

Justice and Home Affairs Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Prison culture: governance, leadership and staffing

Tuesday 18 March 2025

10.30 am

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Members present: Lord Tope (in the Chair); Lord Bach; Baroness Bertin; Baroness Cash; Lord Dubs; Baroness Hughes of Stretford; Baroness Meacher; Baroness Prashar.

In the absence of Lord Foster of Bath, Lord Tope was called to the Chair.

Evidence Session No. 11

Heard in Public

Questions 145 - 152

Witness

[!:](#) Kate Fraser, Head of Practice, Women in Prison

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witness

Kate Fraser.

Q145 **The Chair:** Kate, welcome to our session today. Thank you for coming out of order—those are the wrong words to use in an event such as this, are they not? Thank you for appearing before us out of the intended order. First, would you like to introduce yourself briefly?

Kate Fraser: Of course. I am a head of practice for Women in Prison, which is a national charity. It has been around for about 40 years now and supports women affected by the criminal justice system, both in custody and in community settings.

The Chair: Thank you. Baroness Cash, you are first—unexpectedly.

Baroness Cash: Thank you very much for coming to speak to us today. I will start off with what might feel like quite an obvious question, but we are very keen to hear about your experiences around the biggest challenges faced by women versus men as prisoners. That is probably quite a big question, but can we start there?

Kate Fraser: Sure. The biggest problem stems from women being a very small percentage of the prison population. They make up only 4% of the prison population and about 10% of the probation case load. There also far fewer women's prisons: there are only 12 women's prisons in England and none in Wales at all. There are also only two open women's prisons.

So there is already a challenge around women maintaining family ties and getting visits from their children. For most women, it is around 60 miles away from their home. For some women, it is 150 miles. If you are a Welsh woman from north Wales, you will go to Styal prison, which is in Cheshire; if you are from south Wales, you will go to Eastwood Park, which is around Gloucester way. It will potentially be really expensive for you to maintain those family ties; it is definitely difficult for women wanting to remain in contact with their children. That is the first thing.

The second thing is that the vast majority of women are serving short sentences. Many of them are caught up in that revolving door of being in custody for a short time, then going back out, then coming back into custody. They are in that cycle. In those very short periods of custody, a lot of damage can be done. Even in a short time in custody, you can lose your home and your job. You could lose your children. You will definitely be impacted, both emotionally and psychologically. Most people are not happy about going to prison, so people can develop depression and anxiety. Although we may think that those are quite short times to be in prison—perhaps six, seven or eight weeks—the damage that can be done in that time is immense.

On top of that, we have pregnant women and mothers going to go to prison. The recent Bromley briefings stated that around 17,500 children were separated from their mums because of imprisonment in 2023-24. We also see women being impacted by the use of remand. There is a very high use of remand for women.

Again, those women have not been found guilty of anything but may spend weeks on remand. It is about the ongoing damage that happens.

We also see prison being used as a place of safety for women. Again, these women have not been convicted of anything, but they are taken to prison because there is no place in the community. Anybody who has spent any time in prison at all will realise that using prison as a place of safety is just not the thing to do.

The other thing we find is that there are really high levels of trauma in the female prison population. Again, in the recent Bromley briefings, 63% of the women surveyed, I think, stated that they still required support for either historical or current trauma. We see a lot of criminalisation of domestic abuse survivors. Women who have experienced domestic abuse are being imprisoned and not getting the support that they need, either because the support just is not there in the prisons they go to or because they are not there for long enough to access any of the support that is available. If you are in prison for, say, 12 weeks or less, you are really not going to get any kind of support at all.

Baroness Meacher: So why do they go to prison? They must have done something. Yes, they have been the subject of domestic abuse, but what have these women done, in general?

Kate Fraser: Talking about women who have committed less-serious crimes—of course, there are women who will have been subjected to domestic abuse and may eventually fight back—sometimes, we see a lot of women being convicted of assaults on emergency workers. Those numbers are creeping up at the moment. That is quite often when, perhaps if there is a domestic abuse situation, the police are called and emotions run very high. Women may express high emotions, get arrested and sent to prison.

I am not a magistrate—I do not know whether we have any here—but, speaking to magistrates, I hear the idea that we expect men to commit crime, and we are not that surprised when they do. But, for women, there is a different societal view: that you should not be committing crime, it does not seem right and, if you have a child, you definitely should not commit crime—you must be a bad mother if you commit crime.

I do a lot of training with magistrates—I have done a lot of trauma-informed training with magistrates in Greater Manchester—and I have not met one yet who said to me, “I became a magistrate so I could send women to prison”, but women are still going to prison in increasing numbers. What magistrates will often say is, “We’ve exhausted our community options. We have sentenced this woman, and we’ve given her a community sentence. She may have breached that sentence, and now our hands are tied. The only choice is custody”.

But what I would say is that we have a Probation Service with probation programmes that were designed by men for men. For example, I worked with a woman who was sentenced to a six-week probation programme that was talking

about the reasons why she and everybody there offended in the first place. It was her and nine men and, in her own past, there was a lot of sexual trauma and gender-based violence. She just was not going to talk about that in front of nine men. So she did not go—she went once but did not go again. She was breached and given a custodial sentence.

Quite often, a lot of these programmes are designed for men. I cannot speak nationally, but I know that, in Greater Manchester, one programme is designed specifically for women. You may have to wait a number of weeks to get on to that programme, which could extend your period on probation.

Q146 Lord Bach: Rather changing from the first question, we are interested very much in leadership in prisons, and particularly the role of those in command of them, whether they are governors or prison staff. How visible and engaged, in your view, are prison governors in women’s prisons? What impact does their leadership, or style of leadership, have on the environment in a women’s prison?

Kate Fraser: It differs from prison to prison, and women will tell you this. If they have perhaps been in different prisons, they will say, “This prison’s really rubbish. We never see the governor. She doesn’t seem interested”. In other prisons, women will have something quite different to say. There is no question about the fact that, if the governor is visible and if there is visibility in that leadership, that absolutely cascades down to operational staff. If governors are not just leading by example but are actually visible, going out in the prison and talking to prisoners, prisoners feel valued and listened to. It is not about good order—rather, they will understand when issues arise in a prison. If that does not happen—if you never see your prison governor and they never speak to you—that goes down to the front-line staff. We hear women saying this.

A woman in one of the northern prisons said to me, “The only time I’ve ever spoken to a prison governor was when somebody killed themselves”—when there was a self-inflicted death. That was the first time they had seen the governor, when they came out to tell the women in the various housing blocks that a woman had died. She said to me, “Is that what it takes to get a governor to come out to see you?” So it is really important, but it does not always happen.

Having said that, there are some really good pockets of good practice. I know that in HMP Styal in Cheshire, the governor does a video blog. All the women have laptops, and the governor does a little video blog where she talks to women and tells them about things that are happening. She tells them about things that will happen, and the women definitely feel much more informed. I would say that women feel safer when there is that visibility of leadership.

Lord Bach: Beyond visibility—I think we accept how important that is—what else is vital in terms of leadership in a women’s prison? What is lacking, and what would you and your organisation do about it?

Kate Fraser: What is lacking is an understanding of the very real issues that often bring women into contact with the criminal justice system in the first place. There is gender-specific training, I believe, for prison officers now, before they actually start work in prisons. But I see a lack of understanding around trauma, domestic abuse and mental health. If governors do not hold that understanding and do not understand the real impact that this is having on women in the prison, you can expect that operational staff will not have that understanding, because there will not be a focus on training staff in those different areas.

We are talking about a really complex group of women who are coming into custody. Many of them are really traumatised and come with a set of complex issues that should have been dealt with in the community. Women say to me all the time, "Prison saved my life, you know". I say, "Why's that then?", and they say that they were in a bad relationship, were homeless or were getting beaten up, and they started to use drugs to cope with all that. I always say to them, "If you'd got the help that you needed when you were in the community, do you think you would still have committed your crime?" Overwhelmingly, they all say no: had they got the help they needed with domestic abuse or mental health, they probably would not have ended up getting into trouble.

Q147 **Baroness Bertin:** You mentioned that 17,000 children are separated from their mums, which is a shocking figure—I had not seen it before. You might not know, but what is the proportion of women who go back to their children after leaving prison? Are they going back to their children, or is that family completely broken up and the children have gone into care?

Kate Fraser: Quite often, that family will be broken up. If women lose their accommodation when they go to prison, there is no statutory duty to house them once they come out, because they have made themselves intentionally homeless by committing a crime and going to prison. So there is no statutory duty to house them. For women who have lost their family home with their children, if they are lucky the children might have gone to other family members but, if not, they go into local authority care—there are huge costs attached to that.

If you are very lucky and have enough points on the housing register, you might get single homeless accommodation. But, actually, we are finding out that lots of those women are going out to no accommodation—or to sofa surfing or accommodation that just is not suitable. As you say, that is the family fractured.

Baroness Bertin: I should probably know this—and I hear and am very conscious of all the issues about some of the lead-ups to women committing crime—but is there more of a view that putting a woman who has children in jail for six weeks will have such a catastrophic effect? Does that come into consideration with sentencing, or do you feel it does not?

Kate Fraser: It is definitely supposed to, but the numbers speak for themselves: 17,500 children are separated from Mum through imprisonment. So, again, sometimes there is an idea that we have tried what we can in the community, and

sentencers and magistrates will say to me all the time, “Our hands are tied. What can I do? I’ve tried a community sentence”. Generally, some of those women will go through from perhaps a penalty charge notice to a fine, maybe, depending on what the crime is, and then they will get a community sentence. There does seem to be an idea that “our hands are tied”.

The decision around the sentencing review recently regarding having more pre-sentence reports for specific vulnerable cohorts of women can only be welcomed, so that those issues that women come to court with can be considered. Making sure that they have a proper pre-sentence report, including things like having children, can be taken into consideration.

Baroness Prashar: Is there suitable community provision for these women? You were saying that there are no relevant courses because hands are tied. Is there enough suitable provision in the community?

Kate Fraser: No, definitely not. We have seen, over the past 10 years from 2010 onwards, with our National Probation Service being moved to the community rehabilitation companies—and bringing it back around again—a real decimation of probation services. We already have a Probation Service that is designed for men. As I say, most of the programmes—the group works and the workshops that are delivered—are designed for men. We know that women offend differently to men. They commit different crimes and for different reasons. But probation services say, “Let’s just use the same programme and deliver it to women”. It is fair to say that we see a Probation Service that is on its knees. In the early release scheme—the SDS40—that happened recently, we saw probation officers being overwhelmed. There is insufficient community support for people.

Actually, that is why women are going back to prison. There is this idea from people who do not spend much time in prisons that you will go into prison and, when you are doing your sentence, you will get all the support that you need. If you have debt, there will be some debt advisers who will sort out your debt and put you on a payment plan. You know there will be some domestic abuse support and that there will definitely be housing support. However, that is just not the case. People are shocked when I say that women leave prison with nowhere to live. There is so little support. If you have debt when you go into a prison, that debt is going to accumulate while you are in prison, and you are going to come back out to more debt.

There is a dearth of gender-specific support for women in the community. As part of the community support that is available, we have seen women’s centres take on probation contracts whereby probation officers are co-located at these women’s centres. These are centres that have been around for women, based in local communities, who know what is out there in these local communities, who are creating local solutions for local problems. The idea is that the woman who is in probation will see her probation officer at the women’s centre. The probation officer will do all the offence-focused work but the women will be able to get

support from an advocate or a support worker who will be able to do that wraparound support around domestic abuse or mental health—really simple things sometimes, such as getting clothing for somebody or their children, or food parcels, things like that. Unfortunately, those women’s centres are often underfunded. The probation contracts that they hold often do not cover the work that is required. They are doing what all third-sector organisations do, which is scrabble for funding every 12 months to really provide the support required.

Q148 Lord Bach: I will come back briefly to pre-sentence reports. A practice, largely in Crown Courts but they could be in magistrates’ courts, was that anyone who was liable or likely to go to prison—a possible custodial sentence—would have, as a matter of course, a pre-sentence report. What is the position now, as far as you know, in relation to women? Do they really get sentenced to prison without pre-sentence reports in many cases?

Kate Fraser: I think, for Crown Court, probably not, and in magistrates’ courts. There is an issue around the volume of people who need pre-sentence reports and often the time available to carry out a pre-sentence report. Sometimes we are talking about 45 minutes to do a pre-sentence report where you are having to talk to somebody who has experienced trauma that I would not ask a woman about. I would not expect anybody, except for a trained therapist, to ask that woman about that trauma. They may be people who have experienced perhaps childhood sexual abuse, gender-based violence or domestic abuse, who will not tell somebody who they have just met.

The problem with that is that often, when women are experiencing trauma, we apply this language—statutory organisations especially apply this language—around behaviours that are actually masking trauma. So we will say, “She was she was not engaging”. I would say, “Was she not engaging or did she just not feel safe enough to answer those very personal questions that you are asking her in a 45-minute slot, trying to get through to people to open up about some of the things that she is probably most ashamed, embarrassed or guilty about?” Lots of people do not want to disclose domestic abuse. They are fearful of their children being removed. Sometimes it is the timing and a lack of training around probation officers carrying out those reports.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: When you say 45 minutes, are you talking about a stand-down report as opposed to being remanded for a written report?

Kate Fraser: Yes.

Q149 Baroness Meacher: How well do you think prison staff are trained to understand the specific needs of women in prison? Do you think they are trained specifically to understand those special needs?

Kate Fraser: No. We have gender-specific training provided for officers coming in. But we ask a lot of prison officers now. If we look at women and the complex issues that they are coming in with, we are asking prison officers, first, to be jailers. We are asking them to be key workers. We expect them to be counsellors and have a broad

understanding of complex mental health issues. We expect them to be domestic abuse advocates and have an understanding of domestic abuse and how that impacts on women. We ask so much of prison staff, who are absolutely ill equipped. The prison training that they have—I do not know if it is six or 10 weeks now for new officers—includes a residential course. Lots of officer training is process driven—for example, how to get a smoke helmet on, how to raise an act or work in a certain policy, but with no real understanding of the real issues.

I was working with a woman in a prison who kept getting a negative—a negative response if you have done something that is not right in the prison. I said to her, “Why did you get your negative?”, and she said, “Well, I was first in and I had not been here for very long. I had only been here for 10 days. I was upstairs on the housing unit, and I could hear this man shouting downstairs”. Obviously, an officer had come in and shouted for somebody to come for meds or for exercise, something like that. She said, “I could not really hear him but just could hear shouting. In my house, when you hear a man shouting downstairs, you do not go downstairs, because if you do you are going to get leathered”. So she stayed upstairs, got nicked and was adjudicated.

I would say officers are absolutely ill equipped. The training is just inadequate for the real issues that women are coming into prison with.

Baroness Meacher: We really ought to focus on that lack of training in our report. Particularly if we can really affect that.

The Chair: Other witnesses have made that point and said much the same thing.

Q150 **Baroness Hughes of Stretford:** Thank you very much, Kate. You have already talked a lot about staff training, support services and some issues around leadership that need developing in prisons. Could you give us some insight into what would be your priorities for improvement in staff training, support and leadership to try and work towards a safer and better environment for women in prison?

Kate Fraser: I have to backtrack a little because if we stopped sending quite so many women to prison, we would not have half the issues that we have.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: Fair comment.

Kate Fraser: We find that women are disproportionately sentenced for certain crimes—for example, for non-payment of TV licence, non-payment of council tax, and children not attending school. Women are prosecuted in much larger numbers than men. Not all of those women will go to prison, but they are prosecuted in much larger numbers because Mum will often be the one who holds the tenancy in her name or the one who is at home in the daytime and, therefore, may be the one who answers the door.

If only we had fewer women going to prison, particularly for these very short sentences, which are absolutely damaging. We know that they damage women,

families and local communities; they really fracture those support networks that are so vital for women, in particular women with children.

Having said all that, in terms of training, the way we view prison staff in this country is quite different to the way in which prison staff are perhaps viewed in the Nordic countries. It is a 10-week residential training programme, I think, then sending somebody out into a prison with people who have real, complex issues. I do not think that it is viewed in the same way as a profession, as it might be in some of the Nordic countries. We definitely need to be looking at training that covers trauma and its impact; that is for governors and operational staff all the way down, across all of the grades. We need to look at having real awareness of mental health and domestic abuse, and for that training to be ongoing.

The other thing that we do not do is provide support for prison officers. I remember delivering some trauma training to prison officers quite some time ago. One of them told me that he was about to go to his 13th inquest around a death in custody—13 inquests. He told me that one can only imagine what that is like. He told me a graphic story about cutting this woman down from a ligature in the cell and having to go to this inquest—rightly so—and having to give evidence at it. I asked, “Did you get any support for that?” He said, “Well, I didn’t in the past, really, because there’s a dim view of it in the Prison Service. There’s this idea that you should be able to cope and there is something a bit wrong with you if you get emotional about this stuff”.

However, he got to his 13th inquest and decided that he might benefit from speaking to somebody. So an appointment was made; it was coming up in a few weeks. On the day when he had his appointment, he went on to the wing or wherever and said, “I’ve got to go now, you know, I’ve got my appointment”. They said, “You’re not going anywhere. We’re short-staffed. We need you to cover whatever’s happening”. There is not this focus on external support for prison staff who witness things that are quite traumatic for them as well.

Women will tell you things. They are so used to being assessed multiple times. There is a lot of vicarious trauma floating around in prisons. Women will tell you about the most dreadful things that have happened. They will tell you about the abuse that they experienced, because they are used to telling people; they are assessed multiple times by lots of different agencies before they actually get to a prison. We do not recognise that. How do prison staff cope with that? We ask a lot but—in looking at the issues women are coming in with—for them, trying to put all that in plus all of the process-driven training, a six-week or 10-week training course is absolutely inadequate.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: Given the importance of the governor in setting the culture within the prison, which you described—we have heard about this before from other witnesses—what would you prioritise in training for governors or changes in the way in which governors operate?

Kate Fraser: That is a difficult one for me because I do not know what training governors have at the moment. I would definitely like to see governors leading in terms of support—that is, recognising the importance of emotional and psychological support for staff, as well as for officers. I would like to see them leading that charge and recognising that there will be an emotional impact; that prisons are dark places to work; and that we should not be saying, “Keep your chin up and just carry on as normal”. There should be focused support led by governors. It may be led by them visibly via video blogs or newsletters—any of the things that cascade down to those staff.

Q151 **Baroness Bertin:** Can we talk about the skills and training to get these women—particularly those who have had slightly longer sentences—back into society? Do you think that those things are currently adequate? I suspect that I know the answer, but can you talk a bit about that—about them getting back into society and how that could be improved?

Kate Fraser: I am going to surprise you here because I think that, for the women who do longer sentences, there is probably a good focus. I see lots of great education programmes. I see lots of pockets of great partnerships with private sector organisations around getting people back into employment. East Sutton Park, which is an open prison, has some great initiatives going on.

There is a problem in that there are only two open prisons across the country. Many women will choose not to go to an open prison if it moves them further away from their family and, perhaps, visits from their children. That is an issue, because they would rather be with their kids.

Baroness Bertin: Can I interrogate one thing there? If they have been moved 50 miles away from where they live, say if there is a link-up with a local employer, that presumably would not work so well. Is that an issue?

Kate Fraser: There are still good partners. There are pockets of it. For example, look at Styal prison, which is in Cheshire, and look at where women are being released to. It is a huge area. They are released into Greater Manchester, Liverpool, Lancashire and Cumbria; Cumbria is such a vast area in itself. Things can always be better, of course, but I see a good focus for those women who are spending those longer sentences in custody.

It is about those women who are doing shorter sentences. Prisons have their KPIs. They have to get people through level 1 or level 2 in maths and English. Often, there is a focus on pushing them through things that are going to meet those KPIs, rather than looking at what women want to do and where their interest lies. I have to meet women who will come out of prison with a great qualification in, I do not know, industrial cleaning but who say, “I never want to work in industrial cleaning or do anything around industrial cleaning ever again”. That is just one example.

Sometimes, there is something around having an individualised approach and being able to say to women, “What do you want to do? What is it that you want? What

are you interested in?” Women are often unable to answer that question because they have spent a lot of time having the care system, the police, the Probation Service and the Prison Service tell them what to do, with their agency being removed from them.

When you go into a prison and ask, “What do you want to do?”, that question often stumps people. I say to people, “What would you like if you weren’t here? What do you like?” If they say, “I like dogs”, I say, “Okay, have you thought about volunteering for a dogs home?” They will say, “I hadn’t thought of that”, and I will tell them, “If you did that, you might be able to get insurance and set yourself up as a dog walker”. A lot of the time, there is no individualised approach, so women come out of prison with qualifications that they are never going to use again.

Baroness Bertin: I am conscious of time. Can I very quickly ask something about the basic educational units? Presumably, as with male prisons, a lot of women go into prison and perhaps cannot read and write, having been excluded from school. How do you think that is going in some of these prisons?

Kate Fraser: That is probably addressed pretty well, actually, because most people will get through. One of the big killers in prison is boredom. Do you know what I mean? That is why we see so much self-harm among women. It is because of not just mental health issues but boredom. Lots of people will engage in work and in education because it gets them out of their cell for the amount of time they need to be out.

I want to say one other thing. In prisons, there is a huge focus on giving people skills. There is this idea that everybody comes in with no skills: “We’re going to give you all these skills and you’re going to leave with all these skills”. What we do not do is look at the skills that women already have. Lots of the women in prison have lots of skills, both from previous employment and from just having to survive. With the amount of ingenuity, organisation, time, planning and management that being a full-time drug user requires, you could probably be the CEO of your own company.

Joking aside, lots of people have lots of skills before they go into prison. They get into prison and, because it is a punitive environment—people are not encouraged to speak up, to be innovative, to come up with ideas and to challenge—those skills go on the back burner. Actually, for people who then need to go back out into the workplace, that is an issue as well.

Q152 **The Chair:** Kate, thank you very much, and thank you for stepping in early. Is there anything that you have not said that you would like to say—or, for that matter, anything you have said that you wish you had not said?

Kate Fraser: There is probably always something I wish I had not said. Going back to the point that I made to Baroness Hughes, I think we are imprisoning too many people in this country, including too many women with complex issues. We are overusing remand, which is absolutely damaging. The idea of using prison as a place of safety is ludicrous, as is the criminalisation of domestic abuse survivors. So a lot

of our problems with prisons—and with the prison population growing—is that we are imprisoning too many women. We need to go back and look at that. Scotland has gone the route of no short sentences and not imprisoning anybody for less than 12 months. We know that we have a broken prison system; there is no question about that. I am not here to prison-bash—there are lots of good pockets—but more still needs to be done.

The Chair: Thank you very much—and thank you for stepping in at the last minute. We will bring this session to a close.