



Probation Board for Northern Ireland

Women's Strategy 2025-2029

1. INTRODUCTION

Historical Context

In 2008, PBNI established the Inspire Women's Project, initially funded as a pilot, to deliver gender informed community supervision and interventions to women subject to Probation supervision. 'Inspire' comprised a separate Belfast Probation premises, with a dedicated Belfast based team of female Probation Officers, supported by PBNI (and other) funded services from the Community and Voluntary sector. There was an aspiration for this model to be available for rural female service users as well, but this was not progressed. However, despite the geographical limitations, this was a progressive approach at that time, following publication of the Corston Report in 2008¹ and latterly, the Northern Ireland Office 'Draft Strategy on the Management of Women Offenders'² which recognised that justice-involved women's needs were fundamentally different to men, requiring a distinct response.

As noted, at the core of the Inspire Women's Project was a 'one-stop' partnership approach delivered by female-only Probation Officers based in a dedicated premises, and working collaboratively with partner agencies including NIACRO and the Women's Support Network. The key principle which remains relevant is that "gender matters". A gender-informed approach based on responding to women's unique needs and delivering interventions to ensure equality and best outcomes was central. This model of practice (the Inspire Model) encompassed a holistic approach to also consider women's needs through "(a) supportive women only environment where women (were) supported to address the impact of sexual abuse and violence, to improve self-esteem and be empowered to take control of their lives thus reducing likelihood of re-offending" (O'Neill, 2011)³.

An evaluation by London South Bank University in 2010 highlighted the success of the Inspire Model in reducing re-offending⁴. Separately a review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service in 2011, recommended that the Inspire model should be adopted as the norm for dealing with women who offend stating "It should be centrally funded, but planned and delivered by a partnership of statutory, voluntary and community organisations" (Owers, 2011).

In 2021 the Inspire building was closed, for budgetary reasons, and a dedicated, geographically distributed Inspire team of Probation Officers continued, with a dispersal model adopted under the line management of a dedicated Area Manager.

¹ Corston, J A Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System, March 2007, (recommendation 35) available at, [Corston report - review of women with vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system](#)

² [Microsoft Word - Final Draft 28 10 10 A Strategy to Manage Women Offenders and Those Vulnerable to Offending Behaviour.DOC](#)

³ O'Neill, J The Inspire Women's Project: Managing Women Offenders within the Community, Irish Probation Journal, Volume 8, October 2011.

⁴ CJI, How the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland Treats Females in Conflict with the Law, November 2021.

This approach was taken due to the potential inequality for females with a Belfast-centric approach and dedicated premises in the first iteration of the model, whilst still seeking to adopt a specialist team approach.

Current Operating Model

The Inspire Model continued with this delivery approach until March 2021 when after a review of the model a decision was taken for the dedicated 'team' to be discontinued, and staff (and service users) to be placed under the line management of the geographical teams throughout Northern Ireland,

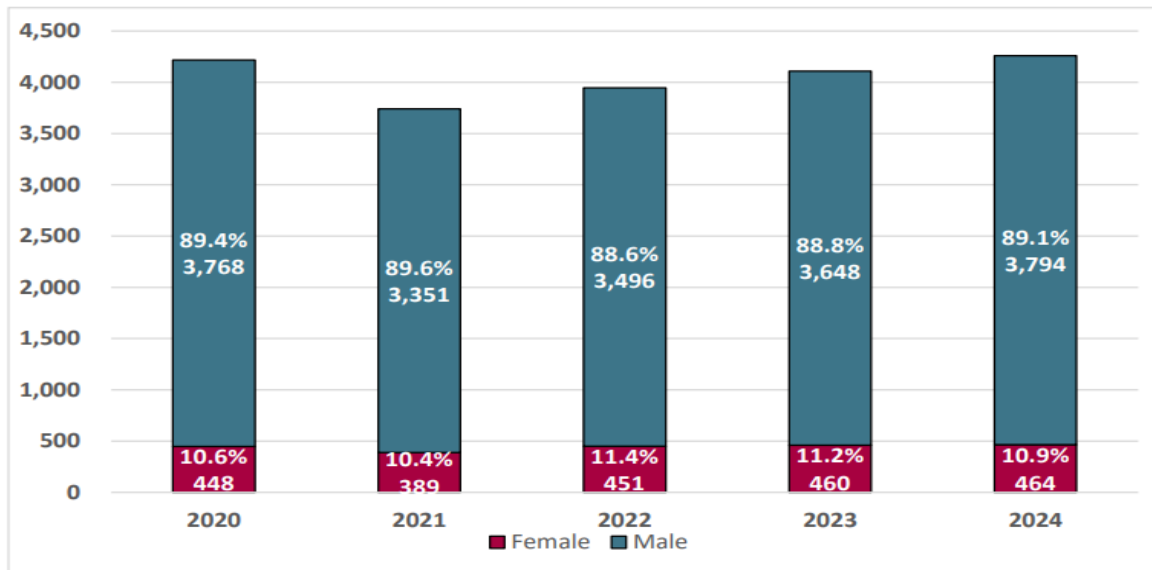
This review of the Inspire Model in 2021 based on evaluation of local and international research⁵, and feedback from service users, staff, and Area Managers alike, highlighted good working partnerships with local community resources for women across the region. Learning did not support a dedicated premises approach, and a preference was highlighted for continued service delivery through the Inspire Team by dedicated Probation Officers based in local offices.

The model is supported by a dedicated Women's Champion, at Area Manager grade, whose role is to support quality practice, consistent operational delivery and staff well-being through the Inspire staff forums. The role based within Hydebank Wood College also provides oversight and consistency of transition of women service users from custody to community.

Caseload

Trends over the past five years show that the numbers of female service users supervised by PBNI have remained relatively consistent.

⁵ Covington, S. and Bloom, B. (2003). *Gendered Justice: Addressing Female Offenders*, Carolina Academic Press. Belknap, J. (2007). *The Invisible Woman: Gender, Crime, and Justice*. Belmont, Canada: Thomson Wadsworth Publishing Company. Chesney-Lind, M. (1997). 'Women and Crime: The Female Offender'. *Sign* **12** 1 pp 78 – 96. Hannah-Moffat, K. (2004). *Punishment in Disguise: Penal Governance and Canadian Women's Imprisonment*. Toronto: Toronto University Press



Service users supervised by PBNI by gender, 31 March 2020 to 31 March 2024

2. STRATEGIC VISION

This strategy will develop the current Inspire Model and service delivery with women for outcomes which are gender responsive, and trauma informed, while also developing and supporting staff involved in delivery. This aligns with core strategic objectives to support women's rehabilitation to reduce re-offending and harm caused to help make communities safer⁶.

The current Inspire Model is gender informed, which recognises and understands the role that gender plays in shaping a woman's experience and how this influences the pathway to offending, which differs from men. PBNI recognises the need however to enhance gender responsiveness. Gender responsive practice goes beyond recognising gender differences, to actively adapt probation intervention and practice to meet gender-specific needs and improve rehabilitation outcomes. Therefore, this needs to consider all aspects of service delivery from environment, to staff involved, and intervention itself. This will be incorporated into best practice guidance of core principles of working with women within the strategy action plan.

The core strategic drivers for this strategy are:

- Supporting Change; A Strategy for Women and Girls in or at Risk of Contact with the Justice System, DOJ, 2022-2029, and corresponding Action Plan,

⁶ Consultation and liaison to assist development of this strategy has taken place with MOJ, HMPPS, Irish Probation Service (IPS), PSNI, Youth Justice Agency (YJA), Women's Resource Development Agency (WRDA), START 360, PBNI Inspire staff and PBNI current/ former women service users.

2024-2026 which aims to end harm by empowering women and society through early prevention, in the community and in custody through a gender-responsive, trauma informed and whole-systems approach.

- Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027 which outlines the need to tackle violence against women and girls.
- Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, Strategic Framework 2024-2031, and Delivery Plan, 2024-2026
- PBNi Corporate Plan 2023-2026 which is based upon the principles of trauma-informed practice to support service users and staff.
- PBNi Service User Involvement Strategy 2021-2025, which highlights the strategic benefit of service user involvement in planning, development and evaluation of services.
- Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, How the Criminal Justice System in NI Treats Females in Conflict with the Law, 2021 which stated that while the Criminal Justice system had a gender sensitive ethos, it needed to enhance its gender responsiveness. Further stating that while gender-informed practice was evident in PBNi's Inspire Model of practice, the precise nature of the approach, and standards for delivery of the model was unclear. This strategy therefore builds upon Operational Recommendation 2 specifically: Within six months of the report publication, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland should complete and implement its review of the Inspire Delivery Model with ongoing training, review of resource and evaluation.

Principles of Gender Responsive Practice

The Criminal Justice Inspection on how the Justice system in Northern Ireland treats females in conflict with the law stated, "Gender responsiveness is not about a different standard being applied to police actions, prosecution decisions or probation practice because the defendant is a woman or a girl. Enforcing laws, bringing offenders to justice and the impact of crime on victims must prevail. However, it is about how criminal justice organisations take account and deliver services specific to women and girls to provide equitable outcomes" (CJI, 2021).

1.Acknowledge Gender Differences

- Recognise the unique social, psychological and economic factors that contribute to women's offending such as histories of trauma, abuse, mental health issues and caregiving responsibilities.

2.Strengths-based and Empowerment Orientated

- Focus on building women's self-efficacy and supporting their goals
- Encourage agency and decision-making in their rehabilitation process

3.Holistic Case Management

- Assess and address the full range of women's needs- mental health, substance use, housing, employment, parenting and relationships

- Use gender-responsive risk and needs assessment and case-planning

4. Relationship-Based Supervision

- Build trust-based, supportive relationships between Probation Officers and women
- Recognise the importance of relational support for women's rehabilitation

5. Community and Family Integration

- Promote connections to positive social supports, including children, families and community services
- Support women's roles as caregivers when safe and appropriate

6. Collaboration with Community Resources

- Work closely with service providers who specialise in women's health, domestic violence, trauma recovery and other relevant areas

Trauma Informed

In view of the prevalence of trauma and adversity amongst women service users in contact with PBNI, the implementation of a gender-responsive approach will be based on trauma-informed principles recognising the need to create safe, respectful environments. These principles, adapted by SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) are outlined within PBNI's Corporate Plan 2023-2026 as follows:

- Safety; fostering psychological and physical safety in staff and service users.
- Trustworthiness and transparency; across systems to promote a sense of fairness.
- Peer support.
- Collaboration and mutuality; a shared vision where everyone has a role to play.
- Empowerment, voice and choice; service users as key stakeholders influence key decisions.
- The recognition of the cultural, historical, and gender issues (including sectarianism) which impact on service users.⁷

⁷ PBNI Corporate Plan 2023-2026, (adapted from SAMHSA [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Support Administration], 2014)

Why is a Gender Responsive, Trauma Informed approach necessary?

Women involved within the Criminal Justice system are amongst the most vulnerable in society. Evidence highlights that women who offend have frequently experienced multiple complex traumas at higher incidences than male counterparts. This includes childhood adversity, domestic abuse, mental health difficulties or addiction problems which is exacerbated by and impacts upon childcare and other caring responsibilities. Therefore, while accounting for small numbers within the Justice system generally and 11%, 435 women (as of January 2025) of PBNI caseload, the impact for victims, the women and girls themselves, their families and wider society is long-lasting⁸. In reverse, when women are supported to achieve better outcomes, there is benefit not just for the woman herself, and children, but wider society which supports PBNI's aim of reducing re-offending for safer communities.

Females involved with the Justice system are also more likely to have been a victim of crime. Within Northern Ireland (NI) 69% of all victims of domestic abuse offences recorded by PSNI in 2022-2023 were female. The Strategic Framework for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in NI notes that women are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence⁹. Therefore, this strategy aligns with key Government priorities to tackle root causes of violence against women¹⁰, through recognising and responding to women's own trauma and adversity, whilst also challenging offending behaviours and responding in a trauma informed and gender-responsive manner. Within the local context it is also recognised that women in NI experience unique oppressions arising from the conflict, sectarianism and potential paramilitarism within communities further exacerbated within specific groups of women (LGBTQIA, foreign nationals)¹¹.

Lastly, in view of women's complex histories, it is widely known that the factors which lead men and women to offend varies significantly. Despite generally being assessed as lower likelihood of re-offending, women are more likely than men to have been sentenced to short prison sentences of 12 months or less for lower-level offences⁴. It is evident that contact with the Justice system for women can lead to pervasive shame and stigma with research highlighting that the personal cost is high¹².

A gender responsive approach which considers women's differing needs, backgrounds and pathway's to offending is therefore considered most effective¹³.

⁸ Supporting Change: A Strategy for Women and Girls in or at Risk of Contact with the Criminal Justice System, DOJ, 2022-2029.

⁹ Strategic Framework: Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, 2024-2031, available at [Strategic Framework – EVAWG](#)

¹⁰ Draft Programme for Government, 2024-2027, NIE, available at [Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most' | The Northern Ireland Executive](#)

¹¹ McNaul, G (2019) The Space in-between: The Gendered Marginalisation of Women's Custodial Remand.

¹² O'Neill, J Time After Time: A Study of Women's Transitions from Custody, 2016

¹³ Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan, MOJ, 2023.

3. STRATEGIC OUTCOMES (WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO ACHIEVE)

This strategy utilises an outcomes-based approach to deliver the overall strategic vision of supporting women's rehabilitation and reducing re-offending through developing the current Inspire Model and service delivery with women for outcomes which are gender responsive, and trauma informed.

In doing so, PBNi recognises the importance of developing and supporting staff who work with women service users that may have experienced multiple traumas and present with complex lives to maintain and develop effective service delivery. Therefore, we will equip staff with the relevant knowledge, skills and gender-specific training, in addition to supporting staff to remain resilient and well in the workplace.

Outcomes

Five key outcomes have therefore been identified within this strategy which directly align with PBNi strategic priorities as stated within PBNi's Corporate Plan 2023-2026 specifically, People, Partnerships, Funding, and Services.

Outcome 1: A shared understanding of the core principles of working with women implemented within best practice guidance.

Outcome 2: A gender-responsive, trauma-informed and resilient workforce trained to focus on holistic needs of women.

Outcome 3: Enhanced partnerships with delivery partners and local community and voluntary sector agencies.

Outcome 4: Promote interventions and service delivery which is evidence-based, gender-responsive and implemented with a trauma-informed approach.

Outcome 5: Enhanced staff development and support through the Inspire Forum, training and supervision.

Measures of success

Through focus on the five identified key outcomes and corresponding action plan, the following measures of success will be monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis, with underpinning data gathered:

- Shared organisational understanding on how best to work with women leading to improved service delivery.
- High levels of participation by women service users in development and evaluation of services leading to increased ownership and responsibility.

- Responsive interventions and service delivery which is needs-led, trauma-informed, and that works.
- Enhanced partnerships and collaborative approach to supporting women to improve their life circumstances and community reintegration.
- Supported and empowered workforce increasing resilience and positive well-being
- High levels of compliance by women service users with Probation supervision.

Reduced re-offending, and harm caused leading to fewer victims and safer communities.

4. ACTION PLAN

PBNI is committed to achieving the strategic vision set out within this strategy. The corresponding action plan sets out how this will be achieved

	Action	Lead	Completion date
1.	Develop best Practice Guidance for staff working with women	AD Prisons	Q3 2025
2.	Implement a Transition Protocol to support Young Women transitioning from YJA to adult justice with PBNI.	AD Prisons	Q2 2025
3.	Implement a pilot within Hydebank Wood to develop transition from custody to community for women service users	AD Prisons/ Women's AM Champion	Q2 2025 development and implementation Q3
4.	Develop and implement gender-responsive training for Inspire Team and all PBNI staff	L&OD/ AD prisons	Q3 2025 development and implementation Q4
5.	Women's AM Champion to represent the women's strategy and promote trauma informed practice via membership of TRIG.	Women's AM Champion	Q1 2025
6.	Ongoing development of the Inspire Forum to enhance practice development and staff support. Representatives from CS, ISU to be included.	Women's AM Champion.	Q2 2025

7.	Enhance service user engagement through use of lived experience pre-release with women.	AD Prisons	Q3 2025
8.	Develop partnerships with gender responsive community and voluntary sector partners, to include funded partnerships, local Women's Centres.	AD Prisons with Women's AM Champion and AM's	Q3 2025
9.	Consultancy on What Works to support staff working with women and implementation of agreed recommendations.	Psychology Team/ AD Prisons	Q3 2025
10.	Review of What Works psychologically in interventions with women.	Psychology Team	Q3 2025
11.	Dedicated Psychologist to be identified for the Inspire Team to provide gender-responsive advice on interventions.	AD Prisons with Head of Psychology	Q2 2025
12.	Develop a brief intervention, co-produced with women service users on healthy relationships	Consultancy Work	Q4 2025
13.	Promote internal and external awareness of the Women's Strategy	Head of Communications	Q2 2025 ongoing
14.	Promotion of gender responsive practice through practice seminars at local team meetings.	AMs	Q4 2025

5. EVALUATION

The above action plan will be reviewed on an annual basis and reported on in terms of business plan reporting.

An evaluation group will be developed comprised of AD Prisons, Women's AM Champion, Inspire staff and service users to review progress on a bi-annual basis.