



All Party Parliamentary Group
Women in the Penal System

4pm, Tuesday 16 January 2018

House of Commons, Committee Room 19

Chair: Baroness Corston

Present: Lord Bradley, Lord Brown, Kate Green MP, Baroness Hamwee, Baroness Healy, Lord Phillips, Victoria Prentis MP, Lord Ramsbotham

In attendance:

Joe Corryroake, Parliamentary Assistant to Kate Green MP
Frances Crook, CEO, the Howard League for Penal Reform
Stephanie Davin, Campaigns Officer, the Howard League for Penal Reform
Danielle Fetuga-Joensuu, Parliamentary Assistant and Researcher to the Bishop of Rochester and Co-ordinator For Prison Hope
Alastair Gordon, Parliamentary Assistant to Richard Burgon MP
John Ricketts, Researcher for Lord Bird
Shivani Somaiya, Intern in Roberta Blackman-Wood's office

Apologies:

Bim Afolami MP, Professor the Lord Alton, Baroness Armstrong, Lord Boswell, Lord Carlile CBE QC, Damian Collins MP, Sir Edward Davey MP, David Drew MP, Maria Eagle MP, Frank Field MP DL, Carolyn Harris MP, Liz Hogarth, Baroness Howe, Tom Tugendhat MBE MP, Lord Judd, Sir Greg Knight MP, Earl Listowel, Fiona Mactaggart, Baroness Massey, Kerry McCarthy MP, Maria Miller MP, Baroness Northover, Teresa Pearce MP, Dr Daniel Poulter MP, Baroness Stern, The Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Dr Paul Williams MP

Baroness Corston welcomed everybody to the meeting and outlined the aims of the APPG's Inquiry, which are to reveal the issues around sentencing that inhibit the use of non-custodial solutions, and to encourage and enable the magistracy not to send women to prison. She gave some context on the experiences and risk factors of women in prison.

The nature and cost of women's centres

There was a discussion of the relatively low cost and effectiveness of women's centres in comparison with prisons.

Lord Brown asked why women's centres are cheaper. Frances Crook explained that women's centres receive matched funding from charitable trusts and public services like the NHS other than Justice. Lord Phillips also noted that they are not residential – even though, as Lord Ramsbotham pointed out, some will have hostels attached.

Lord Phillips suggested asking an accounting firm to demonstrate the business case for women's centres.

Lord Phillips asked how intensive the women's centres are. Frances Crook explained that the requirements are minimal but the centres provide a wrap around service to support all of the women's needs but without the threat of breach.

John Ricketts introduced himself and asked why women's centres are closing – was it an issue of government funding being withdrawn? Baroness Corston said that most women's centres could not or would not comply with the new regime required by CRCs (for example, gagging clauses or fees for changes to contracts). CRCs also only provided group therapy, but the women's centre model relied on individual therapy.

Ministry of Justice strategy and the reshuffle

Frances Crook said that these issues around women's centres and CRCs could provide a motivation for the new Secretary of State to take control of women away from CRCs. Baroness Corston said she had successfully persuaded David Lidington of this before the reshuffle. Lord Ramsbotham said he hoped that the new Secretary of State takes stock before he makes changes.

Lord Ramsbotham asked about the forthcoming women's strategy. Frances Crook explained that it appeared to be delayed because the MoJ was rethinking its approach.

The knowledge of sentencers

There was a discussion about the knowledge of sentencers. It was noted that some judges lacked full knowledge and training about how or whether they can use community orders, so the use of treatment orders linked to women's centres was very small. Magistrates needed timely information so that remand was not used as a default.

Lord Brown asked about persistent offenders. Frances Crook said that many women in prison were on remand, the vast majority of whom would not be given a custodial sentence. Lord Ramsbotham pointed out that breach also needed looking at, as sometimes it was not 'proper' breach.

Lord Brown asked whether, as part of their judicial studies, sentencers were taught that some routes are more effective and cheaper when sentencing women. Lord Phillips noted that Crown Court judges have local organisations which sometimes work with magistrates and asked whether this could be a way of getting the message

through. In his experience, sentencers usually fall over themselves to use non-custodial options, but the resource needs to be there.

Baroness Hamwee mentioned role-playing training for magistrates on motor offences.

Comparison with Scotland

Frances Crook raised the example of Scotland. The women's prison there is being closed. Instead small units jointly run by local authorities and Justice will be set up with a very limited number of places; these units will be welfare-based but secure. Scotland has virtually removed sentences of under three months for both men and women and is now consulting on getting rid of sentences of under one year. Lord Bradley noted that community sentences had increased in Scotland.

Lord Brown and Baroness Corston mentioned the recommendations made by Dame Angiolini in the Commission on Women Offenders 2012 final report (<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/70346.aspx>).

Invitations to give evidence to the Inquiry

Baroness Hamwee suggested linking in with the APPG for the Magistracy. Frances Crook said that we would meet with Jon Collins, the new Chief Executive of the Magistrates Association. Victoria Prentis MP said she was willing to write to the prisons minister to ask him to come to the APPG.

Kate Green MP asked whether we are going to either visit or have someone visit us from Scotland. She suggested inviting Karyn McCluskey from Community Justice Scotland, and representatives from the Greater Manchester criminal justice team.

Baroness Corston thanked everybody and closed the meeting.