



Women's Justice Board Minute

Held on 22 July 2025

Attendees

- Lord Timpson (*chair*), Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending
- Dame Vera Baird, Hon Professor at LSE, Chair of the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC), ex-Victims' Commissioner
- Michaela Booth, National Lead for Patient and Family Engagement, Practice Plus
- Bernie Bowen-Thomson, Chief Executive, Safer Wales
- Kate Green, Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester for Policing and Crime
- Lady Edwina Grosvenor, Founder and Chair of One Small Thing
- Dr Tom McNeil, Chief Executive, JABBS Foundation
- Dr Shona Minson, Research Associate, Centre for Criminology, Oxford
- Pia Sinha, Chief Executive, Prison Reform Trust
- Katy Swaine Williams, research and policy consultant (currently Hibiscus and Centre for Women's Justice)
- Claire Fielder, Director of Youth Justice and Offender Policy (until August 2025), Ministry of Justice
- Paul Candler, Director of Youth Justice and Offender Policy (from August 2025), Ministry of Justice
- Laura Thompson, Deputy Director, Women in the Criminal Justice System, Ministry of Justice
- Sir Brian Leveson, Chair of the Independent Review of the Criminal Courts (attended for Agenda item 3 only)
- Sarah Morton, Deputy Director, Sentencing and Offender Management Analysis Team, Ministry of Justice (attended for Agenda item 4 only)
- Lauren Small, Female Offender Analysis Team, Ministry of Justice (attended for Agenda item 4 only)

Agenda Item 1: Introduction

1. Lord Timpson welcomed Board members to the meeting, thanked them for their continued engagement and formally introduced Paul Candler as the new Director of Youth Justice and Offender Policy from August 2025.

Agenda Item 2: Setting the Wider Direction

2. Lord Timpson provided an overview of progress. Key achievements and progress indicators were as follows:
 - i. Upcoming Sentencing Bill.
 - ii. Aims to drive down the number of women in prison.
 - iii. Widescale implementation of Intensive Supervision Courts.

Disproportionality in the criminal justice system



3. Lord Timpson asked the Board their views on how the government can address disproportionality in the justice system in light of the Board's interest in the issue.
4. Board members suggested that the actions the Women's Justice Board and the government are taking to address disproportionality need to be more visible throughout the Women's Justice Board Strategy.
5. Board members noted the need for increased expectations on police to have comprehensive diversion schemes, especially for non-violent offences. Board members felt this would quickly reduce prosecutions where diversion into support was more appropriate.
 - i. It was noted that third sector women's community services offered a strong foundation for progress, particularly through women's centres. Board members stressed that increasing funding for these services would improve diversion opportunities for the police.
6. Lord Timpson noted that the department was operating within a limited funding settlement meaning low-cost, high-impact opportunities will need to be prioritised.
7. Board members raised concerns about young black girls and their trust in the police force. It was requested that Ministry of Justice and HMPPS colleagues provide an overview of the activity that was currently taking place to address disproportionality in relation to women from minoritised backgrounds.
 - i. The Women's Justice Board (WJB) noted that the language around adultification of young black girls was an issue that needed to be tackled through:
 - a) Judicial and professional training on cultural sensitivity and language.
 - b) Ministry of Justice (potentially through the Women's Justice Board) led briefing about the use of language and the key problems about treatment of minoritised young girls.
 - c) Identifying specific drivers for offending amongst minoritised girls and designing a response to the drivers of offences amongst young black girls.
8. It was noted by Board members that there were a lot of limitations in current data on sentencing disproportionality for minoritised women, particularly the small numbers when disaggregated by gender and ethnicity which could obscure issues. There was a consensus that lack of perfect data should not prevent action, and that qualitative evidence could supplement quantitative gaps. Lord Timpson noted the Lord Chancellor has commissioned a review of sentencing disparity and its causes.

WJB Strategy

9. Officials thanked all for their input on the introduction to the WJB strategy and for their comments on the revised aims. Officials said the next step would be to send out communications to Partnership Delivery Group to get their commitment to support the work. It was also noted that there had been a lot of cross-government support for the new approach.
10. Officials noted that the Strategy draft would be sent to Board members mid-August, allowing members a week to review before the internal and external clearance process.

Board members expressed concern that this was insufficient time to fully review the Strategy, it was agreed that officials would extend the clearance period.

Agenda Item 3: Independent Courts Review Update

11. Sir Brian Leveson, Chair of the Independent Courts Review, attended the meeting to give Board members an update on the aspects of the review relating to women in the criminal justice system. He spoke about the concept of the "Crown Court Bench Division" to handle complex cases more efficiently.
12. Members of the Women's Justice Board raised the following questions:
 - i. **Coercive control:** The issue of women being accused of an offence due to counter allegations or due to association with a male partner who committed an offence was stressed as an area of concern. It was raised that these cases often reached the courts when this was not required and caused unnecessary expense as they were usually dismissed by the judge. This could be caused by a lack of holistic assessment at the police and prosecution stages.
 - ii. **Victim attrition:** Some members felt that Section 28 was currently underutilised due to training and technical issues with the application of it. Other members had concerns that section 28 interviews had negative effects on trial timelines.
 - iii. **Appeals and Sentencing Guidelines:** Concerns were raised about the proposal to limit appeals from Magistrates' Courts to points of law, noting that a significant proportion of women's appeals currently were successful, sometimes due to a lack of awareness of sentencing guidelines for primary carers. Sir Brian Leveson clarified that appeals on sentence would still be possible if it was felt to be fundamentally wrong in principle. It was noted that Sir Brian Leveson's team would consider HMCTS training for legal advisors in an efficiency review.

Agenda item 4: Data and Metrics to Support Delivery

13. Sarah Morton and Lauren Small spoke about data and metrics for the Women's Justice Board strategy, introducing Board members to the data dashboard and to request feedback
14. Members welcomed the data dashboard and noted that they would like it to include more on:
 - i. **Community alternatives:** Community sentences, Liaison and Diversion statistics, and other alternatives to custody for women.
 - ii. **Diversion outcomes:** A more granular breakdown e.g. voluntary vs conditional discharge and Outcome 22 statistics
 - iii. **Suspended sentences:** Separate reporting on suspended sentences vs immediate custody.
 - iv. **Policing:** Some Board members raised that police reports often present aggregated data, with little qualitative data analysis. Some Board members



suggested that qualitative analysis could be provided to support the data from police reports.

- v. **Racial disproportionality:** Including prominent display of data on the homepage.
 - vi. **VAWG victims in the criminal justice system.**
 - vii. **Migrant and non-British national women.**
15. Members also asked if the dashboard could be altered so it measured against the Women's Justice Board aims and tracked the impact of diversions and interventions.
16. Some members proposed that comparing data collected following the Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022 with data gathered under the Women's Justice Board Strategy could serve as a useful means of assessing the impact of interventions over time.
17. Some members raised concerns around the language used in the data dashboard and proposed that references to 'female offenders' be changed to 'women in the criminal justice system' to signify the change from the Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022 to the Women's Justice Board Strategy and to reflect a broader and more inclusive focus.

Agenda item 5: Working Lunch, Including Engaging the Board on Potential Priorities for Funding

Sentencing Bill

18. Board members expressed concerns that the Sentencing Bill would implement the recommendation to ensure short custodial sentences are only used in exceptional circumstances through a presumption to suspend short custodial sentences, rather than a presumption to impose a community sentence. There was concern amongst the Board that suspended sentences can be imposed without rehabilitative requirements and that sentencers would default to suspended sentences without considering whether this was the appropriate solution.
- i. Board members noted the difference between breaching a suspended sentence rather than a community one - expressing concern that the current breach rate for suspended sentences was 16-18%, noting this would increase if more women received suspended sentences, and could lead to more custodial sentences.
 - ii. Officials noted that the presumption to suspend would be focused on moving away from immediate custodial sentences. Officials also reiterated that the intention was not to reduce use of community sentences.
19. Board members agreed to discuss further with the Sentencing Bill teams.

Funding

20. Board members noted that sustainable funding was fundamental for the women's sector and pointed to the government's acceptance of David Gauke's Sentencing Review recommendation 6.2. Some Board members advocated for more core costs



- grant funding (rather than project-based commissioning) for women's specialist services, as this enabled flexibility, sustainability and local ownership.
21. Officials noted that it would be helpful to get members' thoughts on funding opportunities within the next month.
 22. Lord Timpson reiterated earlier points about the Ministry of Justice operating within a constrained funding settlement.
 23. Board members felt strongly that the grants due diligence process should be improved to ensure that organisations are not subject to disproportionate requirements when bidding for relatively small amounts of funding.
 24. A Board member suggested that if every police force area was expected to have a women's diversion route, a small, flexible portion of funding should be reserved for the women's sector to build capacity and respond to local needs, including supporting Intensive Supervision Courts.
 25. Board members noted that Intensive Supervision Court (ISC) models needed to be robust to allow for widescale implementation. It was also raised that core grants funding from the Ministry of Justice alongside other funding sources, including from trusts and foundations, provided the flexibility to allow Anawim Women's Centre to participate effectively in the Birmingham ISC pilot.

Cross-government engagement

26. Lord Timpson noted a cross-government ministerial roundtable would take place on 9th September.
27. Board members proposed a cross-government common outcomes framework to be agreed with ministers to map services funded across departments measuring housing, health, and employment outcomes.
28. Board members also raised concerns that there was currently no direct engagement planned with Local Government and suggested that Lord Timpson consider including involving them in future conversations. Board members felt this was necessary as many of the services provided to women were delivered at a local level.
29. Some Board members suggested that the £40bn social housing investment from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government could have a specific allocation for Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector so that there was a specific housing stock allocated for VAWG organisations.
30. Board members noted the importance of a strong link between Health and Justice, particularly when considering the role of the Department for Health and Social Care in commissioning liaison and diversion services and integrated care partnerships.
31. Officials set out the next steps and the wider departmental updates:
 - i. Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) team from HMPPS were keen to engage with the Board as the women's CRS contracts were coming up for retender in 2027.
 - ii. Suggested that Board members work up ideas on engagement around the funding ideas.

- iii. Board members should feel empowered to do their own independent engagement with the sector.

Agenda item 6: Conclusion and AOB

32. Lord Timpson thanked members.
33. Lord Timpson noted that the next meeting would be held in Manchester on 21st October.
34. Lord Timpson asked that the January WJB meeting was put in diaries as soon as possible.
35. Some members felt that public messaging regarding the Board could at times overstate its responsibility for women's justice reforms, given its advisory role.

ACTION 1: Board members requested that the Female Offender policy team set out the relevant reviews (Independent Sentencing Review, Independent Courts Review) clearly within the narrative of the Strategy.

ACTION 2: Board members requested more time to review the Strategy document in August. Female Offender policy team to revert with a clearance timeline.

ACTION 3: Lord Timpson to take away the Board's suggestions on the need for public acknowledgement and visible action on disproportionality.

ACTION 4: Ministry of Justice and HMPPS colleagues to provide an overview of the activity currently taking place to address disproportionality.

ACTION 5: Sir Brian Leveson and Inquiry team would feed back to the Women's Justice Board on awareness raising amongst magistrates in relation to the sentencing of primary carers.

ACTION 6: Sarah Morton and Lauren Small to consider feedback and work with the Board to ensure the dashboard reflects members' priorities, including exploring options for more qualitative analysis and local data disaggregation. Lord Timpson suggested this follow-up should take place at a future Board meeting.

ACTION 7: A meeting between the Women's Justice Board and the Sentencing Bill team to be set up (to take place over summer).

ACTION 8: Female Offender policy team to set up a meeting between Women's Justice Board members and Minister Dakin to discuss the Sentencing Review.

ACTION 9: The Women's Justice Board Secretariat to contact HM Treasury and locate the presentation delivered a few years ago to the Advisory Board for Female Offenders on cross-government savings modelling. Secretariat to also investigate whether colleagues from HM Treasury would be able to update the figures in the presentation.