



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
Tuesday 26 October 2021
Virtual meeting via Zoom**

Minutes

Chair: Jackie Doyle-Price MP

Attending:

Baroness Corston
Baroness Sater
Baroness Hamwee
Lyn Brown MP

Apologies

Debbie Abrahams MP
Lord Bishop of Gloucester
Baroness Bennett
Sir Peter Bottomley MP
Lord Bradley
Carolyn Harris MP
Baroness Burt
Baroness Masham
Maria Miller MP
Sir Bob Neill MP
Liz Saville Roberts MP

In attendance

Dr Laura Abbott
Deborah Adewale, the Howard League
Lorraine Atkinson, the Howard League
Dr Lucy Baldwin
Benjamin Bessey, office of Lyn Brown MP
Dr Molly Corlett, the Howard League
Frances Crook, the Howard League
Lucy Cserna, office of Sarah Champion MP
Avril Culley
Liz Hogarth

1. Welcome from the chair

i) The minutes from the previous meeting on 7 July were agreed.

ii) Update on the work of the APPG

The third APPG briefing on reducing the arrests of women was sent to every police chief constable and the APPG had received responses from a number of forces including Greater Manchester, Avon and Somerset, Thames Valley, Cheshire and Durham.

iii) Baroness Corston

Jackie Doyle-Price noted that Baroness Corston would be taking on a new role within the APPG to become **Honorary President**. She announced that Baroness Corston would be standing down as co-chair of the APPG, a position she has held since the group's inception over a decade ago. Jackie Doyle-Price thanked Jean for all her hard work as co-chair of the APPG.

iv) Frances Crook

Jackie Doyle-Price announced that Frances Crook was leaving the Howard League at the end of October and this was her last APPG meeting as CEO of the charity. Andrea Coomber would be succeeding Frances as Chief Executive of the Howard League in November and the charity would continue to provide administrative support to the APPG. Jackie Doyle-Price thanked Frances for all she had done over the years.

2. Inquiry into women's health and wellbeing in prisons: Evidence session 3

Jackie Doyle-Price said that this was the third evidence session as part of the APPG inquiry into women's health and well-being in prison. At previous sessions, parliamentarians had heard evidence from:

- Women in Prison
- The Chair of the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody
- Birth Companions
- Sunflower Women's Centre
- Together Women

The APPG has also received written evidence from charities and individuals.

Jackie Doyle-Price MP introduced the witnesses from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons.

Charlie Taylor, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons

Charlie Taylor taught for many years in both primary and secondary schools in London. He began to specialise in supporting pupils with special educational needs and in 2005 became the headteacher of the Willows Special School (now The Willows School Academy Trust) for children with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties.

In 2011 he became an expert adviser on children's behaviour at the Department for Education. In 2012 he became the CEO of the National College for Teaching and Leadership.

He led the 2015 review into the youth justice system and made wide-ranging recommendations, including the introduction of Secure Schools, a new model for youth custody.

In 2017 he became Chair of the Youth Justice Board and continued working with the Department for Education as an adviser on behaviour hubs, a new initiative to improve the ability of schools to support their most challenging pupils

Charlie Taylor was appointed as HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in 2020.

Sandra Fieldhouse, Team leader for inspection of women's prisons, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons

Sandra had worked at Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons since 2010. She spent eight years as an inspector before becoming team leader of the women's inspection team, a role she has been in for three years.

Prior to 2010, Sandra was an inspector with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. Her career background before that was as a social worker with young offenders followed by becoming a probation officer and then being involved in the national development and implementation of offending behaviour programmes across the National Probation Service.

Charlie Taylor said that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons inspected 115 prisons in England and Wales, prisons in Northern Ireland, immigration detention centres and court custody facilities. The needs of women in prison were very different to the needs of men.

Prisons has acted quickly at the start of the pandemic in March 2020 to protect prisoners. Restrictions were brought in and prisoners were locked in their cells for up to 23 hours a day. Education, socialisation and ROTL were all restricted.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons had conducted short scrutiny visits during the pandemic but was now returning to full inspections.

HMIP had published thematic reviews on prisoners during the pandemic. There were concerns about the long-term detrimental impacts of the pandemic and the restrictions on prisoners.

Prisons were starting to open up. The inspectorate had noted that women were getting out of their cells for slightly longer than men. However, generic issues were slowing down changes including labour shortages and new staff who had started during the pandemic under the restricted regime and who were not used to the new regime.

Charlie Taylor said that HMIP conducted a prisoner survey as part of the inspection process. It showed the different needs of women compared to men. Seventy per cent of women reported that they had mental health problems. A higher percentage of women also reported they had housing worries compared to men. Twenty-five per cent of women reported feeling suicidal and 25 per cent reported physical health problems. Thirty-eight per cent had problems with drug or alcohol misuse.

Sandra Fieldhouse said that new expectations for women's prisons had been introduced by HMIP in April. There was a focus on the quality of staff/prisoner relationships and personal wellbeing. It had taken forward the recommendations of the Farmer review including a focus on children and families. The expectations were built on how best to work with women.

Sandra Fieldhouse said that living conditions in some women's prisons were just not good enough. More investment was needed in old buildings that were crumbling. In one prison, 20 women were sharing two toilets. Rates of mental health problems and self-harm were extremely high for women in prison and had increased during the pandemic. In one prison, 70 per cent of women said they had a mental health problem prior to the pandemic and this had increased to 85 per cent during the pandemic. This was placing a huge demand on services in prisons. There continued to be delays in transferring women with acute mental health needs to mental health hospitals.

The pandemic had made issues worse. Women reported more thoughts of self-harm and were locked in their cells for almost the whole day. One woman reported putting on so much weight that none of her clothes fitted. There had been no face-to-face visits with children for months on end. One mother had decided to no longer have visits from her children as it was too distressing for them and her when she was not able to hug or touch them.

The lack of physical activity was impacting women's health and wellbeing. Self-harm rates which had been five times higher than rates for men had increased to up to eight times higher during the pandemic. Some women were self-harming daily. Peaks in rates of self-harm occurred on when restrictions were eased in the community but prisons remained out of kilter. Responses to self-harm were too variable in prisons.

Women had spent long periods without face-to-face contact with staff, other prisoners, families and children. Family days had stopped and had not yet restarted. The impact of keeping women locked in their cells with no interaction with staff or their peers had been huge.

Resettlement services were no longer on site and prisons had lost important links to the community. The recovery of services was very slow. Women on remand were struggling to get the support they needed.

Release on temporary licence (ROTL) had stopped for all but essential workers. Recovery was very slow and only a small number of women were being granted ROTL.

Prison was being used as a place of safety for men, women and children. The lack of central data collection meant this problem remained hidden. In August 2021, HMIP asked six local prisons (three men's prisons and three women's prisons) for information about any individuals remanded in the previous 12 months who were so acutely mentally unwell that they should have been diverted from prison. The three women's prisons identified 68 women who were acutely mentally unwell and had been remanded to prison. The outcome for all of these women was not known but of those for whom the outcome was known, over half were transferred to a secure hospital. There was a need for a better range of community facilities for women facing a mental health crisis.

Jackie Doyle-Price said that the number of women being sent to prison as a place of safety was significant. The APPG had been calling for an end to the use of remand for own protection. It was clear that the money that was allocated to build 500 new prison places for women would be better spent building more secure mental health facilities for women.

Questions from parliamentarians

Jackie Doyle-Price asked why facilities in women's prisons were so bad.

Charlie Taylor said that the cuts to the Ministry of Justice budget and staffing cuts had affected all prisons. It had improved but the pandemic had taken prisons back to square one. Post pandemic, there continued to be staffing challenges. The focus should be on making sure that prisoners spend more time socialising with others.

Sandra Fieldhouse said there was a lack of investment in women's prisons. There were good units but also facilities where 20 women were sharing two toilets at night.

She said there was no specialist recruitment and no selection process by aptitude or skills to work with women in prison. Instead, factors such as closeness to home determined where new officers worked.

Jackie Doyle-Price commented that sensitive staffing could make a huge difference to women in prison.

Baroness Corston asked what accounted for the disparity in provision of mental health services in prisons.

Sandra Fieldhouse said in some prisons the demand for services was huge and this made it difficult to respond appropriately. She noted that prisons which had adopted a whole prison approach were delivering good quality care management and helped women to cope. Mental health should be a whole prison issue.

Jackie Doyle-Price asked what role leadership played in prisons.

Charlie Taylor said leadership was essential. The quality of leadership at all levels, from governor to regional manager and wing officer. Good leaders led to good outcomes.

Baroness Corston asked if there was a uniform approach across women's prisons.

Charlie Taylor responded that there was not as much sharing of good practice between establishments as he had seen in the education sector. Prison staff were very busy and it was difficult to make time to share best practice but it was worth making the time.

Baroness Hamwee said that she was not surprised by the reactions of children who were unable to hug their mother in prison during the pandemic. She had heard distressing stories about the impact of visits on children and mothers. The judiciary took no account of the needs of children before sentencing a mother to prison. The issue was much wider than just one service.

Charlie Taylor agreed there were complexities with women. Holding families together helped to increase women's resilience. Police forces now asked whether there was anyone at home if they had arrested a woman but this had not always been the case.

Sandra Fieldhouse said that pre-sentence reports had to be clearer about the woman's home life and dependent children.

Baroness Sater noted there were two worrying trends. Women were being locked in their cells for longer and had less time for purposeful activity. This was damaging to their physical and mental wellbeing. She asked what the barriers were.

Sandra Fieldhouse said that women who were not involved in any meaningful purposeful activity struggled the most. Before the pandemic there had been good examples of constructive activities and peer working. Trauma programmes had been well-received but there were not enough of them. More could be done to develop women's skills to stop re-offending.

Charlie Taylor said women needed to be cared by officers who could meet their needs and set clear boundaries. Whilst there was a lot of talk about trauma informed practice this did not always result in action.

The emphasis should be on purposeful activity. Wiping surfaces with a cloth had been described in one prison as work but as an activity it was limited. He had seen examples of good practice. Staff at Styal prison had worked hard to support a vulnerable woman and had found her meaningful work, giving her a sense of purpose.

Jackie Doyle-Price agreed that work was important for mental health. This was recognised in the community and should be rolled out through prisons too. Prisons were a microcosm of the harms caused during the pandemic. It was a matter of concern that purposeful activities were not returning now the lockdown had been lifted elsewhere.

Parliamentarians had seen the power of good mentoring schemes at the previous evidence sessions. She asked how far mentoring schemes had declined in prisons during the pandemic

Sandra Fieldhouse said it was difficult to quantify but during the pandemic most peer working and Listener schemes in prisons had stopped.

Jackie Doyle-Price asked about women with mental health problems in prisons.

Charlie Taylor said he has seen two officers looking after a woman who was completely unwell in unsuitable conditions in prison. If those staff had been working in a mental health facility they would have received regular supervision and support. Prison officers were not trained and did not have the support to deal with mental illness. It was important that prisons had mentally healthy staff. People did not always cope.

He had raised concerns about prisons being used as a place of safety for women. He had written to the minister and had a meeting to discuss the data. Using prisons to hold women who were mentally unwell put pressure on the prison service and on the prison staff who looked after them.

Jackie Doyle-price said the solution lay with the Department of Health and it was important to keep up the pressure for change. She asked about the problems finding appropriate accommodation for women in release.

Sandra Fieldhouse said women wanted a safe place where they could live by themselves or with their children and did not want to be placed in unsafe accommodation. There was a lack of suitable places for women and problems securing a suitable place before a woman was due to leave.

Jackie Doyle-Price thanked the witnesses for their contributions which had been hugely interesting.

4. AOB

Baroness Corston said it was her last meeting as co-chair of the APPG. She was very confident that the APPG had a strong base and would continue to do good work.

Jackie Doyle-Price said the next meeting of the APPG would take place in November

The meeting concluded at 4.45pm