



All Party Parliamentary Group
Women in the Penal System

**Minutes of a meeting held at 4.30pm on Tuesday 30 October
House of Commons, Committee Room 19**

**Meeting with Edward Argar MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry
of Justice**

Addressing the group

Edward Argar MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice

Chair

Baroness Corston

Parliamentarians attending

Baroness Barran
Baroness Burt
The Lord Bishop of Gloucester
Baroness Hamwee
Baroness Healy
Lord Judd
Victoria Prentis

Non-parliamentarians attending

George Barrow, Ministry of Justice
Kady Billington-Murphy, Office of Kate Green MP
Will Collins, Ministry of Justice
Elle Costigan, Private Secretary to Minister Argar, Ministry of Justice
Frances Crook, Howard League for Penal Reform
Stephanie Davin, Howard League for Penal Reform
Alastair Gordon, Parliamentary Assistant to Richard Burgon MP
Liz Hogarth, Independent Advisor, Corston Independent Funders Coalition
Eleanor Hourigan, Counsel to the Joint Committee on Human Rights
Caroline Howe, Lloyds Bank Foundation
Janice James, Ministry of Justice
Laura Janes, Howard League for Penal Reform
William Kent, Catholic Bishops' Conference
Brendon Lawler, Joint Committee on Human Rights
Fiona Mactaggart
Nerissa Martin, Tolkien Trust
Julia Mulligan, Police & Crime Commissioner for North Yorkshire

Lauren Nickolls, Clinks
Kate Paradine, Women in Prison
Harriet Paul, The Disabilities Trust
Rob Preece, Howard League for Penal Reform
Angela Russ, Tolkien Trust
Louise Scarce, Office of Roberta Blackman-Woods MP
Rachel Senior, Parliamentary Assistant to the Lord Bishop of Gloucester
Becky Short, London Assembly
Jessica Southgate, Agenda

Apologies

Debbie Abrahams MP
Tonia Antoniazzi MP
Roberta Blackman-Woods MP
Lord Boswell
Lord Bradley
Lord Carlile of Berriew CBE, QC
Sarah Champion MP
David Drew MP
Baroness Fall
Vicky Ford MP
Pauline Latham OBE MP
Kerry McCarthy MP
Ian Mearns MP
Baroness McIntosh
Ian Mearns MP
Maria Miller MP
Angela Rayner MP
Jo Stevens MP
Lord Woolf

Baroness Corston welcomed the minister and highlighted trends around the number of women in prison since the Corston report.

Edward Argar said that evidence showed that short sentences did not work. Where an offence justified it, custody was an option – so, improving conditions in custody was still a strand of the strategy. He said that government needed to look at the operation of CRC contracts and he was linking with Rory Stewart on this.

The minister suggested that he wanted to pilot a residential centre for women in the hope that this would mean courts would not sentence to prison if they could be assured that women would get wrap-around support and supported accommodation.

Frances Crook noted that residential centres underused and the probation service had recently sold a women's residential centre to a private developer in Bristol because it had been empty and unused for years.

Baroness Corston asked why there had been a fall in the number of community sentences – were magistrates losing confidence or did they just not know about provision?

Edward Argar referred to the comments in the APPG's report about knowledge gaps and said that he was not sure that a clear picture of what provision was always known to magistrates. He had asked his staff for a mapping of provision but was not sure that this information had filtered to sentencers.

Baroness Corston noted that even many female magistrates had not heard of women's centres and observed that there needed to be conversations with the bar and the magistracy.

Edward Argar agreed and said that while some magistrates were very good, others were not – so he would look at improving training. There was a perception amongst magistrates that knowledge needing to be pushed to them but he believed that sentencers had a responsibility to know what was on offer in their communities, to visit women's centres and other community services. He said that when one saw what was being done on the ground, one could not help but be impressed.

Victoria Prentis asked what the government was going to do to cut the number of short sentences, which everyone agreed were unsuccessful for an individual or society.

Edward Argar agreed that short sentences were counter-productive but noted that sentencing was a matter for the judiciary. He lauded the drop in children in custody over a period of five years and noted that this could be achieved for women.

Victoria Prentis agreed and pressed the minister on how practically speaking he would provide leadership to achieve this two thirds reduction.

Edward Argar referred to the strategy and its goals of improving relationships with CRCs, piloting women's residential centres, raising awareness and increasing the provision of longer-term support.

He said there were three strands to this work: trying to get multi-year funding settlements, leveraging philanthropy and simplifying the process for bidding.

Victoria Prentis offered the help of the APPG in demonstrating the evidence base around women's centres and why 'spending to save' worked.

Edward Argar noted that he would soon be visiting Manchester and meeting Bev Hughes and Andy Burnham MP.

Baroness Barran pointed out that 46 per cent of women in prison had already attempted suicide while only three per cent were a risk to others – so what could be done to reduce the number of women going into prison, especially those with mental health and substance misuse needs?

Baroness Corston noted that while there had been a welcome fall in self-inflicted deaths, self-harm was a big issue.

Edward Argar said that the female offender population in custody was very complex. Two thirds had suffered domestic violence. He said that one challenge was that short sentences disrupted community provision but were not long enough to do anything meaningful.

Baroness Hamwee asked whether magistrates regarded community sentences as being soft. In fact, compared with a short sentence, a community sentence required a lot from someone.

Edward Agar said that it was hard to generalise but more needed to be done to raise awareness about what being a given sentence actually involved. Where a magistrate was looking at someone for whom they thought a custodial sentence was the only option, there could in fact be a community piece that was fantastic – but this required the system to pull together.

Baroness Burt mentioned that she had been the assistant governor at Holloway and said that she felt angry about the £5M funding given for community provision despite the the £45M saving on the original plan of building new prisons. She asked when would the residential pilots finish and by when would the rest of the funding for women's services be in place?

Edward Argar said that no figure had ever been mentioned – the £45M was a number mentioned by the media, not ministers. That funding was predicated on the money being used specifically and only for a capital prison building programme.

He said they received over 70 bids over the summer and he had a meeting later this week about the remaining £1.5M. This was a multi-year strategy, conversations continued with the Treasury and there was a Spending Review coming next year.

Baroness Corston implored Edward Argar to consult with the sector on the plans for the new residential centres. Home Office research had shown years ago that women's centres worked but there had been a failure since then to talk to people in the women's sector. When Holloway prison closed, smaller organisations were caught by surprise and unable to plan.

Edward Argar explained that he had already held many meetings including with Anawim, the Nelson Trust and Vera Baird, and was drawing on the advice given by the Advisory Board on Female Offenders.

Fiona Mactaggart pointed out that it was had been clearly shown that sending women to prison messed up their children's lives

Edward Argar said that almost a third of women in custody were sole carers. The sins of parents should not be visited on their children. Moreover if one's aim were to reduce reoffending, similarly one should not transfer this risk on the children.

He said that legislation and the guidelines from the Sentencing Council were clear that custody was a last resort and the needs of children should always be taken into account, and referred to the 2012 Court of Appeal judgment in Petherick.

Fiona Mactaggart said that some women did not admit they had children because they were scared that their children would be taken into care.

Edward Argar said that more could be done to reassure women at risk of custodial sentences to get them to declare if they have children.

Rachel Treweek said that the kinds of knowledge gaps referred to in the APPG's report existed even in government. Dr Shona Minson's work was being referenced constantly but not being implemented.

Edward Argar said that it should be possible for magistrates to use technology – for example, an app – and the concordat represented a step forward.

Baroness Burt highlighted the need for recording of whether women had dependent children given the extreme vulnerability of these children – who often have to sofa surf or stay with relatives, although this was often preferable to being taken into care.

Edward Argar said that in the vast majority of cases keeping a family together was a good thing. Lord Farmer was already working on a report on links for women and their families.

The minister said he had visited half of the female estate and met with Lord Farmer. They were developing a family policy framework and a lead inspector had been appointed on children and families.

Baroness Barran asked what the blocks to ambition were, especially given we were talking about just four thousand people.

Edward Argar said that broadly the prisons across the women's estate were better than men's prisons.

He was hoping to do some work on health before the end of the year and gave the APPG a personal commitment that he would push the pace on these issues.

Baroness Barran noted that the clearer the strategy and deliverables the easier it was to bring in philanthropic money to enhance, not replace, statutory responsibilities.

Lord Judd pointed out that the primary issue was still understanding the implications of what was going on with sentencing. Sentencers needed to look at all aspects of a woman's life as an individual before they passed a sentence.

Edward Argar agreed and said that to understand the nature of individual as a person all part of the pre-sentence report needed to be completed

Baroness Corston again raised the issue of funding. Edward Argar said that the larger amount was mooted three years ago. Funding and the sustainability of funding was a priority for him and he was aware there were a number of elements that could improve support for women's centres – multi-year settlements, simplification of application processes and attempts to leverage other money in.

Edward Argar expressed a desire to keep in contact with the APPG and draw on its expertise and Baroness Corston said the APPG would certainly help if it could.

Baroness Corston thanked everyone and closed the meeting.