Catherine Atkinson MP
Minister for Victims

Natalie Fleet

Minister for Safeguarding

Dear Ministers Atkinson and Fleet

Re: Women, Domestic Abuse, and the Recall System

Congratulations on your new appointments.

We are writing on behalf of the **Recall Reform Coalition**, a group of charities and lived experience organisations working to reduce unnecessary recalls to prison and improve outcomes for people on licence.

We welcome your respective commitments to strengthening protections for victims across the justice system. We are writing to highlight a critical issue where victimhood and criminalisation intersect: the experiences of women who are in the criminal justice system, and particularly the experience of those women recalled to prison.

Women in the justice system are overwhelmingly victims of abuse

The Ministry of Justice's own data shows that **around 70% of women in prison have experienced domestic abuse,** and they often experience multiple forms of victimisation throughout their lives. For many, their criminalisation is directly linked to that abuse, including through coerced offending, reactive violence, and counter-allegations. For young women in particular, prison can be especially harmful, with disproportionately high levels of self-harm and suicidal ideation. For these women, contact with the criminal justice system is often a consequence of trauma, coercion, and instability rather than deliberate offending.

This vulnerability does not end at the prison gate. Many women are released into homelessness or unsafe accommodation, often because fleeing an abusive partner has left them without secure housing. These conditions make compliance with licence conditions extremely difficult, and increase the risk of relapse, return to an abusive relationship, or reoffending. They also compromise mothers' ability to resume the care of their children, or to have contact with children who are in alternative care arrangements.

Ministry of Justice figures show that **recall now accounts for around one in three receptions of women into custody**, a proportion that has risen sharply over the past decade. The majority of these recalls are for **technical breaches**, not new crimes.

For women who are victims of domestic abuse, the recall system can function less as a safeguard and more as a revolving door:

- Women are released into situations of poverty, homelessness or unstable accommodation

- They are often housed in areas where they experienced previous harm and abuse, and where drug use is prevalent
- Many are leaving prison with ongoing addiction and mental health needs
- They struggle to meet licence requirements through no fault of their own
- They are recalled for non-compliance or minor breaches
- The cycle repeats, with women separated from their children, and losing housing and employment, worsening their vulnerability and extending the impacts of their criminalisation

Sentencing Act changes now also mean women will be recalled to prison for a fixed period of 56 days, whereas they would previously often serve 14 or 28 days. No modelling has been done on the gender-specific impacts of this blanket change.

This cycle means that **victimhood is effectively being criminalised**. Women who are already traumatised are returned to custody for circumstances directly linked to their abuse, poverty, and lack of support.

We welcome the Minister of State for Prisons and Probation, Lord Timpson's ambition to reduce the number of women in prison, and the opportunity presented by the Women's Justice Board's evidence-led recommendations to drive system-wide improvement, particularly in relation to pregnant women and mothers of young children, young women and girls, and the need for an anti-racist, intersectional approach to addressing disparities experienced by women from Black, minoritised and migrant backgrounds.

Your ministerial roles are central to this agenda. Women who are recalled are often the very victims the system seeks to protect. Ensuring that victimhood is recognised within recall decision-making is essential to delivering a justice system that is fair, proportionate, and trauma-informed.

What we are asking for

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss:

- How better safeguards can be put in place to prevent the criminalisation of victims, and how to prevent women who have been victims cycling round and round the system.
- How recall decisions can better account for domestic abuse, coercion, and homelessness.
- Opportunities for lived experience voices to shape policy development in this area

Thank you for your attention to this important issue. We look forward to the opportunity to engage further.

Yours sincerely,

The Recall Reform Coalition

(list of organisations)