007)

Juliet Lyon, Director of the Prison Reform Trust and an independent member of the Corston review group, expressed disquiet that the Commission specifically recommended by Baroness Corston had not been adopted:

The government approach is welcome, and fits with what ministers have been saying for years and years, but without the Women's Commission Baroness Corston called for, or the money needed, to turn good intentions into practical reality, nothing much will change for the vulnerable women caught up in the justice system.

With enormous sums of public money earmarked for so called 'titan' jails, at best women may be bolted on the side, limpet-like in specialist units.

For government to respond to a major review, which it commissioned following the tragic deaths of six women in Styal prison, by setting up yet more reviews, and talking optimistically about 'direction of travel', is insubstantial and pathetic.

(Prison Reform Trust press release, 'PRT on the Government's response to the *Corston Report*', 6 December 2007)

This press release also drew attention to interim findings in a New Economics Foundation (NEF) briefing paper, submitted to ministers by the NEF and the Prison Reform Trust, which argued that the approach advocated by Baroness Corston "could save millions of pounds every year and be more effective at cutting crime."

Dr Katherine Rake, Director of the Fawcett Society, emphasised the importance of adequate resources:

Prison for women simply isn't working. 64% re-offend, nearly 18,000 children are separated from their mothers every year by imprisonment, and seven women have already taken their own lives in prison this year.

Today's proposals are an important first step in addressing this, and signal a shift away from an over reliance on custody towards a greater use of community sentences for women. What is needed now is a real financial investment in community provision for women who offend, and it is disappointing that no significant new funding is included in today's announcement.

The Government must put its money where its mouth is by investing in community sentences for women instead of in prisons. Otherwise, today's proposals will be an empty gesture which will do little to reduce re-offending or make a difference for women offenders and their families.

(Fawcett Society press release, 'Fawcett comments on the Government's proposals on women offenders', 6 December 2007)

