

Women's experiences of the criminal justice system

Note of Meeting – His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)

January 2023

As part of its inquiry into women's experiences of the criminal justice system, Jenny Rathbone MS, Chair; met Chris Jennings, Executive Director Wales of HMPPS. Also in attendance were 4 officials from HMPPS and 1 from the Welsh Government.

The Chair provided an overview of several issues that had arisen during the Committee's inquiry:

- A general lack of post-release support illustrated by examples shared in both HMP Styal and HMP Eastwood Park;
- The lack of suitable accommodation for those released from prison, including approved premises;
- Access to health, including the provision of Buvidal;
- Confusion about eligibility for Release on Temporary License (ROTL) and the lack of information given during the initial induction;
- Magistrates' lack of awareness about the Blueprint;
- Continuing issues around short sentences (average stay is 42 days in HMP Eastwood Park);
- The lack of opportunities for women to participate in community sentence schemes which are available to men. Why are there none tailored for women, including schemes suitable for those who have experienced domestic violence?
- The PCC's decision to withdraw funding for North Wales Women's Centre; and
- The lack of detailed pre-sentence reports.

Implementation and progress of the Blueprint

Chris Jennings made the following points about the implementation and progress of the Blueprint:



- Prison and Probation has been unified for nine years in Wales, this has still not happened in England
- There is a good relationship between HMPPS and the Welsh Government, for example during the pandemic HMPPS were sending daily updates to the Minister for Social Justice.
- There continue to be gaps in the support offered to women; HMPPS along with other organisations (e.g. mental health, the courts and magistrates) all have a role to play in addressing these.
- There are signs of progress as a result of the “good work” that is being done in Wales. Although data isn’t published, internal key management information shows there are less women receiving custodial sentences. Chris Jennings said he would look into whether it is possible to share this data with the Committee.

Post-release support and accommodation

- Chris Jennings said that he was not shocked with the examples highlighted by the Chair of women who had not been offered suitable accommodation on release from HMP Styal and Eastwood Park. He does not run those prisons but he confirmed he does meet with the Governors to discuss the various issues relating to post release support.
- HMPPS do collect data on the numbers of women who were homeless at the point of release. However, these figures often don’t reveal the real situation facing women and could underestimate the number of women who should be considered as homeless, for instance those who are released and ‘sofa surf’. The data also doesn’t reveal occasions where women will make the choice to go back to abusive partners. **HMPPS also collect data on accommodation eight weeks post release** and it was argued this may be a better indication of their housing situation. HMPPS will attempt to make this data available to the Committee.
- Responding to the lack of approved premises, Chris Jennings said they would like there to be one in Wales. There are approved premises in Bristol, however it was explained that most women are deemed low risk and approved premises are mainly for people who are deemed high risk on release. He argued that most women are ‘vulnerable’ rather than ‘risky’ and therefore require supported accommodation. To meet Welsh women’s needs it was argued that they should be able to access both approved premises and supported accommodation. Nicola Davies explained that many women express fear of going to an approved premises and said that more work is needed to improve the perception they have of this type of provision.
- It was argued that the most effective action to prevent short custodial sentence would be the Residential Women’s Centre pilot which would be a “brilliant addition to the system”. Chris Jennings informed the Chair that in light of the planning application, HMPPS are now considering submitting a planning appeal. Reflecting on the work that had been done to prepare the original application, he acknowledged that more could have been done to engage with the community but whether that would have changed the outcome is debatable given community views.
- Going forward, HMPPS are working on obtaining Service Level Agreements with the 22 Welsh Local Authorities to provide accommodation for 84 days. This will allow local authorities a period of time where they can find more sustainable accommodation. Progress was said to be slow and it was revealed that some local authorities have not been forthcoming, for example Wrexham County Borough Council has not agreed; however this was viewed as an understandable response given the existing pressure on housing stock. HMPPS has recently written to local authorities, giving them a further month to respond. In the event they don’t sign up, HMPPS will

engage with the private sector in these areas. This is not desirable as it will create competition with the local authority. However HMPPS' priority is ensuring women on release are provided with suitable accommodation and are not homeless. Other solutions include discussions with Police and Crime Commissioners and organisations (like the church) to see if they have land that could accommodate modular housing (an initiative that has been used to accommodate males on release).

Access to employment

- Employment support (despite not always being a woman's top priority) can be difficult given the location of women's prisons (in England).
- Chris Jennings noted there is a push on employment directed by the Deputy Prime Minister. Every prison in Wales now currently has an employment board which is bringing employers together and there are opportunities to do the same for women.

Access to healthcare

- Chris Jennings agreed they would like the drug Buvidal to be available to Welsh women, however, it is not currently available on the NHS in England.
- Overall, he agreed that women from Wales should not be disadvantaged or receive less than women from England. The examples of Welsh language education and the Visiting Mums service were used to highlight instances where Welsh women received over and above English prisoners.

Preparation for discharge

The Chair made the point that preparation for discharge should happen on Day 1 of a custodial sentence:

- HMPPS has discussed this issue with women who say they don't want to be overwhelmed with information and that managing their health needs are the first and foremost priority.
- It was explained that each prisoner is allocated a Prisoner or Probation Offender Manager (POM) when they start their sentence who will support them through the process.

The role of magistrates

- Reflecting on the findings of the Magistrates' Association survey where 50% were unaware of the Blueprint, Chris Jennings referred to them as a membership organisation akin to a union and therefore not representative of all magistrates in Wales.
- He noted however that more work is needed and explained that training/awareness has been delivered to over 200+ magistrates and are said to have been well received. A further note of these events will be provided to the Committee.

Women's Centres

The Chair asked HMPPS for their view on [north Wales PCC's recent decision](#) that funding for the delivery of Women's Pathfinder project from the North Wales Women's Centre will instead move to Checkpoint Cymru.

- HMPPS described the work of the North Wales Women's Centre as "brilliant" and said they did not support the PCC's decision to withdraw funding. They confirmed they have been in discussions with them about this decision.
- In addition to this resource in north Wales, Chris Jennings referred to the 'women-only reporting centre' that HMPPS offer in Wrexham.
- The Chair was informed that the Nelson Trust has recently began providing support at their new centre on Richmond Road, Cardiff and that a formal opening will take place on 16 January at 11am.

Pre-sentence reports

- It was explained that there has been a big push for 'on the day reporting' and for 'speedy justice', leading to pre-sentence reports being completed on the day. This deadline limits the detail that a Probation worker can provide and there is work underway to strengthen pre-sentence reports, particularly for women where there is a need to document trauma and the impact of sentencing on children.
- It was argued that short-sentences are not helping and there is a need to communicate this to sentencers who may feel that by giving women a prison sentence of 5-10 days they will be able to get the help they need from the various organisations.