



All Party Parliamentary Group
Women in the Penal System

Meeting and evidence session

5.00pm-6.00pm, Tuesday 2 March 2021

Launch of the APPG on Women in the Penal System Inquiry into women's health and well-being in prisons

Minutes

Chair: Jackie Doyle-Price MP

Attendees

Diane Abbott MP
Baroness Armstrong
Baroness Corston
Lord Bradley
Baroness Burt
Lord Bishop of Gloucester
Carolyn Harris MP
Jackie Doyle Price MP
Baroness Sater

Apologies

Debbie Abrahams MP
Baroness Bennett
Sarah Champion MP
Baroness Hamwee
Lord Judd
Lord Ramsbotham
Liz Saville-Roberts MP

In attendance

Charley Allan, Office of Mary Glendon MP
Lorraine Atkinson, the Howard League
Piers Barber, Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody
Benjamin Bessey, Office of Lyn Brown MP
Frances Crook, the Howard League
Kelly Grehan, Office of David Lammy MP
Paul Marsden, Office of Tracey Brabin MP
Rob Preece, the Howard League

Chair: Jackie Doyle-Price MP

1. Welcome

Jackie Doyle-Price welcomed Parliamentarians and observers. The minutes of the APPG meeting on 4 November 2020 were agreed.

2. Launch of APPG Inquiry into women's health and well-being in prisons.

Jackie Doyle-Price introduced the witnesses:

Kate Paradine

Kate Paradine is Chief Executive of Women in Prison (WIP), a national charity that delivers support for women affected by the criminal justice system in prisons, in the community and through its Women's Centres. The charity campaigns to end the harm caused to women, their families and communities by imprisonment.

Juliet Lyon CBE

Juliet Lyon is chair of the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody. She is a visiting professor in the School of Law at Birkbeck, University of London and a member of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Advisory Council. Previously Juliet was director of the Prison Reform Trust, secretary general of Penal Reform International and a Women's National Commissioner.

Naomi Delap

Naomi Delap is Director of Birth Companions, a charity specialising in the needs and experiences of women who face disadvantage during pregnancy and early motherhood in the criminal justice, maternity, social services and immigration systems. Birth Companions marks its 25th anniversary this year.

Kate Paradine (WIP) said that the starting point of the inquiry should be that prisons could not support women's health and wellbeing. Women were going into prisons in poorer health than men. Prisons made everything harder. The pandemic has multiplied the negative impact of prisons including severely curtailing family contact and decreasing the amount time women were out of their cells and able to socialise and exercise.

The government's announcement to build 500 additional places in women's prisons was a harmful backward step. She noted that women's centres were facing a cliff edge in terms of funding from April 2021.

Kate Paradine said there were three key areas where the impact of prison on women's health and well-being could be seen:

1. Levels of self-harm had reached record levels over the last month. There had been an increase in levels of stress and anxiety as a result of the restrictions brought in during the pandemic. It had impacted on women's mental wellbeing which was already very poor.
2. Access to appropriate food and exercise was limited. Women in Prison frequently gave emergency grants to women who had put on excessive

weight due to poor diet and a lack of exercise whilst in prison and could no longer fit into their clothes.

3. It was much harder to tackle women's physical health problems in prison. Conditions like diabetes and MS were more difficult to manage.

Kate Paradine noted that women were being released to homelessness. She welcomed the fact that the APPG inquiry would focus on the bigger picture of health and well-being and called for a reduction in the numbers of women in prison.

Juliet Lyon (IAP) agreed the poor health of women in prison was poorer than the poorest of women in the community. She was saddened that many of the recommendations of the Corston report had not been taken forward and women were still facing the same issues more than a decade later.

Between December 2015 and December 2020, 56 women had died in prison. 24 deaths were self-inflicted.

The Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP) had published a report on preventing the deaths of women in prison (IAP, 2017)

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c5ae65ed86cc93b6c1e19a3/t/5f5207216dd18341fc2848a2/1599211305040/IAP%2Brapid%2Bevidence%2Bcollection%2B-%2Bv0.3.pdf>

22 women died in prison in 2016, 12 of whom had taken their own lives. The report was in response to that. Its aim was to investigate the experiences of women in prison and to understand why so many women had died.

It found women were more likely to suffer anxiety. A third of women in prison had previously been taken into care and half had experienced abuse as a child. 46 per cent of the women in prison had tried to kill themselves at some point in their lives.

The evidence showed that the following five factors had contributed to the high number of deaths:

1. A reduction in prison staffing levels,

There had been a loss of experienced prison staff and there were a high number of vacancies in mental health teams. Women had limited time out of cell and the resulting inactivity and lack of contact had impacted on their health and well-being.

2. Unmet mental health needs in women's prisons

There was a lack of access to mental health, drug and alcohol treatment and an increase in vulnerability. Drug use, bullying and debt in women's prisons had contributed to mental ill-health.

3. A decrease in the use of ROTL

4. An increase in the number of women recalled to prison.

5. The closure of Holloway prison

The closure of the women's prison and also women only support services as well as cuts to staffing had all adversely affected women.

Professionals told IAP that preventative work and greater use alternatives to custody would help to reduce the number of women in prison and save lives. Prison should be reserved as a place of last resort.

Juliet Lyon reported that the most recent figures on self-harm in women's prisons in the year to Sept 2020 showed there were 12,443 recorded incidents. Three per cent of the incidents needed hospital treatment. Incidents were at record levels and showed the high levels of distress in women's prisons during the Covid 19 pandemic. The sudden withdrawal of staff, the withdrawal of contact with other women, the lack of contact with Samaritans Listeners and the break with family members had left women isolated. The Prison Service had appointed a task force to respond.

The reality remained that women in prison were in distress for the best part of a year. Extra support would be needed in prison and on release.

Juliet Lyon said that health and wellbeing was the right lens to look through as it applied to all women in prison.

Naomi Delap (Birth Companions) said that the complex physical and mental wellbeing needs of pregnant women and new mothers were not understood or provided for in the prison system. Access to healthcare was a major issue in prisons and women missed ante-natal appointments at higher rates than women in the community. Two babies had died in prison within last 9 months. There were individual and systemic failures.

There were greater barriers to navigating the multiple agencies working with women in prison including prison staff, maternity services and social services. This impacted on the safety and wellbeing of women and children. Covid 19 had compounded these issues adversely affecting the mental health and wellbeing of pregnant women and mothers. Pregnant women and those with new babies had increased levels of anxiety during the pandemic and the suspension of visits had hit hard. Women had faced considerable challenges before and after release.

Naomi Delap report that a policy framework for maternity services would be published shortly. However, the risks and complexities of women meant that prisons would never be a safe place to hold women and children. Naomi Delap echoed concerns about the proposed additional 500 prison places for women.

3. Questions from Parliamentarians

Baroness Corston asked why the diet given to women in prison contributed to weight gain?

Kate Paradine said women required a different diet to men yet prison food was based around the needs of men. The budget for prison food was limited, there was a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables and women were unable to control portion sizes.

Naomi Delap said the higher calorific food provided by prisons to pregnant and breastfeeding women was not always healthy and was not always what women wanted or needed. Women had little control over what they ate and when they ate it.

Juliet Lyon agreed that prisons were designed around the needs of men. Exercise was one example where there was a pre-occupation with male activities including bodybuilding and gyms. A few women's prisons had provided activities specifically for women but in the main the orientation was towards men's needs in prison.

The Bishop of Gloucester asked the witnesses for examples of good practice in prisons.

Kate Paradine referred to the health advocates project provided by Women in Prison. She said that health advocacy was vital and women needed greater access to independent advocates. She gave an examples where women had been able to take yoga classes provided by an outside instructor but this had been stopped. She agreed the focus was on men's needs rather than what women wanted or needed.

Juliet Lyon said that Listeners were a huge help to women in prisons and also benefitted those who volunteered as Listeners. Kate Paradine raised concerns about the support that Listeners were being given during the pandemic and said more support was needed at this difficult time.

Jackie Doyle-Price referred to the strong sense of community and support from other women in women's prisons.

Naomi Delap said peer support and the voluntary sector could help to bridge the gulf that divided women in prisons from statutory services. She said social prescribing was widely used in the community but not in prisons. Activities such as gardening or art could be helpful for women's mental wellbeing and should be supported in prisons.

Baroness Sater asked about physical activity in women's prisons. She was shocked to hear that people in prison had been locked in their cells, unable to exercise. She spoke of the importance of allowing organisations to come into prison from outside, for example to deliver services or provide yoga or dance classes for women. She asked what simple things prisons could be doing to support this.

Kate Paradine said that opening the prison doors to expertise in the community had created opportunities for women. However, changes as a result of TR contracts had meant that many organisations had been locked out of prisons. The focus should be on innovative provision for women in prison.

Lord Bradley commented on the decision to build an additional 500 prison places and the justification that this was because of a predicted rise in the number of women in the criminal justice system as a result of an increase in police numbers. He said this was like looking at the problem through the wrong end of the telescope. He reiterated the call to dramatically reduce the numbers of women in prison and reduce the use of remand.

He suggested that if the number of women in prison was reduced it would be possible to apply NHS principles of equivalence of care in prison. Integrated models where physical and mental health were dealt with at the same time, were being rolled out in the community. However, in prisons physical health, mental health and well-being were often siloed. There were examples of good practice but prisons were very bad at sharing and rolling out good practice across the estate.

Juliet Lyon agreed that equivalence of care was important but it needed to be equivalence plus. She said that opening a prison in an area was like dropping a sick town into a new location. The IAP report on women had recommended that every mental health trust should have a clinical lead for women. She noted that prisoners experienced premature aging and were in exceptionally poor health. There was a need for a whole institution approach to prisons. The pandemic had highlighted the risks facing the prison population. The number of women in prison needed to be reduced and police, health and education services had to work together to achieve this. The reduction in the numbers of children in prison showed this was possible.

Naomi -Delap said that women's health needs should be addressed early on to prevent poor health outcomes for women and their children. Plans needed to be ambitious with a focus on early intervention.

Diane Abbot said the women's prison estate had been neglected for far too long. She asked the witnesses that if the prison's minister was asked to do one thing, what would they like that to be?

Kate Paradine said that radically reducing the prison population would enable prisons to concentrate on a smaller number of women. Far too many women in prison did not need to be there. Prisons made their problems worse whilst their health deteriorated and it was completely unnecessary. The £150 million due to be spent on building new prison places could be spent on supporting women in the community instead.

Juliet Lyon cited the example of the planned Cornton Vale women's prison in Scotland where the Scottish government had cancelled the contract and was heading in a different and better direction. She said there was a need for a driving engine to help bring about a reduction in the numbers of women in prison.

Jackie Doyle-Price suggested the APPG should open up a conversation with women and equalities minister.

The Bishop of Gloucester reported that she had met with Lord Chancellor to discuss the 500 additional places. She said there had been a lack of joined up thinking and the prison expansion policy was at odds with the focus on police diversion and keeping women out of the criminal justice system. She expressed the frustrations at having to deal with different departments.

Jackie Doyle-Price said it was a perennial problem when there was more than one department dealing with women.

Jackie Doyle-Price thanked the witnesses and thanked everyone for coming. She said the evidence session had picked up the key themes and shown the need to make the arguments for reducing the women's prison population and highlighting how this would lead to better outcomes for women.