

Scotland doesn't need a new Women's prison

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The Scottish Government is intending to issue tenders for the construction of a new women's prison. Doing so goes against all expert opinion, represents a very poor use of money in times of tightening budgets and flies in the face of the Scottish Government's own policy of reducing the size of Scotland's female prison population. Instead of commissioning a new prison the Scottish Government would do better to invest this money in better treatment rehabilitation and support services. **UNISON branches are urged to encourage members to [sign the petition](#) opposing the construction of the new jail and make their views known to their local MSPs.**

The female prison population has risen by 120% since 2000, despite conviction rates remaining stable over the same period. Many women in the criminal justice system are frequent reoffenders with complex needs that relate to their social circumstances, previous histories of abuse and mental health and addiction problems. Recognising this and following two consecutive inspection reports critical of conditions at Cornton Vale, the Scottish Government established a Commission on Women Offenders in June 2011. Chaired by former Lord Advocate Dame Elish Angiolini. The Commission published its [report](#) on 17 April 2012 which included the following recommendations:

- Cornton Vale should be replaced with a smaller specialist prison for women serving a statutory defined long-term sentence and who present a significant risk
- most women prisoners on remand or serving short-term sentences should be held in local prisons to improve liaison with local communities and reintegration
- women at risk of reoffending or custody should have a named key worker as a single point of contact and intensive mentoring
- community justice centres (one stop shops based on the 218 Service, Willow Project and Women's Centres in England) should be established for women offenders to enable them to access a consistent range of services
- a national Community Justice Service should be established to commission, provide and manage adult offender services in the community.

The Scottish Government said that they accepted these recommendations of the Commission. Yet since then they have announced plans to build a new larger prison on the outskirts of Greenock to be known as HMP Inverclyde. This would have a capacity to hold 300 women, with the option of increasing this to 350 places. There are currently around 390 women in prison in Scotland. Together with other facilities the new jail would increase prison capacity to 500, going against the Scottish government's declared intention to reduce the female prison population. HMP Inverclyde is expected to have a lifespan of at least 60 years. The capital cost of HMP Inverclyde is planned to be £60m, the estimated cost keeping 400 women in prison is at least £13m (some estimates suggest considerably more.)

Very few women need to be in prison for reasons of public protection and female prisoners have high rates of self-harm and mental illness. Increasing prison capacity will encourage the use of custody. It also self evidently takes resources away from community justice options and the services which can help tackle the root causes of women's offending – poverty, substance and alcohol misuse, mental health problems, histories of domestic and sexual abuse. These issues must be tackled if we are to prevent women from entering the criminal justice system in the first place. The Scottish Government need to be persuaded from investing in failure instead resourcing preventative services.

Useful links

- [Commission on Women Offenders](#)
- [Howard League Scotland](#)
- [Stop new women's prison - petition](#)

UNISON Scotland's key campaigns

- [Public Works](#)
- [UNISON Scotland website](#)
- [Social Work web page](#)

For more information please contact UNISON's Bargaining and Campaigns team on 0141 342 2811, or email [Dave Watson](#), Scottish Organiser.



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