



All Party Parliamentary Group
Women in the Penal System

4pm, Tuesday 24 October 2017

House of Commons, Committee Room 20.

Chair: Baroness Corston

Present: Lord Bradley, Lord Brown, Sarah Champion MP, Kate Green MP, Baroness Hamwee, Baroness Howe, Baroness Masham, Lord Ramsbotham.

In attendance

Lorraine Atkinson, the Howard League
Frances Crook, CEO, the Howard League
Danielle Fetuga-Joensuu, Parliamentary Assistant and Researcher to the Bishop of Rochester and Co-ordinator For Prison Hope.
Liz Hogarth
Rt Hon Fiona Mactaggart
Connie Muttock, Agenda
Kate Paradine, Women in Prison

Apologies:

Bim Afolami MP, Baroness Armstrong, Lord Beith, Lord Bird, Lord Boswell, Lord Carlile, David Drew MP, Lord Judd, Stephen Kerr MP, Clive Lewis MP, Lord Listowel, Connor McGinn MP, Jess Phillips MP, Dr Daniel Poulter MP, Angela Smith MP, Jo Stevens MP, Tom Tugendhat MP

Giving evidence: Sonia Crozier, Executive Director of Probation and Women at Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)

Baroness Corston welcomed Sonia Crozier to the meeting.

Sonia stated that hers was a new role, appointed in April. She had a background in probation and was committed to developing community support for women and women's centres having been involved in the Brighton Women's Centre.

She said whilst she could not comment on the details of the forthcoming strategy for women, she would talk about her vision.

She said that it was well recognised that women in contact with the criminal justice system have complex needs and have usually been victims of abuse. It was sad to see that the number of women in custody was rising and this was contributing to

increasing incidents of self-injury. David Lammy's inquiry showed that BAME women were more likely to be remanded and sentenced to custody which raised serious questions about disproportionality in the behaviour of the courts.

Her vision was that women would be diverted from the criminal justice system and secure help for their problems. She is impressed with the 'whole system approach' operating in Manchester.

She was planning to roll out gender informed advice to courts to improve their understanding and decision making.

She will provide training to staff in the NPS on trauma informed approaches and offer this to the CRCs.

For the few women who require custody, prison should maximise rehabilitation. She was looking at the interventions provided to women in prison and how they could be improved.

Sonia Crozier was meeting the Chief Executives of the CRCs and reviewing the interventions and support available to women, such as support for victims of domestic violence.

Questions from parliamentarians

Baroness Corston stated there was a consensus on the need to fund women's centres through central funds. One reason why women's centres were so effective was that they offered holistic one to one work for women which covered a range of issues such as mental health and debt.

Baroness Corston wanted to know what HMPPS planned to do to make financing more secure for women's centres.

Sonia Crozier replied that HMPPS would consider funding of women centres alongside other funding decisions –including those made by MoJ. HMPPS are interested in coalition models involving funding from other services.

Fiona Mactaggart said that the prisons minister had a romantic view about voluntary funding for women's centres. Women's centres were delivering state interventions. The bigger women's centres had the capacity to keep going with a funding shortfall but many of the smaller women's centres had gone. Fiona Mactaggart wanted to know what HMPPS was going to do to make sure there was an infrastructure in place to ensure certainty for the role of women's centres.

Sonia Crozier replied that women's centres such as Hull were doing a fabulous job but were looking for the next source of funding. She agreed that needed to be certainty of funding so that women's centres could continue to deliver court sentences successfully.

Lord Bradley said that for women's centres such as Manchester, their first concern was funding. He suggested that women's centres be put into a national framework to

ensure they had secure funding and were not reliant on local CRCs that were failing to support their work.

Lord Bradley said that the best way for women to avoid prison, particularly remand, was to ensure the courts had information at first appearance. Women who had committed low level offences did not need to be remanded and the damage caused by remand to prison was disproportionate to the cost of prison.

Sonia Crozier recognised that certainty of justice funding was required to secure funding from other sources. She recognised that women's centres needed certainty of funding from justice sources if they were to continue delivering justice services. HMPPS had ambitious forecasts for the number of women who should be on community orders.

In terms of sentencing, Sonia Crozier was engaged in the national court reform programme. She said that the focus on virtual courts must not lose sight of the fact that vulnerable people are coming before the courts. She agreed magistrates should be better informed about their needs and the best outcomes

Lord Bradley said that women did not need to be remanded to custody before information could be gathered for the courts. The strategy for women should not start by looking at the prison estate but by looking at the full range of services for women in the community.

Sonia Crozier stated that she wished to bring probation expertise alongside health expertise.

Baroness Masham asked about financial support for people on low incomes to visit people in prison. Sonia Crozier replied that there was an assisted visits scheme for people on low incomes.

Kate Green MP asked about the nature of the relationship between the CRCs and women's centres. She had visited her local women's Centre in Manchester which is at the heart of the whole system approach.

Sonia Crozier said that the nature of the relationship between CRCs and women's centres varied across the country. CRCs were contracted to provide services for women but there were variations in terms of the way they interpreted this duty.. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation's thematic review had shown that spend on services for women had diminished.

Kate Green MP said that the commercial contract between CRCs and women's centres was causing difficulties and a lack of stability for centres.

Baroness Hamwee also referred to the uncertainty of core funding for women's centres.

Baroness Hamwee asked about the gender informed assessment tool and its roll-out if it proved to be effective.

Sonia Crozier said the tool borrowed heavily from the model in Northern Ireland. It prompted probation officers to pursue lines of inquiry and focus on the differences for women compared to men. Issues such as domestic violence and the possibility of coercion in criminal behaviour were explored.

It encouraged probation staff to explore the full range of options for women.. There is work underway between MoJ, health and HMPPS to improve access to drug and alcohol treatment with a view to making more drug and alcohol treatment requirements.

Baroness Hamwee stressed the importance of ensuring that users of the assessment tool had the necessary training to recognise issues such as domestic violence. Sonia Crozier agreed that training was important.

Kate Green MP took the role of chair following a division in the House of Lords.

Lord Ramsbotham spoke of his role as Chief Inspector of Prisons when he suspended an inspection of Holloway prison after finding out that women were shackled during labour. He had asked to see the Director of women's prisons at the time and was shocked to be told there wasn't one.

Lord Ramsbotham asked who was currently responsible for women's prisons. Sonia Crozier replied that she was. She said she was also the director for women on probation. Luke Sergeant was the deputy director for the women's estate and had an operational line to Phil Copple, executive director of prisons and to Sonia Crozier.

Sonia Crozier said the lines of responsibility were working. She would be holding Luke Sergeant to account.

Fiona Mactaggart said that sentencers had a legal duty to take into account the impact of a prison sentence on a child if a parent is sent to prison. She asked what work was being done with the courts to ensure that children were not being punished for the behaviour of their mothers..

Sonia Crozier said probation needed to be more assertive in court and explain the impact of a short prison sentence to magistrates.

Fiona Mactaggart responded by saying women felt there was no advantage in telling their probation officer they had children. Some worried their children would be taken away from them.

Sonia Crozier said it was important to engage with women at the earliest opportunity.

Fiona Mactaggart stated that sentencing guidelines say courts should consider if an offender is a sole or primary carer for dependent relatives. The courts must also consider the best interests of the child. At the moment the courts are breaking the law.

Lord Brown said the Human Rights Act and the UNCRC should be important factors in sentencing. He asked whether HMPPS was consulting the Sentencing Council.

Sonia Crozier said it was not planning to ask to change the sentencing guidelines but to ensure they were being used.

Kate Green suggested that the APPG on Women in the Penal System should invite the Sentencing Council to come and answer questions

Sonia Crozier said that the National Sentencer Probation Forum had been re-introduced. There was a focus on women and plans to refresh joint liaison between magistrates and judges.

Fiona Mactaggart and Kate Green MP called for strong messages to be conveyed to magistrates against the use of custody for women. Sentencers should stop punishing children by imprisoning women.

Lord Ramsbotham asked about gender specific training for prison officers. Sonia Crozier reported that the trauma informed approach was being rolled out and they were developing gender specific training for the new key worker role in the women's estate. She had looked at the role of resettlement workers in Scotland who accompanied women on leaving prison in order to support them in the community.

The talent matrix process was spotting stars in the prison service and encouraging individuals to take on more challenging roles

Lord Ramsbotham asked what the new prisons for women would look and feel like and how they would be different to men's prisons.

Sonia Crozier was unable to comment on plans in the forthcoming strategy for women. She said that in other jurisdictions women were held in smaller units inside men's prisons and these worked for women.

Kate Green MP emphasised that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to make change for women. She asked what the process would be for consultation.

Sonia Crozier said that once the strategy had been drafted, there would be a full consultation that would include workshops for stakeholders.

Fiona Mactaggart said that if any prisons for women were built in a prison for men you would not have a specific women's estate. Staff would be drawn from the women's prison to work in the men's and vice versa. She said that all experience showed that small women's units attached or alongside men's prisons meant that women suffered.

Baroness Corston asked Sonia Crozier for a reassurance that HMPPS would not be building a women's prison in Wales to add to the already over-bloated women's custodial estate. She referred to the Corston report which followed the deaths of six women in Styal prison and said that building more prisons was the wrong way to go. Baroness Corston stated that if a new prison was built in Wales it would guarantee the deaths of women.

Sonia Crozier said she did not want women to go to prison but could not say if/where new prisons for women were planned.

Kate Green MP asked about a presumption against short sentences for women, as has happened in Scotland for both men and women and was helping to reduce crime and the prison population

Sonia Crozier said there was a presumption in Scotland against prison sentences of under three months, and there are proposals to extend this to 12 months.

Kate Paradine from Women in Prison asked whether consideration had been given to the monies allocated by the Treasury for capital expenditure to be invested in of community provision for women, instead of building new prisons. As the Treasury had earmarked the money for capital expenditure, it could be spent on capital schemes in the community rather than expanding the prison estate.

Sonia Crozier said that treasury rules stated that the money set aside to build new women's prisons could only be used for capital investment and she didn't think it could be reallocated. The money had initially been allocated entirely for the male prison estate and only subsequently was it agreed the money could be used for the Women's estate. had been secured.

Kate Green MP raised the issue of recalls to prison. Since the inception of the CRCs they had used recalls and the number of recalls of women for breach was a cause for concern.

Sonia Crozier said that women were more likely to get shorter sentences and there were now many more women supervised on licence than previously. It was important to ensure better provision for women on release. Approved premises for women should not be designed like men's but must recognise the complexity of women's needs.

Lord Brown asked what sentencers should do when a woman who has committed 30 offences or more appeared before them.

Sonia Crozier said there should be high quality community orders for women. Judges should also be able to bring women back to court to discuss progress. Evidence from other jurisdictions had shown that women benefitted from such courts.

Kate Green MP asked whether HMPPS envisaged bringing about change without legislation. She asked about the timescale for change.

Sonia Crozier said the strategy for women would be published soon and HMPPS would be engaging with stakeholders to bring about change.

Kate Green MP re-emphasised that it was a once in a lifetime opportunity to make structural change and called for close dialogue with Sonia Crozier and HMPPS.

Baroness Corston thanked Sonia Crozier.