



All Party Parliamentary Group
Women in the Penal System

Meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System

**4.00pm-5.00pm
Wednesday 7 July 2021
Virtual meeting via Zoom**

Minutes

Chair: Jackie Doyle-Price MP

Attendees:

Debbie Abrahams MP
Baroness Burt
Baroness Corston

Apologies:

Lord Ramsbotham
Baroness Bennett
Lord Bishop of Gloucester
Lord Bradley
Carolyn Harris MP
Tony Lloyd MP

In attendance

Lorraine Atkinson, the Howard League
Lucy Cserna, office of Sarah Champion MP
Liz Hogarth OBE, Corston Independent Funders Coalition
Caroline Howe, Lloyds Bank Foundation
Olivia Mervyn-Smith, Housing for Women
Andrew Neilson, the Howard League
Rob Preece, the Howard League
Richard Rowley, Working Chance
Esther Sample, One Small Thing

1. Introduction

Jackie Doyle-Price welcomed everyone to the APPG meeting and evidence session.

Jackie Doyle-Price stated that Lord Judd, who had been a longstanding member of the APPG on Women in the Penal System, had recently died. She wished to express condolences to his family on behalf of the APPG.

Baroness Corston said that he had been a staunch supporter of the APPG and its aims since its inception and had been a highly valued member of the group. He would be greatly missed.

2. Evidence session: Inquiry into women's health and wellbeing in prisons

Jackie Doyle-Price stated the meeting was the second evidence session as part of the APPG on Women in the Penal System inquiry into women's health and wellbeing in prisons. The APPG Inquiry was investigating to what extent prisons promoted healthy lifestyles and supported the specific and diverse needs of women, many of whom had been victims of crime themselves.

Jackie Doyle-Price reported the APPG inquiry was launched in March 2021 and parliamentarians had heard evidence from:

- Kate Paradine, Chief Executive, Women in Prison
- Juliet Lyon CBE, Chair, Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody
- Naomi Delap, Director, Birth Companions

The APPG had also called for written evidence. It had received submissions from a number of organisations and individuals including Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons and the PPO.

Jackie Doyle-Price introduced the witnesses for the second evidence session:

Hannah Shead CEO, Trevi

Hannah Shead has been CEO of Trevi, a women and children's charity in the South West of England, since 2011. She is passionate about women's issues, has been in the addiction field for over 20 years and has worked in the statutory and voluntary sector.

Hannah was a presenter for the Lord Farmer Review and the recent Home Office Roundtable event for the UK Drugs Strategy. She regularly speaks at conferences and participates on several addiction and domestic abuse forums including the Choices Consortium and Domestic Abuse Sexual Violence forum.

Laura Fraser-Crewes Strategic lead, Sunflower Women's Centre, Trevi

Laura Fraser-Crewes has been Strategic Lead at Trevi since 2018 and has developed the award-winning Sunflower Women's Centre. She was currently developing Trevi Women's Housing which should see 250 women housed in safe and valuing accommodation by 2025. In 2019 Laura was given the Lifetime Achievement Venus Award.

Previously she has managed a women's refuge in East London, a probation hostel in South-West London and a residential detox and rehabilitation centre in Leeds. Laura

was involved in Government research relating to homelessness and training, which saw the birth of the national Foyer initiative. She has worked with Plymouth's Social and Housing Services and has taught personal development at Dartmoor prison.

R

Peer mentor, Sunflower Women's Centre, Trevi

R was a peer mentor at the Sunflower Women's Centre in Plymouth, which supported and empowered more than 500 women locally every year.

Rokaiya Khan

CEO, Together Women

Rokaiya Khan is CEO of Together Women, a charitable organisation working to support women and girls with multiple and complex needs across the North of England.

Evidence:

Hannah Shead said that she was privileged and humbled to be speaking to the APPG on Women in the Penal System. The work of Trevi had developed as a result of the report produced by Baroness Corston in 2006.

Trevi ran three facilities for women in the South West of England; the Sunflower women's centre, the Daffodil family centre and the Jasmine residential mothers' recovery centre. 65 per cent of the women who attended the mother and child rehabilitation unit had had contact with the criminal justice system. Hannah Shead noted that there was a significant number of pregnant women in prison each year. The centres run by Trevi provided an alternative path for women in contact with the criminal justice system and allowed women to stay with their children.

Health and wellbeing were at the heart of the work at Trevi. The centres encouraged healthy eating, allowed women to make choices around health, wellbeing and birth, offered support with ante-natal and post-natal care and addressed the impact of trauma which the majority of women had experienced. Hannah Shead explained that trauma was the gateway for women with drug and alcohol issues. Given the right support, women could break the cycle of trauma and drug abuse. The Jasmine centre provided therapy and support whilst avoiding the separation of the mother from their child which was traumatic for both. 80 per cent of the women who came into the centre with their children left with them, providing better outcomes for the women and for children.

Laura Fraser-Crewes was strategic lead at the Sunflower women's centre. She has asked one of the women they had supported at the Sunflower Centre how prison had impacted on them. The woman had replied;

'Going into prison never made me change. It made me harder and more withdrawn. Every day was about survival and I knew from the beginning that I could not let my guard down and be vulnerable. My whole sentence I felt like I was on edge, my anxiety levels were sky high. The whole experience was traumatising, de-valuing and tapped into my sense of worthlessness and

shame. I left feeling even more angry with the world and went straight back to using and offending.'

Laura Fraser-Crewes stated that prison was a huge beast and was drawing women in who did not need to be there. Women were receiving harsher sentences than men for offences such as theft. Short sentences were damaging and had high rates of re-offending for women. Laura Fraser-Crewes reported that one woman had her two daughters taken away from her when she went into prison and never got them back.

Laura Fraser-Crewes said there needed to be a greater investment in diversion and more trust in the third sector to manage the risk of supporting women who had been in contact with the criminal justice system.

The Sunflower centre had supported over 500 women in the last year and ran ten different training programmes for women. The offer was holistic and non-judgemental and the vast majority of women engaged with the programmes. As a result, re-offending results were as low as five per cent. The holistic programmes included therapy, fitness, art, drop-in social wellbeing sessions and a creche.

The Sunflower centre invested in the right staff who were multi-skilled and trained. The peer mentors and the women who attended the centre worked together with the staff to shape the centre.

R was a peer mentor at the Sunflower centre. She had been sent to prison at the age of 18 and had spent twelve years of her life there. Prior to prison she had experienced trauma and domestic violence.

When she arrived at the prison she was placed on the adult lifer wing and said she found this very scary. She did not know who to trust. She had seen a lot of violence in prison. Prison had made her cold and she had to adjust to survive. R had seen women separated from their children after going to prison and the chaos this caused. She had also met 'part-time lifers', the women who came in and out of prison on short sentences.

During her first seven years in prison she had been offered very little in terms of courses that engaged her or addressed the trauma she had experienced. She was offered a place in a therapeutic community after seven years and it took a further six months until she was able to speak to others in the community.

R felt she had become institutionalised in prison. She had expected some support after release but she was just left. It was not until she found the Sunflower centre that she felt supported and encouraged. The staff had helped and nurtured her. She felt that she belonged. She said that in prison she felt as if staff didn't care about you, they just locked you in and left you with your emotions behind the door. At the centre there was warmth and human reaction. R wanted to use her experiences to help others in similar situations.

Jackie Doyle-Price said that R was a walking example of peer mentors and thanked her for speaking.

Rokaiya Khan said that she was in awe of R who had spoken about her experiences in prison and the damage it caused. R had talked about survival. Her experience was similar to many of the women Together Women had supported.

Following the publication of the Corston report, Together Women had been set up to address the issues raised by Baroness Corston. The charity ran women's centres for women with multiple and complex needs in the North of England. Women's centres were one place where women were safe and where women's needs were not siloed. Choice was at the heart of the service they offered. The centres provided therapeutic support, mentoring and other services to address women's offending. The voluntary sector was good at being creative and innovative and working with statutory services to provide support.

Rokaiya Khan said short prison sentences should be abolished as they were damaging. The government announcement of 500 additional prison places for women was disheartening. More women should be supported in the community. Custody should be reserved only for a very small number of women who required it.

Together Women worked with staff in Newhall prison to provide a women's centre within the prison. The environment was very different from prison and staff worked in a trauma informed way. The centre provided counselling and other support services.

3. Questions and discussion

Baroness Burt thanked everyone for their contributions. She said the APPG needed to find a way to persuade the government to implement the wonderful work of women's centres that the witnesses had advocated for. Baroness Burt said it was sad to reflect how little had changed since she had been a prison governor and worked with girls in prison. She had become a champion for women and girls in the penal system once she knew what they had been through.

There was a need to create more women's centres. Prisons were being used as mental health facilities and women were not getting the help they needed.

Debbie Abrahams said that R's evidence had had an impact on all of them. The APPG needed to create the argument that it was better to invest in therapies and community-based interventions rather than prison.

Hannah Shead said that the UK Women's Budget Group had produced a useful briefing on the case for sustainable women's centres.

<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-15-Womens-Centres-Report-v4.pdf>

Baroness Corston asked each of the witnesses if they could change one thing what would that be.

Hannah Shead said that she would not lock up pregnant women.

Laura Fraser-Crewes would abolish short sentences and prevent the use of imprisonment for low-level offences. For the very small number of women who need to be detained, residential units should provide meaningful programmes.

R said that women in prison needed hope. There needed to be light at the end of the tunnel. Women in prison serving long sentences should have therapy.

Rokaiya Khan agreed that short prison sentences should be abolished. She noted that the charity Revolving Doors had produced a compelling case against the use of short sentences.

<http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/file/2271/download?token=p3aMJ1PX>

Baroness Burt said the APPG could help to build the financial case for women's centres as economics appeared to be winning through with the current government.

Hannah Shead said that the women's sector organisations worked well together and they would be happy to provide evidence to support the case for women's centres.
See

Jackie Doyle-Price concluded that women's centres were delivering better outcomes for women.

The meeting concluded at 5pm