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NEWS RELEASE

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Solicitor General debates schemes to keep women out of prison

The Solicitor General, Vera Baird will be using today's Westminster Hall debate to focus on the important diversionary work developed to help reduce the number of women entering the prison system unnecessarily.

Following Baroness Corston's report the Solicitor General proposed the use of conditional cautions which would include referral of women offenders to "women's centres". This work is near to fruition, and 'Together Women' centres in the North West and in Yorkshire and the Humber have been selected as pilot areas. Prosecutors have worked closely with local police to look at how this initiative might work, and explore the benefits of keeping women from entering the prison system, whilst accepting punishment for low level crimes.

The Solicitor General said, "Piloting this use of conditional cautioning goes above and beyond Baroness Corston's recommendations. We felt that to truly help women within the prison system we needed to try and create a diversion from the traditional route to prison.

The pilot will run for six months from September, during which time this type of caution will be available for all women offenders over 18 who admit to committing an offence at an appropriate level. The condition will be to attend a women's centre for a full needs assessment. The centres provide a wide range of assistance and appropriate courses. Although it will not be a requirement that the women take advantage of these, we believe that once they are made aware of them and have taken the important step "through the

front door” they will avail themselves of the exciting opportunities the centres offer.

Obviously the crimes have to be an appropriate level. However if this scheme ensures we can help women out of the criminal justice system, and tackle the problems which underpin their offending then we have succeeded.”

‘The ‘Together Women’ centres will launch the conditional caution pilot in September this year. To ensure effective measurement the pilot will run for 6 months. The sort of diversionary advice and courses available at the centres includes training in IT skills, basic English and Maths, budgeting skills, anger management, and healthy eating and nutrition courses.

Justice Minister Maria Eagle who leads on the Government response to the Corston report, and who opened the Westminster hall debate said: "I welcome this pilot project which, if successful, has the potential to contribute to our overall aim of ensuring that the use of custody is reserved only for those women who really need to be there."

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Notes to Editors

- The Criminal Justice Act 2003 itself places no restrictions on the types of offences for which a conditional caution may be administered. However the intention is that they only be used for low level offending and so the Director of Public Prosecution’s guidance on conditional cautions restricts their use to summary and certain either way offences, such as criminal damage and possession of drugs for personal use. The guidance is available on the Crown Prosecution Service web site at http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/directors_guidance/conditional_cautioning.html
- The government is concerned about the increase in the female prison population over recent years and recognises the need to deliver a distinct response to women's offending.
- To help support a more community-based response to women’s offending; £9.15 million government funding was allocated in March 2005 to establish new initiatives to tackle women’s offending in the community – the ‘Together Women’ Programme. This is developing an integrated approach to routing women to appropriate services to meet their needs at various stages of their offending history, from prevention and diversion from custody, to resettlement on release.

- 'Together Women' is currently being delivered via demonstration projects within two regions – Yorkshire & Humberside and the North West. An evaluation of the outcomes will be undertaken when the programme comes to an end in 2009 and the full impact of the projects on the women going through them can be assessed. Ahead of that we will ensure that lessons learnt along the way on providing effective multi-agency wrap around services for women with multiple complex needs will be disseminated to other regions.
- Baroness Jean Corston's report on her Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System was published on 13 March 2007. The government published its response to the report in December 2007, and set out the first ever national service framework for female offenders in May 2008.