



Department of
Justice

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Mánnystrie o tha Laa

Supporting Change – a strategy for women and girls in, or at risk of contact with, the justice system

Progress Report 2022-2025

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

The Department of Justice published “[Supporting Change – A Strategy for women and girls in or at risk of contact with the justice system](#)” in March 2022. The Strategy has a life span of seven years, and in the four years since it was published, a comprehensive number of actions have been completed. This report highlights the progress made during the life span of the Strategy’s first action plan which covered the period between April 2022 and March 2025.

Background

The first strategy in Northern Ireland with a focus on improving outcomes specifically for women and girls in, or at risk of contact with, the justice system, was launched by the Justice Minister in March 2022. Its vision - “*ending harm by empowering women and society*” - clearly sets the tone for this work. It emphasises an approach that is not about acting on behalf of women but rather about equipping them with the skills, confidence and resources needed to shape and improve their own life outcomes.

While led by the Department of Justice, the strategy was developed in partnership with key Government Departments, including Health, Communities and Education. Voluntary and community sector organisations were also engaged and, importantly, the Strategy was informed by the views of those with lived experience. In addition, a range of reviews and reports produced by academics and subject experts contributed to its development and were instrumental in shaping the resulting action plans.

In order to ensure the strategy delivered right across the spectrum in terms of meeting the needs of women and girls in contact with the justice system, it was structured across three broad themes: **Early** (a culture of prevention and early intervention for women); **In the Community** (effective and suitable alternatives to custody and supervision of women in the community); and **In and Beyond Custody** (a fit for purpose, rehabilitative, restorative, therapeutic custodial environment for women).

Within each of these themes, three priorities were identified, designed to enhance the strategy’s co-ordinated response to women and girls. Everything delivered and achieved through the strategy will be underpinned by the following three key principles:

- i. Gender responsive and person centred;
- ii. Trauma informed and holistic; and
- iii. Pro-active and responsive.

Governance of the Strategy

Following publication, with a view to ensuring effective execution of the Women and Girls Strategy, a Delivery Group was established early in 2023. The group is chaired by Reducing Offending Division within the Department of Justice and meets three times a year. Membership comprises the key organisations identified as having a role in delivering improved outcomes for girls and women in the justice system. A full list of the organisations represented can be found in the attached Terms of Reference for the group (Annex A).

In the early years of implementation, regular updates in relation to progress were provided to the Reducing Reoffending Strategic Oversight Group, which was chaired at Deputy Permanent Secretary level and attended by senior representatives from the key justice organisations. This group was stood down in August 2025 following the introduction of new governance arrangements developed to support the delivery of a new cross-Executive strategy focused on reducing offending and reoffending.

It has been agreed that periodic progress reports will be produced and published to highlight the work and achievements of the Women and Girls Strategy Delivery Group. This inaugural report covers the period from April 2022 to March 2025.

Action Plans (2022-2025)

The Women and Girls Strategy Delivery Group's first key task was to agree the actions which would be required in order to deliver the aims of the Strategy. A decision was taken early in the process to develop two actions plans – one for women and a separate one for girls in contact with the justice system. This was to ensure that the different needs of both cohorts were properly considered and that actions were tailored accordingly. Both plans also took account of the recommendations published in the 2021 Criminal Justice Inspectorate NI report – [How the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland treats females in conflict with the law](#).

These plans were formally signed off by the Delivery Group in October 2023 and while initially intended to cover the period 2022-2024, they were extended until March 2025. New plans which will cover the remaining strategy period (up to March 2029) were developing during the course of 2025 and have been agreed. Subsequent progress reports, to be published biennially, will cover the delivery of actions in the new plans.

Engagement with those with lived experience

Ensuring the voices of woman and girls in contact with the justice system were heard and taken account of was a key element in the development of the strategy and

continues to be important in the inclusion and subsequent implementation of actions. The views of those with lived experience of the system, and individuals who work with them, are particularly beneficial in informing policy and effective service development. Information in relation to engagement with these key stakeholders as part of the delivery of work is provided throughout the report. We are committed to continuing to engage on a regular basis throughout the lifespan of the strategy to ensure interventions are targeted, practical and effective.

Report format

Updates on progress made in implementing the strategy have been provided in the next sections under the headings of the three key themes highlighted earlier in this document – early; in the community; and in and out of custody. Any specific actions delivered in relation to girls are clearly outlined.

THEME 1 – SUPPORTING CHANGE EARLY

Three priorities were identified within this theme:

- (i) A shared understanding of women's and girls' needs and pathways in and out of offending;
- (ii) Increased collaboration to support and prevent women and girls with complex needs from entering the justice system; and
- (iii) Accessible and effective wrap around services for women and girls delivered through and beyond justice.

Context

Women make up a small proportion of people in contact with the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. In 2024/25, adult women accounted for approximately 20% of all court convictions; 10% of Probation Board cases; and around 6% of the prison population. In respect of girls in the youth justice system, in 2024/25 females made up almost 26% of referrals to youth justice services and 27% of those in custody in the Juvenile Justice Centre during that period. An infographic detailing information relating to women and girls in the justice system is attached at Annex B.

However, while the number of females is much smaller than that of males any engagement with the justice system can have a significant and detrimental impact – not only on their own lives but on their children, wider families and their communities. Available research has demonstrated that the female pathway, both in and out of offending, typically differs from that of males. A high percentage of women come into contact with the justice system because of a vulnerability, or as a result of low-level offences such as acquisitive crime. In general terms, it is considered that women are less likely than men to commit serious or violent offences. However, further research is required in order to understand what the implications of this are and what interventions should be developed in order to provide better outcomes for women.

What the available research has shown us, is that women in contact with the justice system have much higher incidences of health and social care needs compared with the general population. Whilst complex issues, including substance abuse, addiction, poor mental health (depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm), accommodation problems, unemployment and poverty are frequently prevalent amongst offenders, females are more likely to report a history of domestic abuse (including coercive control), sexual abuse, exploitation and trauma. Similarly, social exclusion is known to be a factor which leads to offending behaviour and higher levels are reported by female offenders.

For all the above reasons, the range of complex issues prevalent in female offenders, particularly those relating to abuse or exploitation, are often better addressed by a health or welfare-led response as opposed to a punitive criminal justice response.

Supporting change early is about ensuring that women and girls get the right support at the right time.

Actions and Progress Update

Action	Progress
Establish and embed appropriate governance to deliver key actions and initiatives for women and girls throughout the lifetime of the strategy <u>Sub-actions</u> • Establish a women and girls strategy delivery group. • Agree action plans • Establish and co-ordinate: ○ a senior sponsors' network; ○ an engagement network; and ○ network events. • Promote co-design and the participation of those most affected including victims and women and their families with lived experience. Lead – DoJ (Reducing Offending Division – ROD) Status – Achieved	Governance structures have been established in order to deliver on the actions outlined in the plans as follows: - The establishment of the Women and Girls Strategy Delivery Group (WGSDG). Terms of Reference for the group were agreed at its first meeting held in March 2023 (Annex A). - Two separate action plans – one for girls and one for women – were developed and these were agreed in October 2023. Implementation of both plans were extended to March 2025. - A Senior Sponsors' Network was established in May 2024. The aim of the network is to drive a gender responsive approach across the Department and justice agencies. - Following ongoing consideration and debate, it was agreed by the WGSDG that a further engagement network was not required, and engagement from relevant stakeholders, including those with lived experience, would be sought during key touchpoints.
Raise awareness of current and emerging issues affecting women and girls in, or at risk of, contact with the justice system. <u>Sub-actions</u> • Maximise opportunities available through senior sponsors network and other	During the past four years, members of the Women and Girls Strategy Delivery Group have used every opportunity available to highlight the particular issues faced by women in the justice system. This has taken various forms including using the arts, via theatre performances; presenting on the Women and Girls Strategy at a number of different meetings; and directly engaging with those with lived experience in order to inform future services. Some examples of engagement are provided below:

relevant multi-agency, cross-departmental fora; • Share insights into experience of women and girls in the justice system; and • Inform policy, practice and guidance for those supporting women and girls at an early stage, to ensure that it is gender-responsive and aligned with best practice, taking cognisance of specific groups. Lead – WGSDG members Status – Achieved	- Six in-person performances of Runny Honey (a play highlighting the particular issues faced by women in prison) were delivered at the launch of the strategy and separately to statutory partners, VCS partners, women and young men in Hydebank Wood and PBNI female users. - A digital performance of Runny Honey was procured for a year and shared with relevant stakeholders. - A spotlight session on the women and girls strategy was delivered at the Reducing Reoffending Strategic Oversight Group meeting in March 2023. - Officials delivered a presentation on women and girls in the justice system to the Children and Young Person's Strategic Partnership Offending Subgroup in May 2024. PSNI - In partnership with the Department of Justice and the Executive Office, PSNI launched a new <u>Power to Change</u> campaign to tackle gender-based violence. This campaign encourages men and boys to help play their part in affecting a cultural and societal shift. Whilst the primary objective of the campaign is to reduce gender-based violence (GBV), victimisation through GBV (both domestic abuse and sexual violence) represents the most significant pathway towards female offending. By reducing this, we can protect women and girls from the trauma and abuse which can lead, in some cases, to offending behaviour. In order to inform policy, practice and guidance, the following progress was made: - A fact-finding exercise was carried out by PBNI with women in Hydebank Wood to inform a proposed pilot for the bail support scheme. - NIPS supported the Prison Reform Trust to conduct a study with long-term women in custody to scope interventions and support. - The YJA facilitated research by QUB and the University of Limerick in relation to gendered experiences and pathways to justice contact for girls in Northern Ireland.
---	---

	- Input was provided for the first “Women in Justice” event (hosted by the NIPS Women’s Network and the University of Ulster) in May 2024. - The profile of women in the care of NIPS was highlighted at Five Nations meetings held in 2024.
Work with key partners to develop a whole systems approach for women and girls who come into contact with the justice system, focusing on their journey through the system, focusing on transitions seeking to identify gaps in, or barriers to provision. <u>Sub-actions</u> • Seek to build the evidence base and improve data and analysis available on the profile (and needs) of women and girls in contact with the justice system in order to enable personalised and gender responsive services; • Map how women and girls come into contact and move through the justice system at all stages; and • Outline a range of measures to ensure the best interests of children impacted by parental involvement in the criminal justice system, taking specific account of mothers with dependent children. Lead – WGSDG members Status – Partially achieved	- An updated operating protocol for multi-agency support hubs was introduced in December 2024. The principles of the protocol support a “whole systems approach” ethos, focusing on the individual, collaboration, professionalism, shared decision-making, trauma informed practice and consent/data protection. - An updated infographic (see Annex B) highlighting the key facts and figures concerning female contact with the justice system in Northern Ireland has been shared with relevant organisations. - Prisoner Needs Profile data, which collects information on women in Hydebank Wood in relation to a number of key areas, such as key relationships and physical and mental health, along with the Personal Development Plan which aims to improve skills, address needs and prepare the individual to return to society, are completed within 40 days in custody. NIPS - The NIPS Mother and Baby Policy has been comprehensively reviewed, with a Policy Lead in place. In addition, the Mother and Baby Unit within Hydebank – a self-contained facility with 6 bedrooms - has been refurbished. - A Child Protection Committee within NIPS was commenced in January 2024. The committee will: ○ Consider any applications for child contact submitted from those who may pose a risk to children. ○ Review any current restrictions on individuals contact with children. ○ Support and identify any training needs in relation to child protection. ○ Provide updates on any reported concerns of child abuse.

	○ Provide updates on Mother and Baby Unit (when applicable), including any applications submitted. - Child-focused visits to Hydebank Wood to dispel myths, concerns and trauma for children with parents in custody, were carried out. PSNI - The PSNI has been involved in campaigns highlighting paramilitary gangs' use of illegal money lending in order to control and coerce victims. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to this type of coercion, which can often be a pathway into offending. Guidance has also been developed for police officers in respect of this. PBNI - In partnership with the Department of Health, PBNI has developed practice guidance to consider the impact of imprisonment for the dependents of women facing a custodial sentence at the pre-sentence report stage. PBNI practice standards have been updated accordingly. Due to resourcing issues within DoJ, there has been limited progress made in relation to the mapping exercise and measures to ensure the best interests of children impacted by parental involvement with the justice system. Both of these actions have been carried forward in the new action plan and work will commence on them in the 2026/27 year.
--	---

THEME 2 – SUPPORTING CHANGE IN THE COMMUNITY

Three priorities were identified within this theme:

- (i) Tailored support and pathways from offending for women and girls in the community;
- (ii) Comprehensive sustainable community-based solutions for women and girls; and
- (iii) A shared appreciation of the need to support women and girls, where we can, in the community.

Context

While periods in custody will have negative impacts on outcomes for both sexes, it is recognised that women who have spent time in prison experience greater levels of stigmatisation, not only within their own communities but also in the way they are portrayed in the media. We know from research that women are typically sentenced to custody for lower-level offences than men, which explains why they are also more likely to serve sentences of under one year than the male cohort. Short sentences are shown to be of little benefit, both in terms of allowing sufficient time for rehabilitation but also with regards to public protection. However, the impact of short sentences on the women themselves, and often their families, can be significant.

Not only are more women in custody in Northern Ireland today than in any period in recent history, the proportion of women on remand (50% during 2024/25) is particularly high when compared with other UK jurisdictions. Given that almost half of those on remand will not go on to receive a custodial sentence, it begs the question as to whether the period on remand was really necessary. For most women, even a short period in custody such as that on remand, can have a devastating impact on them, their families and particularly on any children they may have. The resulting disruption to employment, accommodation and benefits can have long lasting consequences, outstripping the period originally spent in custody.

As female offenders, by and large, present a much lower risk to the public than male offenders, there is a strong argument for increasing the use of community-based solutions for women. A body of evidence exists which highlights that in a community setting, women are more likely to access support which improves their chances of desisting from offending/further offending. This is further enhanced if the support is provided on a multi-agency basis and is based around the development of strong interpersonal relationships.

Actions and progress update

Action	Progress
Develop cross-cutting expectations for working with women and girls in the community. <u>Sub-actions</u> • Improve gender-responsive practice when working with women and girls in the community. • Develop a guide for Police Officers on a female-centred approach to women and girls' offending; • Develop a practice guide for working with girls as part of the new YJA model of practice; • Develop a gender-responsive approach in the community to support young women transitioning between youth and adult offending; • Provide appropriate support and wellbeing services for staff working with girls in the community; • Complete and implement the review of the gender-responsive PBNI INSPIRE model regionally; • Review training and resources for staff. Leads – YJA, PSNI and PBNI Status – Achieved	PSNI - The PSNI established an internal Women and Girls (in conflict with the law) Working Group in December 2023, in order to support the development of gender-responsive practice. The work of this group to date has focused on short-term, practical, achievable changes to practice. - It has also supported the NIACRO Connections programme through PSNI membership of the Steering Group and its work to raise awareness and support referrals into the programme; - A draft guidance document on a female-centred approach has been developed and remains under review. The PSNI will consider the implications of gender responsive guidance before introducing any changes to practice. Progress will be reported in the new rolling action plan for 2025-2029. YJA - A Champion's Group was established within the YJA to promote gender-responsive practice within local area teams. - Guidance for working with girls as part of the new Model of Practice in YJA has been completed and shared with relevant staff. - Awareness raising workshops were delivered to YJA staff working with girls in community services. - Guidance around support for young women transitioning between youth and adult offending has been developed and agreed between YJA and PBNI. PBNI - The PBNI Hydebank Area Manager has been appointed as the PBNI Women's Champion to ensure gender responsive focus on transition from custody for women service users. - A review of the PBNI Inspire Model was completed in 2022.

	- Learning from the review of the Inspire Model was built into a PBNI Women's Strategy, 2025-2029 to enhance gender responsive and trauma informed practice with female service users. - The Strategy Year 1 action plan, based on feedback from staff, service users and research, has delivered the following: • Quarterly INSPIRE forums have been enhanced to promote gender-responsive practice, staff training, development and well-being. • A PBNI Probation Service Officer pilot has been delivered in Hydebank Wood to enhance through the gate support, pre-release intervention including 1:1 offence focused work and post-release support for women to ensure best practice. • PBNI-YJA Transition Protocol guidance developed to support young women transitioning to adult supervision with PBNI. • Development of a pre-release PBNI women's service user group including use of lived experience from women in the community to maximise pre-release support for women in custody due for release on Licence. • A review of 'What Works' in psychological intervention with women service users. • Dedicated PBNI Psychologist identified for women service users to ensure gender responsive intervention and case advice for PBNI staff working with women. • Review of PBNI staff training for those working with women. Implementation of HMPPS gender responsive training package, Empowering Women, Working Well for all operational staff. • Psychology review of how best to support staff well-being for those working directly with women service users. • Continued EPPOC funding for the PBNI-START 360 Engage Project for 80 women per year subject to statutory supervision, women leaving custody or those whom PBNI have prepared a Pre-Sentence Report and not sentenced to supervision.
--	--

	• PBNI have supported the NIACRO Connections programme through steering group representation.
Explore the potential for gender-responsive alternatives to remand and short sentences. <u>Sub-actions</u> • Under the auspices of the DoJ-led Working Group on Remand, ensure that women's needs are represented when identifying and implementing viable alternatives to remand. • Promote out of court disposals, diversion and sentencing alternatives for women. Lead – DoJ (ROD) Status – Achieved	- The prevalence of remand for women is raised at each Working Group on Remand meeting. These meetings, which are chaired by the Deputy Secretary of Reducing Offending Division, are held quarterly and provide an opportunity for relevant justice organisations to seek to identify alternatives to remand. Actions being taken forward by the group include case reviews, expansion of electronic monitoring technology, review of legislation and a bail support scheme pilot. - A task and finish group is in the process of designing a bail support pilot for women in Northern Ireland in order to reduce the number of women being held on remand. The pilot will launch in 2026/27 and will focus on providing wrap around support to help women live independently, whilst helping to address any offending behaviours including mental health and addiction.

THEME 3 – SUPPORTING CHANGE IN AND BEYOND CUSTODY

The following three priorities were identified within this theme:

- (i) Bespoke rehabilitative support and pathways from offending for women and girls within and beyond custody;
- (ii) A gender and trauma informed environment and workforce focused on the holistic needs of women and girls; and
- (iii) A collective ethos that women and girls in custody are part of the community, not apart from the community.

Context

In recent years, Northern Ireland has witnessed an exponential increase in the number of women being held in custody, both in terms of those on remand and those sentenced, whilst a similar increase has not been observed in respect of the number of women arrested under PACE. The average daily prison population of females more than doubled between 2015/16 and 2024/25, rising from 53 to 108. While delays in processing cases as a result of Covid may explain some of this increase, there are evidently other factors at play.

Many of the women who are sentenced to custody have a range of complex needs, with histories of mental ill health, addiction and self-harm, which require to be taken account of in the development of services and programmes aimed at supporting rehabilitation and minimising the risk of reoffending upon release. Evidence suggests that key to the delivery of successful interventions delivered in prison are the relationships which are built around them, allowing the women to feel supported and safe. An awareness of past trauma and victimisation is also important, both in the design and implementation of resettlement interventions – considerations such as the environment and the need for non-confrontational approaches to addressing offending behaviour should be taken into account. The training of staff and service providers working within prisons needs to be aligned with gender-responsive approaches and international best practice with regards to women in the justice system.

Finally, smooth transitions between custody and the community are essential if women and girls are to continue on their rehabilitation journey once the custodial period is over. Disconnects between service providers are all too common, with issues also arising if the available accommodation upon release is not located close to vital mental health or addiction services.

Actions and Progress Update

Action	Progress
Provide a modern, restorative and therapeutic custodial environment for women and girls. <u>Sub-actions</u> • Bespoke rehabilitative support and pathways from offending. • Deliver initiatives to support the physical and mental wellbeing of women and girls in custody. • Align role of women's support officer with the strategy, catering for the complex needs of women in custody who have experienced trauma. • Align estates projects with strategic approach. • Support transitions from custody to the community. • Support the harmonisation of service provision between Woodlands JJC and Lakewood Regional Secure Care Centre, catering for the complex needs of girls in custody who have experienced trauma. Leads – DoJ (ROD), YJA, NIPS, PBNI, PSNI, DOH, DfC, SEHSCT Status – Achieved	PSNI - The PSNI developed a Custody Care and Dignity Model for female detainees in 2025. The model takes a number of factors into consideration including health hygiene and welfare; menopause; body searches; breastfeeding; caring responsibilities etc. Implementation of the Model will be an action in the rolling action plan for 2025-2029. NIPS - The Prisoner Development Model (PDM) offers a comprehensive, whole prison approach to addressing the needs, strengths, and risks associated with individuals, including females, under the care of the justice system. Its objective is to foster an environment in which prisoners are supported, encouraged, and motivated throughout their sentence, appropriate to their specific needs, in order to facilitate their resettlement and rehabilitation. The foundation of the model are the nine resettlement pathways which include (amongst others) accommodation, employment, health and finance. - A Women's Support Officer for the NI Prison Service has been recruited and funding for the post secured through the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy funding. The role of the Support Worker is to provide support to women in NIPS care, particularly those who have disclosed to NIPS experience of domestic and/or sexual violence, abuse and exploitation. - A series of programmes were delivered in Hydebank Wood including a Trauma Talks pilot, the Beyond Violence programme and continued delivery of White Ribbon interventions, which aim to end violence against women and girls by changing the attitudes and behaviours of boys and men. - Women are supported to engage in restorative justice, if they wish to do so, and Hydebank Wood is represented on the DoJ-led Restorative Practice Steering Group.

	- Females in custody can participate in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. Female centred physical activity is also provided for. - In order to support mental health, females in custody can avail of one-to-one counselling from Nexus NI. Access to advice from Women's Aid is also available. - An outline business case for a new female custodial facility was reviewed in line with the strategy and completed. - Two other estates facilities were completed in line with the strategic approach – a new female care and supervision unit, and the new mother and baby unit. - A targeted version of the Belfast Complex Lives model is being piloted in Hydebank Wood in order to help highly vulnerable women who are known to the Complex Lives Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT), or who wish to be supported by the Complex Lives MDT, to engage with the range of support services they need, stabilise their lives, progress through a recovery journey and reduce reoffending. This is due to be launched during the reporting period of the next W&G Action Plan. YJA - Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre, has developed a shared therapeutic and mental health service which operates across both the JJC and Lakewood Regional Secure Care Centre. This service, called Acorn, consists of a multi-disciplinary team which comprises psychiatry, psychology, occupational therapy and mental health nursing. - A new senior nurse was appointed during 2024/25 who will take forward a new joint primary care model for application across both sites. - The YJA senior team and the lead for Looked After Children in Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) meet in order to share knowledge and ideas for improvements in practice, including around transitions from secure care or custody into community settings.
--	---

	SEHSCT - The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust continues to provide equivalency of primary health care services to women in custody through the healthcare in prison team. PBNI - PBNI continues to co-ordinate pre-release planning with all sentenced women service users being released from custody subject to PBNI supervision 12 months pre-release. This includes completing risk assessment on suitability of release for the Parole Commissioners Northern Ireland process, Public Protection Arrangements (PPANI), 1:1 offence focussed work and release plans to address risk management in the community. - Under the PDM model, NIPS and PBNI deliver collaborative tasks including joint pre-release testing for complex women service users i.e. those subject to Life Licence. - Commenced in Sept 2024, the Probation Service Officer pilot provides for trained, skilled staff delivering 1:1 offence-focused work within prisons to assist resettlement and rehabilitation. Given the vulnerabilities of women being released from custody, as part of the pilot women are being additionally supported post-release to support the overall prison-community transition.
Scope the provision of accommodation for women and girls in contact with the justice system with a view to working with partners, to facilitate sustainable housing solutions (potential for a step-up/down supported housing model). <u>Sub-action</u> • Identify current accommodation options for women and harness opportunities for female-only accommodation provision.	- An outline business case developed by NIPS for a new female estate includes 12 independent living units for those in custody. - All available housing options are explored through Housing Rights and PBNI partners on release. - PDU staff in prisons work with the relevant HSC Trust in order to identify suitable supported accommodation for life sentence prisoners, if this is required upon their release. - Catherine House, a short-term accommodation service for women experiencing chronic homelessness (up to 2 years), opened in March 2023. The support provider is the Welcome Organisation and there are 10 units available. Referral is through the NIHE.

Lead – DoJ (ROD), NIPS, DfC Status – Achieved	
Review relevant policy, practice, guidance and training to ensure that it is gender-responsive and aligned with international standards and best practice applicable to women and girls involved in the criminal justice system/custody¹. <u>Sub-actions</u> Focus on specific groups including: - Foreign national females; - Those from ethnic minority groups; - Transgender people, in line with their identity; - Young (18-24); - Older women; - Women/girls with a caring or parental role; and - Women/girls with a disability or presenting with a vulnerability e.g. neurodiversity, learning disability etc. Procuring training from providers with specific case examples on how the training relates to girls as well as highlighting any gender differences in research. Leads – PSNI, PPS, NICTS, PBNI, YJA, NIPS Status – Partially Achieved	PSNI - In November 2022, the Police College carried out a review of training materials across Crime Faculty and Foundation Training which confirmed that the training courses, materials, and associated resources, were consistent and compliant with the CJINI recommendation in its report on females in conflict with the law, including the Bangkok Rules. - As a result of the review, a number of minor changes have been made to the Student Officer programme including: - o Policing and Public Safety - Hydra added to trainer notes for debrief. This technology is utilised to educate officers on a variety of skills while developing their knowledge of the law in a range of police scenarios. Some themes currently highlighted are coercive control and officers' use of appropriate language. - o Criminal Justice System – cautions and Article 34 lesson – updated to include Bangkok Rules. - o Investigative Standards lesson – the CJINI Inspection overview sheet is provided to all student officers. - Specific engagement was undertaken with representatives from ethnic minority groups. - PSNI contributed to the DoJ consultation on the PACE Codes of Practice. This resulted in a range of gender-responsive updates around, for example, same-sex custody staff, the removal of clothing for evidence, availability of menstrual products and guidance on searches. - In May 2024, new guidance was issued on the conduct of juvenile strip searches in police custody. Strip searches can be traumatic and have a significant and long-lasting impact on the child. Given this, officers are required to adopt a child-centred approach when conducting such a search, listening to the voice of the child and being alive to their

¹ Supporting CJINI's recommendations from its report on Females in Conflict with the Law.

	views and feelings. Whilst the guidance applies to girls and boys, strip searches have the potential to be particularly impactful on girls/young women and the introduction of guidance focussed on dignity and respect is a positive step. - A new Vulnerability Strategy was published in June 2024 along with guidance, including vulnerability considerations. There are 13 strands of vulnerability as outlined by the College of Policing. Many of these are particularly relevant to women and girls such as: sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, honour-based violence, modern slavery and human trafficking. - A new Interface Protocol between HSC Trusts and the PSNI was launched in September 2024. It covers situation whereby any child/young person is reported missing as well as police interactions with residential children's homes. Whilst not gender-specific, this protocol recognises the importance of collaboration and the provision of a trauma related response (including awareness of exploitation and ACEs). - In September 2024, the PSNI launched its Year 3 – Year 7 Action Plan for tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG). The framework for delivery uses a “4P approach”, which ensures a focus on being well prepared to tackle VAWG offending; that action is taken to protect individuals, families and communities; and that perpetrators of VAWG are being relentlessly pursued. This also has a focus on preventing VAWG, with a commitment from policing to support partners in taking a whole system approach. NIPS - NIPS has completed a training needs analysis for staff working within the prisons and has shared this with the Prison Service College. A review of policy and guidance is ongoing. - Engagement has been undertaken with the Rainbow Project in order to advise on all aspects of LGBTQI+ training, particularly in relation to transgender awareness for the female prison estate.
--	--

	NICTS - A joint NICTS/PSNI/PECCS working group on court custody is considering arrangements to minimise the time detainees are held in court custody and reduce unnecessary movement of those in custody. Any subsequent reductions in the numbers of detainees physically attending court custody sites will improve the ability to accommodate women and girls in designated cells. YJA - Training providers use case examples to show how the training relates to girls as well as highlighting any differences in research. Any case examples used are gender sensitive. - Five staff completed training specifically in relation to working with women and girls in the justice system. PBNI: - Section 75 training delivered by HERE NI to operational and corporate staff to support working with those from an LGBTQIA+ background. - Accredited training delivered to Inspire staff on working with women from an LGBTQIA+ background and gender responsive practice.
Provide appropriate support and wellbeing services for staff working with women in custody Lead – NIPS Status – Achieved	- NIPS has completed a training needs analysis for female residential staff. Wellbeing services are in place. These are not specific to those working with women but are based on the needs of the individual staff member. - PBNI staff are supported through 1:1 formal supervision delivered by the PBNI Women's Area Manager champion, and engagement at the Inspire quarterly forum. - Additional support is provided by the Probation Service Officer pilot in Hydebank Wood with practical assistance in complex cases. - Dedicated PBNI psychologist providing 1:1 case advice clinic pilot to support case advice and staff well-being.

CONCLUSION

During the period covered by the first action plans for both women and girls, considerable progress can be demonstrated across a number of areas. Of particular note is the establishment of the Gender Responsive Senior Sponsors Network; the development of a PBNi Women's Strategy; the sustained provision of a dedicated Women's Support Officer within NIPS; the introduction by PSNI of a Custody Care and Dignity Model for female detainees; and the establishment of a YJA Champion's Group to promote gender-responsive practice within the five local area teams. Furthermore, justice organisations have embedded consideration of gender-specific needs within training frameworks and have undertaken reviews of key policies and procedures. Importantly, these outcomes have been achieved despite the absence of dedicated implementation funding, reflecting the commitment of partner organisations across the justice system to deliver meaningful change for women and girls.

The challenging financial position facing all Government Departments continues, meaning that difficult decisions relating to priorities will continue to be made. Positive news in relation to the allocation of funding towards the rollout of a new bail support scheme pilot for women, aimed at reducing the numbers of women held on remand, has been welcomed and information in relation to implementation of this will be reported on in the next progress report. Other key actions which will be taken forward during the next reporting period include work to develop a framework to ensure the children of incarcerated parents are supported; the development of a new Communication and Engagement Framework to support messaging around the need for a gender-responsive approach; and the development of a Good Practice Charter for justice organisations working with women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system.

WOMEN AND GIRLS STRATEGY DELIVERY GROUP TOR FOR GROUP

Women and Girls Strategy Delivery Group (WGSDG)

Supporting Change: A strategy for women and girls in or at risk of contact with the justice system

Terms of Reference (*from 2022 to 2025*)

Background

In March 2022, the Minister of Justice launched [Supporting Change: A strategy for women and girls in or at risk of contact with the justice system](#). The justice-wide strategy recognises that the criminal justice system should be gender responsive, trauma informed, and reflect a modern and shared understanding of the offending of women and girls and their complex needs.

Whilst the minority of people who offend in Northern Ireland are women and girls, many are victims of crime themselves, often having experienced physical or emotional abuse. Involvement in the criminal justice system can have far-reaching and long-lasting effects on these women and girls, their families and society as a whole. The challenges women and girls face are at risk of being exacerbated by the criminal justice response, including custodial sentences that can disrupt important social bonds, with children and family members, contributing to social exclusion and having an adverse impact on future generations. The strategy seeks to provide a joined-up approach that acknowledges the gendered needs of women, promotes early intervention and community diversions to support positive wellbeing and successful long-term outcomes to reduce offending and reoffending, outlines the need for (where necessary) a therapeutic custodial environment and supported transitions into the community.

In regard to adopting a specific approach for women and girls CJINI in their inspection on [‘How the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland treats Females in Conflict with the Law’](#) highlighted that *‘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 of and deliver services specific to women and girls to provide equitable outcomes.’*

WOMEN AND GIRLS STRATEGY DELIVERY GROUP

TOR FOR GROUP

Role and Function

- Provide direction and oversight of the delivery of the strategic aims and priorities;
- Agree proposed approach for delivery against the action plan(s);
- Oversee the implementation of recommendations from the CJINI inspection on ‘females in conflict with the law’;
- Identify and agree where the criminal justice system can work differently and more innovatively together with its collective, existing resources; and
- Commission sub-groups to research, consult upon and develop evidence based proposals to implement actions within realistic timescales, taking resources and other issues into account.

Core Membership

The WGSDG will be chaired by the Head of Reducing Offending Policy Branch, Department of Justice (DoJ).

Core Membership will be drawn from:

- Reducing Offending Division (ROD, DoJ)
- Other Departments – Health, Education and Communities;
- Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI);
- Youth Justice Agency (YJA);
- Public Prosecution Service (PPS);
- Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service (NICTS);
- Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI);
- Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS);
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE);
- Victim Support Northern Ireland (VSNI).

Ways of working

- **Membership:** In addition to the core membership above, members may be supported by a senior nominated lead for their organisation or business area. All members unable to attend a meeting should ensure a deputy attends on their behalf. At the discretion of the WGSDG, representatives from other organisations may be invited to attend particular meetings or for certain agenda items.
- **Frequency of meetings:** It is envisaged the WGSDG will meet quarterly / as and when required.

WOMEN AND GIRLS STRATEGY DELIVERY GROUP TOR FOR GROUP

-
- **Administrative details:** Wherever possible, papers for meetings will be circulated to members at least 5 working days in advance of each meeting. Minutes of meetings will record key points and will be issued within 1 week.
 - **Commissioning of sub-groups:** WGSDG will be required to identify and delegate tasks to any sub-group(s) it considers necessary to establish in order to research, consult upon and develop evidence-based proposals within agreed thematic areas and report progress. Sub-group members with appropriate specialisms will be appointed to represent the relevant stakeholder organisations and work in partnership.
 - **Senior Sponsors' and Engagement Networks:** WGSDG will agree a communications framework for both networks and identify key information to share with them. WGSDG will identify opportunities for engagement with the networks and hold events with the networks to focus on priority issues.
 - **Relevant strategies, inspection reports and action plans:** In taking forward its work, the WGSDG will take account of relevant strategies, findings of inspection reports, as well as research and emerging trends and promising practice.

Methodology

Reducing Offending Policy Unit (ROPU) will provide a secretariat for the WGSDG.

As the meetings will be a forum to discuss policy development, WGSDG members are asked to treat the information provided and views exchanged as official-sensitive.

Reporting

The WGSDG will report to Reducing Reoffending Strategic Outcomes Group (RRSOG) through a quarterly highlight report. Any sub-groups will provide ongoing updates and a reporting mechanism to the wider group as the work develops including reporting to other interested parties and organisations.

As per the governance structure set out in the strategy, the Senior Sponsors' Network, comprising of senior official representatives from relevant criminal justice agencies will help to encourage and disseminate a more gender responsive approach throughout the criminal justice system. Whilst the Engagement Network, which includes representatives from voluntary and community sector organisations, will share information and learning with regard to gender responsive practice.

It is anticipated that there will be a two-way exchange of information amongst the networks and organisations in relation to this work, to ensure the views of those most affected, including those women and girls with lived experience, are taken into account.

WOMEN AND GIRLS STRATEGY DELIVERY GROUP

TOR FOR GROUP

Strategic Vision, Aims and Priorities

Vision* - Ending harm by empowering women and society

Aims* - Supporting change

Early A culture of prevention and early intervention for women	In the Community Effective and suitable alternatives to custody and supervision of women in the community	In and beyond custody A fit for purpose, rehabilitative, restorative, therapeutic custodial environment for women
Priority 1 A shared understanding of women's needs and pathways into and out of offending.	Priority 4 Tailored support and pathways from offending for women in the community.	Priority 7 Bespoke rehabilitative support and pathways from offending for women within and beyond custody.
Priority 2 Increased collaboration to support and prevent women with complex needs from entering the justice system.	Priority 5 Comprehensive sustainable community-based solutions for women.	Priority 8 A gender and trauma informed environment and workforce focused on the holistic needs of women.
Priority 3 Accessible and effective wrap-around services for women delivered through and beyond justice.	Priority 6 A shared appreciation of the need to support women, where we can, in the community.	Priority 9 A collective ethos that women in custody are a part of the community, not apart from the community.

* Within the Vision, Aims and Priorities, the term 'women' refers to adult women and girls, and those who identify as female or non-binary.

Strategic outcomes

- Increased participation of women and girls in preventative and diversionary activities;
- Reduced level of offending and reoffending by women and girls;
- Reduced level of harm caused by women and girls in or at risk of contact with, the justice system;
- Enhanced strategic and collaborative delivery of services for women and girls by justice and partners; and
- Improved life chances and opportunities for women and girls.

WOMEN AND GIRLS STRATEGY DELIVERY GROUP

TOR FOR GROUP

Embedding Principles of the Strategy

Principles

A foundation of multi-faceted principles will be used to embed and deliver the strategy.

Gender responsive and Person centred	Trauma informed and Holistic	Pro-active and Responsive
We understand that how women experience the world, interact, and communicate with others is unique to their gender. We acknowledge that we need to focus on the individual, as evidence shows one size does not 'fit all'. Therefore, any response to women in or at risk of contact with the justice system must be rights focussed, evidence based, and reflect and respond to their needs as a woman, a girl, and an individual. This includes their age, ethnicity, and their role as a parent and/or carer. We recognise that the criminal justice response can have a significant and long-lasting impact on children and dependents. 'ensuring interventions are tailored appropriately to the particular needs of women can be more effective than applying a generic approach to men and women alike.' [CJINI inspection]	We recognise that there are links between adverse childhood experience, trauma (as a child/adult), and offending and most importantly that these links can be broken. When supporting women we will: • realise the widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths for recovery; • recognise the signs and symptoms of trauma; • respond by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policy, procedure and practice; • seek to actively resist re-traumatisation. This can only be done through a holistic and restorative approach that focuses on, but is not limited to health, wellbeing, welfare, communication and behaviour. We must also never lose sight of the trauma of victims.	We acknowledge that a comprehensive approach will only be achieved through being proactive and responsive. Proactive – a future focused, planned strategic approach anticipating potential developments, trends and challenges. Responsive – reactive to unanticipated needs, situations and events as they occur. This approach should extend, where possible, across and beyond the justice system.

**WOMEN AND GIRLS STRATEGY DELIVERY GROUP
TOR FOR GROUP**

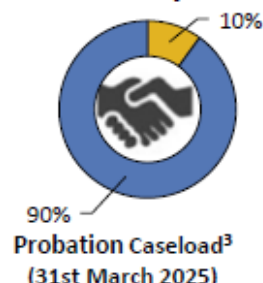
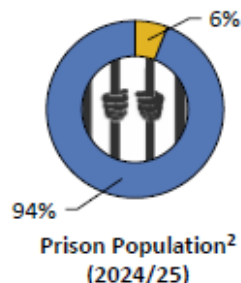
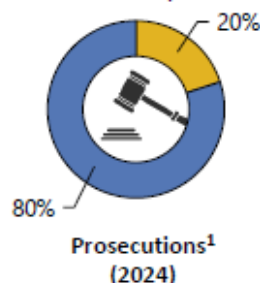
Strategy Governance - Overview



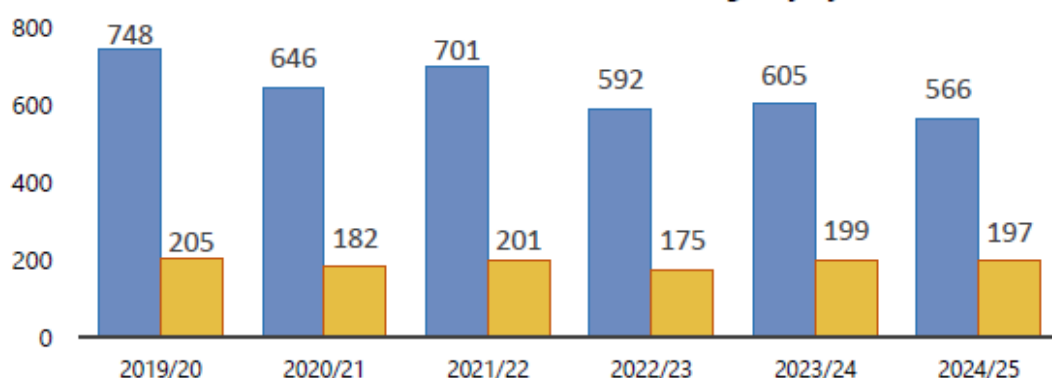
INFOGRAPHIC – WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Women and Girls in Contact with the Justice System

Women make up a smaller proportion of the individuals in contact with the justice system



From Offence to Court

Individual Children Referred to Youth Justice Agency by Gender⁴

Footnotes and Legend

■ Male ■ Female

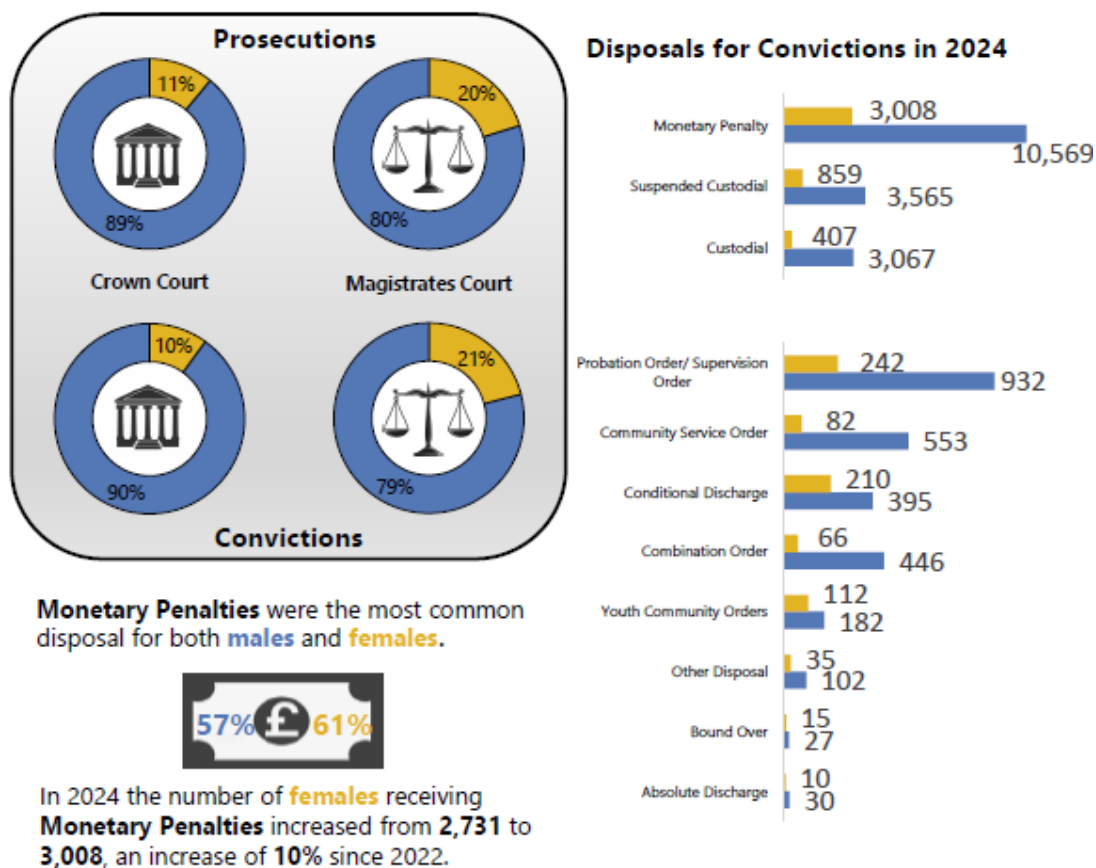
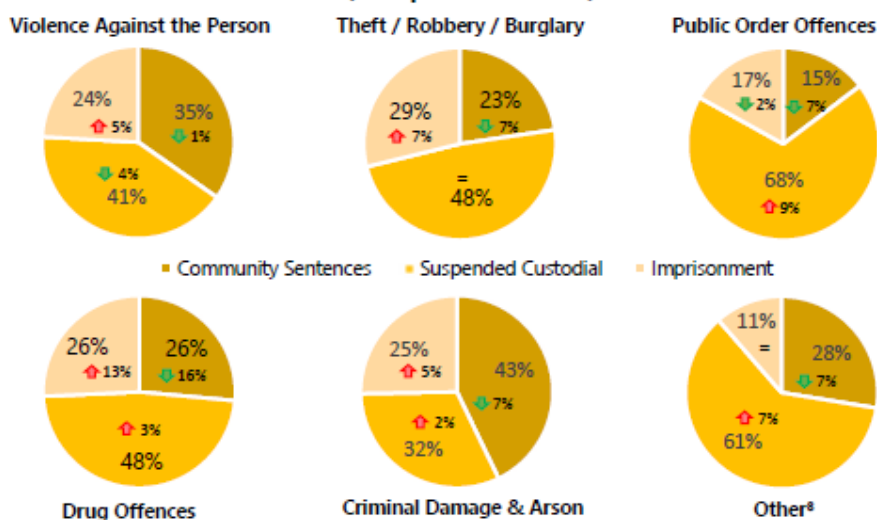
¹ Court Prosecutions Convictions and Out of Court Disposals Statistics for Northern Ireland 2024 (<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/court-prosecutions-convictions-and-out-court-disposals-statistics-northern-ireland-2024>)

² Northern Ireland Prison Population statistics 2024-25 (<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-prison-population-2024-25>)

³ PBNI Caseload Statistics (<https://www.pbni.org.uk/publication/annual-caseload-statistics-report-2024-25>)

⁴ Northern Ireland Youth Justice Agency Annual Workload Statistics 2024-25 (<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/youth-justice-agency-annual-workload-statistics-2024-25>)

INFOGRAPHIC – WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

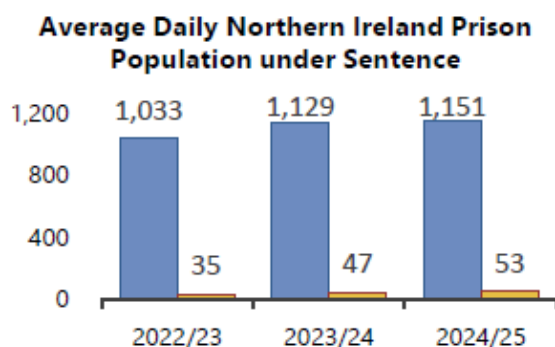
Court and the Community⁵**Offence Category and Main Disposal⁶ for Female Convictions in 2024 (compared to 2022)⁷**

Footnotes and Legend

■ Male ■ Female

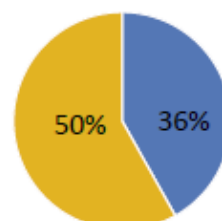
⁵ Court Prosecutions Convictions and Out of Court Disposals Statistics for Northern Ireland 2024 (<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/court-prosecutions-convictions-and-out-of-court-disposals-statistics-northern-ireland-2024>)⁶ Main Disposal for these charts are for Imprisonment, Suspended Custodial, Community Sentence convictions only (excludes Monetary Penalties, Discharges and Other).⁷ Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.⁸ Other includes Crime categories of Sexual Offences, Possession of Weapons, Motoring, Fraud and Miscellaneous crimes.

INFOGRAPHIC – WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

In Custody and Beyond

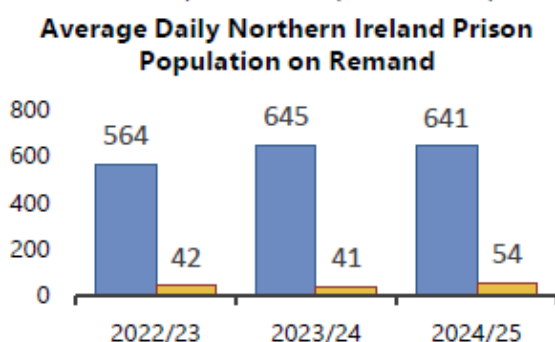
During 2024/25, the average daily prison population⁹ consisted of **1,205** sentenced and **695** remanded individuals.

Remand Rates for Males and Females in 2024/25



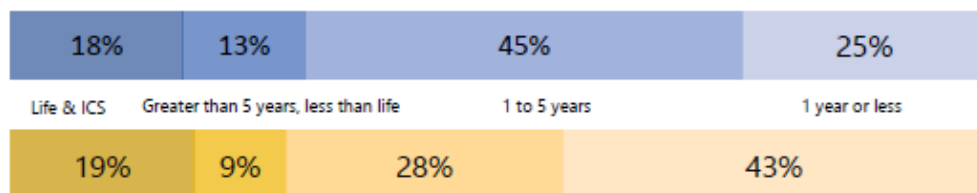
The average daily rate of **remand** was **50%** of the **females** and **36%** of the **males**.

The average daily population remanded into custody has been **increasing** since 2017/18.

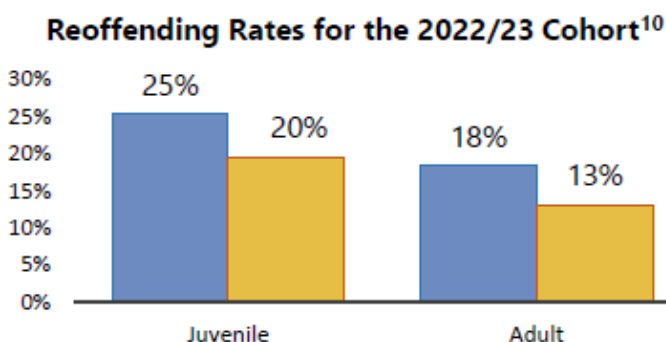


The average number of **females** on **remand** increased from **41** to **54**, an increase of **32%** since 2023/24.

Average Custodial Sentence Length in 2024/25⁹



On average, **females** were serving **shorter** sentences than **males**.



A **smaller** proportion of **females** have reoffended compared to **males**.

PBNI Caseload



On 31st March 2025, the PBNI caseload¹¹ was **4,107** (down from **4,258**). **Females** represented **one in ten**.

Footnotes and Legend

Male Female

⁹ Northern Ireland Prison Population statistics 2024-25 (<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-prison-population-2024-25>)

¹⁰ Adult and Youth Reoffending in Northern Ireland 2022/23 Cohort (<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/adult-and-youth-reoffending-northern-ireland-202223-cohort>)

¹¹ PBNI Caseload Statistics (<https://www.pbni.org.uk/publication/annual-caseload-statistics-report-2024-25>)

¹² Numerical components may not sum due to rounding