

Nick Armstrong,
HM Assistant Coroner for the coroner area of West Sussex, Brighton and Hove

By email only to: [REDACTED]

30th June 2025

Dear Sir,

Inquest Touching the Death of Kirsten Hocking

I refer to your Regulation 28 Report following the Inquest into the death of Kirsten Hocking and am issuing this response on behalf of the Probation Service.

I know that you will share a copy of this response with her family, and I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere condolences for their loss.

You expressed a concern that there was and remains a real lack of specialist rehabilitation for women, and in particular, women who represent only a low or medium risk of harm to others, but a high risk of self-harm. This cohort are for the most part shut out from Approved Premises ("AP") (it appears that it is possible for medium risk women to be admitted to an AP but that possibility is not well understood and the reality is that it is not available; that kind of accommodation being very over-subscribed in any event). This means there is little or no effective system of rehabilitative provision for that cohort. This is a cohort in which the state has invested a great deal of time and money (in imprisoning and rehabilitative work) only, the evidence suggests, for that investment to be at risk of being squandered on release. It also means that provision can become dependent on small charities and acts of individual generosity, which is patchwork and may bring problems of unclear access and unclear criteria (as happened here). The evidence was that this was being looked at by the Probation Service, which does not generally provide specialist rehabilitation accommodation itself but which has an obvious interest in it being available and so is monitoring the situation. However the evidence was also that the situation is getting worse not better, particularly for women (who tend to have higher levels of self-harm), and this is despite things like the Corston review in 2007 and the case of Coll v SSJ ten years later, which found discrimination because of the gender disparity with respect to the availability of APs. There is now a similar lack, and apparent gender impact, with regard to specialist rehabilitation accommodation too. The circumstances creating the risk of other deaths therefore subsist and might benefit from some renewed focus.

From the start of this year, new initiatives have been launched by Government to improve outcomes for women in custody and on probation. These include the creation of the Women's Justice Board and the introduction of The Women's Policy Framework and accompanying operational guidance which was developed with over 250 probation practitioners and subject matter experts. This supports

HMPPS staff across custody and in the community to deliver consistent practice which is gender-specific and trauma informed and includes mandatory actions for working with women. The expectation is that this new oversight from the Women's Justice Board will renew focus on the accommodation requirements for women who find themselves in the criminal justice system.

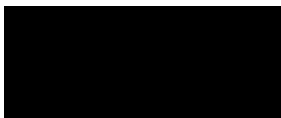
With specific reference to the female Approved Premises estate, the need to accommodate women with a wide range of needs is recognised and the estate does aim to accommodate women with complex needs who may pose a medium risk of harm. There is a new Central Referral Process which is managed by a dedicated Female Central Referral Unit Manager who has experience of such cases and can best assess the need for an AP space. Such spaces are also available for women who are subject to a community-based disposal, not just for those on licence release.

Linked to your first concern, you commented that probation officers, who have primary responsibility for finding accommodation and building release plans, need to understand what accommodation is and is not available. This case showed that no-one, including the relevant officer, realised that an AP might in theory have been available. It also showed a failure to appreciate that once the first specialist placement fell through, a second was very unlikely to be found and so CAS3 accommodation was realistically the only option. That therefore needed finding quickly, so that a support plan could be built around it. There does therefore seem to be a training need.

The Central Approved Premises Team are currently promoting the use of community disposals with Probation Court Teams across the county – which prevent the loss of accommodation due to a period in custody. They are also engaging with regional females leads (senior probation officers) to promote the availability of placements in an Approved Premises for women with complex needs who pose a medium risk of harm. From September this year, there will be Female AP briefings for all practitioners where this exact point will be emphasised.

Thank you again for bringing your concerns to my attention. I trust that this response provides assurance that action is being taken to address the issues you raised.

Yours faithfully,

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Head of Operations