

Women's experiences in the criminal justice system

Summary of focus groups

Monday, 12 December 2022

Background

1. As part of the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into '*Women's experiences in the criminal justice system*', the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement.
2. The programme of engagement was varied and comprised the following:-
 - **HMP Styal, Cheshire:** A tour of the prison, focus group with Welsh women prisoners, meeting with the Governor and a one-to-one discussion with a Welsh woman prisoner;
 - **HMP Eastwood Park, Gloucestershire:** A meeting with the Governor and a focus group with Welsh women prisoners;
 - Focus group with Revolving Doors' Women's Forum; and
 - Focus group with The Nelson Trust in Cardiff.
3. The engagement took place between 31 October – 7 November 2022.
4. This paper will focus on the themes which arose during focus group discussions with Welsh women prisoners. A note of each prison visit, to include meetings with the Governor and prison staff, were circulated to the Committee prior to its meeting on 14 November. Notes of each focus group are available upon request.



Contributors

5. Focus group composition varied and included, but were not limited to:-
 - Women currently imprisoned and those since released;
 - Women who were serving, or had served sentences of different lengths;
 - Repeat offenders;
 - Women with substance misuse issues;
 - Mothers;
 - Women with insecure immigration status;
 - Welsh-speaking women.
6. Participants were sourced through, or with support from, His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS hereafter), Revolving Doors and The Nelson Trust.
7. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement.

Format

8. Three face-to-face focus groups took place. Two took place in HMP Eastwood Park and HMP Styal respectively, with one focus group taking place at the Nelson Trust, Cardiff. One focus group took place on Microsoft Teams.
 9. The format of engagement was largely comparable between sessions, but varied slightly to meet the needs of contributors.
 10. Staff members at the prisons and organisations involved in the engagement were present during part/the duration of the focus group discussions. This was necessary in some instances for reasons of security and/or to support contributors to participate. Much of the discussion focused on the availability of appropriate custodial provision and support for different groups of women, which was in part, delivered by some of the staff present for discussions. Whilst it may be pessimistic to presume that contributors may have shared different or more candid views in the absence of staff, it would be wise to caveat such evidence accordingly.
 11. The following themes emerged from the discussions.
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Lack of initial support

12. Many contributors across the series of focus groups identified the initial support offered (or lack thereof), as a significant issue when discussing their experience of prison. Views shared on the level of support were predominantly negative, with most contributors explaining that they received very little to no information upon arriving at the prison.

13. One contributor, currently imprisoned, explained that three weeks had passed before she received a formal induction. This initial lack of support was also echoed by other contributors, some of whom have now been released. Word of mouth from fellow prisoners was raised as the most common way prisoners found out about the support and services available to them.

“They used to do an induction booklet. They would have a canteen sheet, stuff about education and chaplaincy all in a pamphlet. I’m dyslexic, so for me, there was no support around that. I was lucky they picked up on it, and I passed my English in prison. . . but when I got there, I didn’t have a clue how to fill in the canteen sheet. There were no staff to help you, it was the girls who helped me.”

Focus group contributor.

14. Some contributors explained that a basic, preparatory level of support should be available to women once a custodial sentence is confirmed. The period between receiving a custodial sentence and arriving at prison was described as particularly distressing for many, with some explaining that their distress was exacerbated by the scarcity of information available.

“There needs to be some sort of helpline to understand what do they (prisoners) need before going into prison; what do they get . . . You have such an imagination before going into prison of what it’ll be like. You’re petrified. They can’t tell you every detail, but some information would be helpful, because it’s awful before you go in. It’s bad.”

Focus group contributor.

Staff resource

15. When discussing possible reasons for the lack of support and/or information available upon arriving in prison, many contributors acknowledged that a lack of

staff resource had a detrimental impact on the services provided. This view was also echoed during conversations with some prison staff members during visits to HMP Eastwood Park and HMP Styal.

16. Most contributors did not personally blame prison staff for the lack of support, recognising that they will often not have enough time to support prisoners adequately. However, some contributors questioned the experience of prison staff, with one contributor explaining that staff are often recruited from college without the necessary skill-set to support the prisoners, many of whom have complex issues.

17. Some contributors shared the view that women with experience of the criminal justice system could ask as mentors to those in prison, to encourage them to “open up” about the issues they are experiencing.

“I do suffer from really bad anxiety, but I didn’t really want to say in front of the girls because . . . you’ve got to pretend you’re a bit hard and that would show a weakness with the bullies. . . In prison, there are all these services, but it’s mostly the good girls or the girls who have been in and out of prison that know how to get them. The new girls; they’ve had it.”

Focus group contributor.

Services whilst in prison

18. The views shared by contributors on the services provided during the duration of their prison sentence (some of whom were in the midst of their sentence), varied depending on the nature of the service discussed.

19. Some contributors shared largely positive views of the services accessed whilst in prison, crediting the support available for enabling them turn their lives around.

20. One contributor shared how she learned to read and write whilst in prison, describing it as “*the only good thing.*” Another contributor explained that she undertook a variety of courses whilst in prison, including a bereavement course, pattern-changing course and an anger management course. She also explained that she lost over three stone in prison.

“When I arrived at Eastwood Park, I was shocked and frightened. It was the unknown that was daunting. I hadn’t left my own home for

six years previous to coming here. I was facing a 15 month sentence. I didn't know how I would get through. My life was so routine and every moment was planned for me as I couldn't face people in social settings. In addition to all the mental struggles I was experiencing, I was also in poor health and weighed over 21 stone. I believe that god had put me here for a reason, and that is to better my life. Not only did I need to change my life for my family, but more importantly, for myself.

I encourage everyone to embrace what prison can offer you. It can give you an opportunity to understand yourself better . . . The support I've received from other women whilst there has also been transforming for me."

Focus group contributor.

Healthcare

21. Healthcare within the prison was one specific area of support that some contributors were particularly critical of.

"I'm epileptic and when I first arrived, my medication wasn't sorted for a few days, which frightened me quite a lot as I'm prone to seizures. It would be a case of me contacting officers to try and push for my meds. Sometimes my meds wouldn't be ready for that week, so I'd have a few days without medication again.

I get that they're short-staffed and there's loads of women in there. I had a few epileptic fits when I was in. The staff weren't really educated on my condition, so when I did have a seizure, they thought I was taking drugs and my room got spun. So education-wise, with regards to health, it was quite bad for me."

Focus group contributor.

22. A number of contributors who experienced mental health issues prior to, and/or during their time in prison, shared their insight into the services designed to support them.

23. One contributor shared that she had been arrested in Wales, but her medical records were held in England, which caused issues with the support she was given when imprisoned. She explained that she suffered from bipolar

disorder, but was not believed during her sentencing hearing. She said that she was not assessed for her mental health needs upon arriving at the prison and was initially denied access to any medication or support from the mental health team.

“I’m bipolar and have a list of mental health stuff . . . and they basically said to me that I was lying about all of it because I didn’t want to go to prison. So I was put in prison and had really severe bipolar psychosis, and I wasn’t given any medication and I wasn’t given any assessment for a month.”

Focus group contributor.

24. Another contributor who experienced mental health issues shared her difficulties of securing an appointment with a mental health worker or nurse. She gave an example of making a request to have her medication changed through the prison’s ‘general app’. She explained that it took three weeks for her request to be actioned, by which point her mental health had deteriorated.

“If it hadn’t been for the girls, I don’t know where I would’ve been.”

Focus group contributor.

25. Whilst discussing healthcare provision, some contributors explained that many prisoners with existing substance misuse issues will experience withdrawal upon arriving at the prison due to the delay in being given medication, with one explaining that she needed methadone but had to wait. She described “rattling” whilst waiting for the methadone.

26. Discussion on healthcare during one focus group evolved to discuss health and nutrition more broadly and in particular, the quality of the food in prison. The group described having “gone off beef” and turkey that was “yellow spotted.”

“I have IBS. I needed a special diet. To get that off the kitchen was a total and utter nightmare.”

Focus group contributor.

“The food was diabolical. I understand there’s a budget per head per day, but the difference in the quality of it compared to when I went to open prison was huge.”

Focus group contributor.

Familial relationships

27. Maintaining familial relationships whilst in prison was a topic discussed at length during many of the focus groups, with much of the discussion focused on the efficacy of the channels that exist to maintain those relationships.

“Purple visits would be a Whatsapp type of call. It was awful. The signal was terrible and it would freeze a lot. It would cause a lot of the girls distress. Some of them wanted to see their children and it wouldn’t connect.”

Focus group contributor.

28. Some contributors discussed being given a “top up” of credit during the pandemic, which was considered positive. Contributors were also positive about the opportunity for prisoners to be given what they termed, emergency credit, if there was an issue of emergency at home. However, there was some confusion over its application, with some explaining that the request for emergency credit was not always granted, and that it has stopped in one prison.

29. A number of contributors also discussed the negative impact a custodial sentence has had on the relationship with family members and their children. A key issue was the distance and the cost of travelling from Wales to the prison.

“My family are on benefits ... how can they come up here”

Focus group contributor.

“My mother would have to pay £150 for an hour visit”

Focus group contributor.

Support upon release

30. When discussing the support available to women upon release, accommodation was identified as a significant issue. Many contributors explained that they were anxious about where they would live on being released, with one contributor describing the situation as “*being thrown to the sharks.*”

“I knew a girl who came into prison and would want a bigger sentence because she was living on the streets. She ended up committing suicide. Some staff at the prison left in disgust. That girl shouldn’t have gone to prison – she needed mental health support.”

Focus group contributor.

31. Some contributors during one focus group raised the example of a fellow prisoner who had been placed in a bed and breakfast where she had been previously “beaten black and blue”. This was revealed to her just prior to leaving prison, with contributors describing how “she left here in a right state”.

“Some women I’ve come across who have re-offended, have re-offended because they see the women inside as their family. . . because they haven’t really got much on the outside.”

Focus group contributor.

“You have everything and nothing at the same time. You have your freedom . . . and you come out and have that high for a week or two, but then it’s a crash. You never think you’d feel like that.”

Focus group contributor.

32. Contributors with experience of being released from prison, explained that there is very little support for women once their sentence ends. Some cited the lack of support upon release as the main reason for re-offending.

“I feel like we, as prisoners, should be given more services . . . Many a time I think to myself, why can’t I go back? I was safe in there, I had people around me, my mental health was better. I never would have sat in a group of people like this before working with the Nelson Trust.”

Focus group contributor.

33. One focus group explained that the level of support available upon release varied depending on the local authority area in Wales with one contributor explaining that Denbighshire Housing First collected her upon her previous release from prison, whilst another experienced difficulties in Wrexham.

34. When discussing transition to the community, one contributor explained that she is being released in December, but Denbighshire Council have said they will not accommodate her. Many contributors also explained that services will not engage with them until a few days prior to their release.

"I was lucky I had three good ROTLs (Release on Temporary Licence). I hadn't been in a shop for all these years. How am I going to cope? The probation officer didn't do her job properly, so my day release ROTL wasn't issued, so that meant I didn't have my day release to come home to prepare myself for release. . . it would have benefitted me a great deal."

Focus group contributor.

35. When discussing the type of support they would like to see for women upon release from prison, possible solutions varied. Some contributors were of the view that funding should be available to cover essentials such as first month's rent and bond, whilst others said that self-contained accommodation similar to that offered in women's refuges should be made available.

36. One focus group agreed that having the opportunity to engage with other women with experience of the prison system would be beneficial.

"One good thing I think should be done, but is probably based on a risk assessment, is that it would be nice if women that have just come out of prison could sit together and go for a tea, coffee and just confide in each other. You have life experience together, so you can share tips on where to find support."

I was close with someone in prison who was a massive support when I was in open prison. I asked my probation officer whether I could go for coffee with her but was told I wasn't allowed because they risk assess to see whether if you socialise in the community, there's a risk you'd re-offend. But bear in mind, you've built a strong relationship with people, and then they're gone. No one can relate unless you've actually been through it."

Focus group contributor.

Miscellaneous

37. A number of other issues were raised by contributors and discussed during one or more of the focus groups.

Immigration status

38. One contributor, originally from South America, and since released from prison, discussed the issues she experienced due to her uncertain immigration status. She explained that the lack of knowledge within prisons to support women with immigration issues caused her distress and has since left her in limbo.

“As a foreigner, I cannot have ROTL (release on temporary licence). Even if you have the best behaviour, you can’t have it. You can be a complete nightmare, but if you’re British you can have it. They have no idea what to do with foreigners.”

Focus group contributor.

Products for women

39. Contributors during one focus group explained that there are a lack of products available for women to purchase within the prison. They said that items available to purchase, such as socks, flip flops and body wash, are all products for men and very little is tailored for women.