Written submission from Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland

1. I am grateful to the Justice Committee for their invitation to give oral evidence on prisons and alternatives to custody, including for women offenders, as part of its scrutiny of the Scottish Government’s Draft Budget 2014-15. I will be pleased to do so and, in advance, to provide this written submission.

2. I have been in post for four months, having been appointed in June 2013 to succeed Brigadier Hugh Monro. During his four years in office, my predecessor did much to challenge the conditions in which women prisoners were detained and their treatment in prison. I know that he particularly welcomed the report and recommendations of the Commission on Women Offenders led by Dame Elish Angiolini.

3. Additionally, he argued consistently for an improvement in the use of purposeful activity in prisons and the opportunities this provided for positive and constructive development. He sought increases in both the quantity and the quality of purposeful activities available to all prisoners and young offenders.

4. I fully support his emphasis on these two important aspects of prison life and will continue to inspect and scrutinise developments in these areas.

5. In particular, I welcome the Scottish Government’s commitment to the development of the prison estate for women offenders – at the new HMP Grampian opening in the spring of next year, the regional facility at HMP Edinburgh and through the design and build of the new national prison for women at Inverclyde. These provide an opportunity for the Scottish Prison Service to take a fresh approach to the care and treatment of women prisoners in a way which will better meet their needs. In the meantime, I have observed improvements in the estate at Cornton Vale and note the benefits which have followed the reduction in overcrowding there.

6. While imprisonment will always need to remain as an appropriate sentence for the purpose of punishment and the protection of the public, I support the greater emphasis which the Scottish Prison Service now places on the purpose of rehabilitation. I have been impressed with the work being done in preparation for release, working with prisoners to reduce the likelihood of their reoffending following their release from prison. There are a number of new mentoring services which work with adult and young offenders in the period before they are released and once they are back in the community. These services seek to harness the strengths of third sector and public sector organisations working in the community and have the potential to make a considerable impact on the lives of those who take part.

7. An important aspect of rehabilitation is the maintenance and development of positive relationships with family members where these are constructive. I welcome the commitment to the development of visitor centres and family help hubs at a
number of prisons in Scotland. These encourage family visits and provide support and information to families about all aspects of prison life.

8. I am pleased to see in the Scottish Government’s Draft Budget planned investment in activities which seek to reduce reoffending. Beyond the Justice budget – in particular in Health and Wellbeing, and in Education and Lifelong Learning – I welcome the focus on prevention and early intervention. Tackling some of the underlying factors which contribute to the size of Scotland’s prison population will take a long term commitment. Poor health, including mental health, problematic drug and alcohol use, low levels of educational attainment, all present challenges for the prison service to address. The prison service’s desire to work with other agencies in tackling these challenges is very welcome.

9. I look forward to attending the meeting of the Justice Committee on 30 October.

David Strang
HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland
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