

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system, HC 997

Wednesday 2 February 2022

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Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); Dan Carden; Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown; Sarah Olney; Kate Osamor; Nick Smith.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, Adrian Jenner, Director of Parliamentary Relations, National Audit Office, and Marius Gallaher, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, were in attendance.

Questions 1-25

Witnesses

I: Andrea Coomber, Chief Executive, Howard League for Penal Reform; Joy Doal MBE, Chief Executive, Anawim – Birmingham’s Centre for Women; and Kate Paradine, Chief Executive, Women in Prison.



Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system
(HC 1012, Session 2021-22)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Andrea Coomber, Joy Doal and Kate Paradine.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Wednesday 2 February 2022. We are looking at how the Government aim to improve outcomes for women in the criminal justice system, an area that this Committee has looked at before, and with thanks to the National Audit Office for its most recent Report on this, "Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system", which was published just a couple of weeks ago.

Today, as well as our Government witnesses, we are pleased to have a pre-panel of people working with women at the frontline of the criminal justice system, who have been active in this area. They will give us some context and some thoughts about potential solutions, as well as holding the Government to account for their own strategy for women in the system and how well that has been progressing.

I am pleased to welcome online, joining us on Zoom: Kate Paradine, who is the Chief Executive of Women in Prison; Andrea Coomber, who is the Chief Executive of the Howard League for Penal Reform, based in my constituency; and Joy Doal, who is the Chief Executive of Anawim, Birmingham's Centre for Women. We are pleased to welcome you today.

I thought it would be helpful to get your take first of all on what you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of the female offender strategy. I will take you in the order I introduced you, so Kate Paradine first.

Kate Paradine: The strategy was welcomed across the board, across political parties, by professional groups, and across policing and prison governors. It was in the strategy to reduce the number of women coming into the criminal justice system and the number of women sent to prison. It also spelled the end of plans to build new prisons for women. So, it was broadly welcomed and we have supported its implementation all the way along. The NAO Report is about implementation, and we have been really disappointed about the complete lack of leadership and grip, and of a plan by which to implement the strategy.

Chair: Okay, well that's an opening salvo. Let us hear Andrea Coomber's point of view.

Andrea Coomber: Much the same as Kate's. The female offender strategy, built on the Corston report, embodies the vision of fewer women entering the criminal justice gateway, fewer women in prison in particular for short sentences, and better conditions in prisons. It has a strong



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evidence base and there is not much about it that we would disagree with. The problem has been its implementation. At the start, we were a bit concerned about whether sufficient funding would be made available, which is obviously part of the problem. We are also concerned that it relied on cross-departmental support, which has proved to be a problem.

Chair: It is very much the bread and butter of our Committee, Government trying to work together. We will delve into that a bit more later. Joy Doal from Birmingham?

Joy Doal: I absolutely agree with Kate and Andrea. We fed into the female offender strategy. Phillip Lee came to visit our centre and spoke to women. They spoke very frankly, and he did listen and put a lot of their ideas into the strategy, so we really welcomed it. It is so disappointing to see that a really good strategy like that has just not been implemented properly.

Q2 **Chair:** Will you give us your top headlines for what can be improved? It is easy to sit and criticise, though we have brought you here partly to give your view of that, but what do you think could be done in short order and in the longer term to make this work? We will go in the same order as we went before, with Kate Paradine first.

Kate Paradine: As the NAO said, there needs to be a plan for implementation. Specifically and immediately, there needs to be a review and a cancellation of the plan to build 500 new women's prison places. That was not in the strategy. It was a complete shock, including to those on the Advisory Board on Female Offenders. The announcement was made the day after that board met, and the plans were not mentioned to the board. It was actually told about them the day the press were told. That is the level of transparency we have seen.

If those plans were cancelled, that £150 million—it has reached £200 million in the year since the announcement was made—could be redistributed to where it is needed: in communities, to help women deal with the root causes of offending, which we know include domestic abuse, mental ill health and substance misuse; and towards the real, severe problem with community-based support services, including sustainable funding for women's centres. There is a clear strategy, and we know what needs to happen to make it work. We just need that funding and that plan, and we need to end the plan to build new prison places, which is completely against the strategy upon which the evidence is based.

Chair: Okay. Andrea Coomber.

Andrea Coomber: Everything Kate said, and in addition we are concerned that the direction of policy travel in recent times has been counter to the strategy. Whereas the strategy talks about not using shorter sentences, in the last few weeks we have seen an extension of magistrates' powers to put people in prison for shorter periods of time, which will increase the number of people in prison, including women. The prisons White Paper proposes introducing small custodial units for women



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serving short sentences, which is against the idea that women should not be given short sentences at all. The commitment to build 500 new prison places for women is obviously deeply concerning and without an evidence base, and it is directly contrary to the principles set out in the strategy. We would just like to see the strategy put front and centre in the development of the policy.

Joy Doal: The first two bits of the strategy are the bits that could be implemented without so much cost and could be done really simply. There is disappointment that the number of out-of-court disposals has decreased over the last few years. That is incredibly sad when you think that women could be diverted at that early stage. All it needs is some political will and the PCCs being told to encourage their police officers to use these police diversions, because they are there and they are good and they work really well.

Equally, with the community sentences that the women's centres can provide, we need to invest in that area better so that those women do not need to go to prison, with all the surrounding costs and the disproportionate effect that that has on society—including on children, with grandmothers having to pick them up and look after them or children going into care. We all know the intergenerational effect that that has. That could be solved without £200 million being spent on unnecessary prison places.

Q3 Chair: Before I pass to Mr Dan Carden MP, can I ask each of you this? The Committee often looks at how money is spent and saved, and sometimes spending money now can save money later. You highlighted the £200 million that the 500 new places for women prisoners are now expected to cost. How far would £200 million stretch to deliver some of the other initiatives? If you were spending it now, how would you spend it, and how quickly do you think you would see results? Ultimately, in the end, money has to lead to results.

Kate Paradine: It is a wonderful question, because it would transform community-based services. Within a year, there could be a massive change, and then the running costs of those services would be a fraction of what women's prison places cost. We could have a women's centre in every local authority, potentially.

Q4 Chair: You have done the analysis for that?

Kate Paradine: I have not done the analysis; I would hope that the Ministry of Justice and the rest of Government had done the analysis. It could be transformational. We know that match funding could come from local authorities, from PCCs and from independent trusts and foundations, who already give a fair bit to keep women's centres going and so on. It could be absolutely transformational.

Andrea Coomber: Obviously, that money could go an awfully long way for the community solutions that we know work—as opposed to prison, where 70% of women coming out after 12 months reoffend. You could spend that on women's centres, liaison and diversion. There are all kinds



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of different ways that would stop women offending in the first place and provide real solutions to solve their problems.

The other thing to keep in mind is that it is not just the £2 million; each one of those prison places then costs the taxpayer £52,000, forever. It is a bill that the rest of us—the taxpayers—pick up for a very long time, which, as far as we can see, has a very questionable impact. Frankly, it has a devastating impact. It has a questionable impact on reoffending, but a devastating impact on society.

Chair: Yes, and there is a long tail to the cost, which we don't always manage to follow as a Committee.

Andrea Coomber: A long tail.

Q5 **Chair:** Joy Doal, do you have anything to add? Don't feel you have to add anything.

Joy Doal: Just that the amount is mind-blowing when you think about it. It costs £52,000 to keep one woman in prison for one year, whereas to give her holistic support in a women's centre would cost between £1,000 and £4,000. It's a no-brainer. I do not understand why the maths is not done by the Government.

Chair: Before I hand over to Mr Carden, I think it is worth noting that this Committee has previously highlighted the challenge of short sentences. The "Key facts" in the NAO's Report highlight that "71% of women reoffended following custodial sentences of less than 12 months in 2016", which is an even higher rate than men. We know that there is a challenge around short sentences, which we have covered in the past. Thank you very much for that answer. We might take the witnesses in a slightly different order with our next questioners, so that Kate gets a break and other people get the first word occasionally.

Q6 **Dan Carden:** Thank you, Chair. I am happy to reverse the order if that changes things up. I welcome our witnesses to today's hearing. I can see already how passionately you all feel about this topic, and I can sense your frustration at the fact that the strategy has not been implemented. Aside from that, could you tell us whether there were any elements of the strategy that you were not happy with, or that you would have changed?

Joy Doal: The biggest distraction in the strategy has been the residential women's centres. Speaking as the head of a residential women's centre, they are not easy to run. It is hard work. We have really struggled to run our unit over the last five years. It costs an awful lot of money, and it is not the best use of money. It is something that has been a constant distraction all the way through. Although it is a lovely thing in the Corston report, the idea of small custodial units in the community that are not so far from home, they are very expensive to run. Equally, you could be doing an awful lot of places at a women's centre in day services that could be almost as effective, and you could be dealing with a lot more women. So I think that has been the biggest distraction. We are not against the idea, but it has just been focused on too much.



Q7 **Dan Carden:** Thanks, Joy. Andrea?

Andrea Coomber: Same.

Q8 **Dan Carden:** Great. Is there anything in the strategy itself that you would oppose or suggest was not quite right?

Andrea Coomber: Mine would be residential women's centres, and Joy has already explained why I think that is bad.

Kate Paradine: I would add something about the residential women's centres. Again, we couldn't understand why there was such a fixation on this new institution; we didn't understand what gap it was filling. Meanwhile, homelessness and housing for women leaving prison has remained as much of a problem; it is seemingly getting worse in terms of the numbers of women. It is 27% in the NAO Report. There are higher figures depending on what definition of homelessness you use, which is an issue in itself. The Government should have invested in long-term housing solutions, not in this new institution. We would like to see an end to that now. There has been enough time to implement that part of the strategy.

Q9 **Dan Carden:** You mentioned residential centres and rehabilitation. I have focused quite a bit of my work in the House on drug and alcohol rehabilitation and the work of Dame Carol Black and her review. As far as you can see, is there going to be much crossover between the work she has done on securing additional funding for drug rehabilitation and how that will affect women in the criminal justice system?

Joy Doal: It could be marvellous. That is the thing with the female offender strategy. It is not down to the Ministry of Justice to do everything. You need to open the budgets of other budget holders. Substance misuse is a classic one; they could be contributing to women's centres, but we do not find that it is a joined-up service. We have tried and tried to get drugs services to partner with us—unsuccessfully so far. We need more joining up. We need co-location. The women's centres are a brilliant place to have co-location. Why not have specialist substance misuse workers in the centres, as well as the housing officers? You could co-locate so many services within the women's centres and make them what Corston wanted, which was a one-stop shop. Commissioning has caused that to not happen any more.

Q10 **Dan Carden:** Because we are going to see the largest increase in funding in that area in a generation, I would certainly want to see how that will impact women in the criminal justice system. We might hear about that from our witnesses later on. Andrea, do you have anything to add?

Andrea Coomber: Yes, we know that drugs affect a lot of women. We know about mental ill health and violence. One of the issues is how this strategy connects to other strategies. How does this connect to the violence against women and girls strategy? We know that a large number of women who are in the female offender strategy are equally captured as victims under the violence against women and girls strategy. They are the same women. We need to better understand how these strategies fit together and how they are implemented in a common cause.



Kate Paradine: I would add that co-commissioning is the way forward for services. A plan to implement the strategy and proper leadership at the top will ensure that women have a fair share of those sorts of funds. One of our problems, for example, is prison leavers funds. With some of these funds coming out at the moment, we are not clear how women are benefitting. Women make up 5% of the prison population and 9% of probation case load, and they are often overlooked. The whole point of the strategy was to make sure that women's special and specific needs were not overlooked. I think that is still happening. It is now time to get a grip. You are right that this is an opportunity to make change in the area of substance misuse and violence against women. This group of women are particularly vulnerable on every possible measure that we make in terms of their trauma, domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health. It is a perfect opportunity to address the most needy and the most disadvantaged group of women in our communities.

Q11 **Dan Carden:** Thank you. One more question from me for now. How well are the Ministry and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service doing in engaging with public bodies and getting them to work together locally?

Chair: Who is that to?

Dan Carden: I was looking for someone who had an assured face. [Laughter.]

Chair: Andrea Coomber.

Andrea Coomber: I've been in the middle the whole time.

We have worked with the police on arresting the stream of women going into the criminal justice system. Alongside the strategy, the MOJ published guidance for police services about working with vulnerable women. It is unclear how widely that guidance has been adopted, although I think it has undoubtedly been helpful to those police services that have already committed to an approach that is distinct for women. In police services where they are already minded to take a special approach—Avon and Somerset or Surrey or Durham—it has been useful and well engaged with. I question, though, whether those police services that are not minded to adopt those kinds of approaches have it on their radar at all. It is just very unclear to us.

Joy Doal: There are some statutory services that are always missing, particularly children's services. They are never there at any committee meetings or forums, such as on reducing reoffending or women and girls in the criminal justice system. They are very much absent from the table. I think children's services is a big lack, and the probation contracts completely miss out the issue of safeguarding. There isn't provision around that, yet our workers spend an awful lot of time on safeguarding issues and liaising with children's services. Housing is obviously the other one that is always not joined up.

Kate Paradine: Joy has mentioned the new probation delivery arrangements, and we know a lot of effort is being put in to try to remedy



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some of the gaps in those provisions, but the design of that new system would have been so much better if the strategy had had an implementation plan attached to it. Things have been missed where they should have been recognised as particular needs for women, particularly around domestic abuse and housing.

In answer to your question, the national concordat was published a year ago. We know it was published late, but we do not know what has been going on locally to engage with local authorities and PCCs, so that in every area everyone is putting their bit in. We agree that this is not the MOJ's problem as such; this is an issue that comes about because of the failure of services throughout the system, and often from childhood.

A third of women in prison grew up in the care system, so we know the MOJ is dealing with the results of that, but it also needs to lead on engaging all those local areas in solving this problem and, actually, in saving money. There has been a cost-benefit analysis done to show that we can save money across the entire system of public spending more or less—health and local authorities—so that is what the MOJ needs to concentrate on now.

Dan Carden: Thank you very much; I thought those points were made superbly. I could ask questions on this matter all day, but I will hand back to the Chair for now.

Chair: Mr Carden is going to hold back and hold fire until the later witnesses, so they have been duly warned. Kate Osamor MP, over to you.

Q12 **Kate Osamor:** Thank you, Chair. I welcome our pre-panel, which is giving us its expertise on a very important subject. I want to go back slightly and ask questions around the current funding situation for women's centres. I know that many women's centres have been shut down or their funding has made it almost impossible for them to function. I would like to ask Joy first: what is the situation in Birmingham? Perhaps Kate would like to come in afterwards.

Joy Doal: It is difficult. We have been very lucky because we have a philanthropic family who have been supporting us. If we did not have them, we would be really struggling, and it should not be like that. We should not be reliant on somebody in a charitable trust. That shouldn't be the way. I think that a lot of our statutory contracts, such as liaison and diversion, are going out to tender and we haven't heard anything. It is short-term funding, often one or three years, and it is very difficult to plan. It is hard. At the moment, particularly post covid, there is hardly anything to apply for, so yes, it is hard.

Q13 **Kate Osamor:** Joy, before I bring in Kate, can I just to go back on how difficult it is and obviously how fortunate you are because you have a family that can fund the service? How difficult is it to obtain funding?

Joy Doal: It is difficult. We work very hard doing it, and we have a full-time fundraiser who just does that, but the amount of reporting that you have to do is so time-consuming, and the hoops you have to jump through



take your resources away from actually doing the work you want to do. They could make commissioning so much easier. All of us in the women's sector hated using the portal for the probation contracts—it was awful—but there was one element of it that was quite good, which was that once you have become a provider, you can use that for other contracts. Commissioners could adopt something like that, so that you could be recognised as a good provider and not have to repeat the same thing every time.

Kate Osamor: Thank you, Joy, and now to Kate.

Kate Paradine: Everything Joy said. In terms of commissioning, it is really dysfunctional for specialist organisations providing for women, for black and minoritised women, and for other people. The specialist charities find it difficult to compete with massive charities, which have whole teams putting in complex, bureaucratic and ridiculous bids for sometimes relatively small amounts of money in the grand scheme of Government. We believe that that should be looked at closely to make sure that charities aren't wasting resources on applying for funds.

There are a lot of issues with the probation contracts. However, there was a good bit of the strategy implementation, which was the small fund that was given, but for core funding—roughly £2 million last year and the year before. We encourage the Committee to look at how that money is spent by charities to shore up other things and bring in money from elsewhere. We believe that the core funding element is absolutely vital.

In summary, for women's centres like ours, it is a constant struggle. That makes it hard for women to know when services will be around—that, in itself, is unsettling—and to retain staff in the current environment. It is difficult all around, and we know it doesn't have to be like this. A proper plan could change things significantly, really quite quickly.

Kate Osamor: Thank you so much, Joy and Kate. Andrea, did you want to add anything to that?

Andrea Coomber: No, not on women's centres. They're the experts.

Q14 **Kate Osamor:** Okay, thank you—in agreement, basically. I want to move on to one more question. How do you feel the strategy has impacted on women, whether positively or negatively, especially on the topic you spoke about, around vulnerable women who have experienced domestic abuse—violence as a young child or as an adult of course—and those who are using substances? How do you feel it has captured those women who need support very quickly and, more importantly, the children who are witnessing that too? I will start with Andrea on this one.

Andrea Coomber: I think that the strategy captures their experience and how they should be treated. In terms of how it has affected people on the ground, I think that is very questionable indeed. I think the NAO points to that. It is very hard to see how it has made a difference. We haven't been involved in the advisory board for female offenders; we're not privy to any of the information and we don't understand what outcomes they've had.



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It's all very untransparent. It is very unclear to us what the strategy has achieved, to be perfectly honest.

Kate Osamor: Thank you, Andrea. Joy, I see you nodding in agreement there.

Joy Doal: It is very difficult to say what the strategy has done. I think what upsets us in the sector is what the strategy could have done. If it had been implemented, it could have done all of those things, but when we're reading in this Report that community centres have dropped by two thirds, and that out-of-court disposals are decreasing—why? Why should they be?

If only the Government had done their own strategy we'd have more women diverted and more not doing short prison sentences but being dealt with in the community, with all the effects that that would have on the children. We could be doing work with those mothers around domestic abuse and protecting their children. We can do all of that in the community, but whipping them off 60 miles away to a prison somewhere isn't solving anything.

Q15 **Kate Osamor:** So, if you had a magic wand, what would you say the priority should be, moving forward, for the strategy to work—a strategy that you fully support, in principle?

Joy Doal: The first two: divert more women, and divert more women away from custody into community services. Invest in those two areas. Yes, we like the third one as well—about making custody safer—but if you reduced the population in the prison, you'd probably find that you only needed 200 to 300 places for the women who really need to be in prison. Most of the women in prison don't need to be there. I would say we should invest in the first two points.

Kate Osamor: Thank you, Joy. Kate, did you want to add anything?

Kate Paradine: Really briefly, the national picture is poor. Obviously, the data from the NAO shows how poor it is, but if you go local, and look at somewhere like Manchester, which has seen a significant reduction in imprisonments, you can see our whole-system approach, that is invested in by local government, police and the Ministry of Justice, focusing attention on this. We can see change. It is really important to focus on that. A couple of days ago, I was with a woman who had been in and out of prison for decades and who is getting in-depth advocacy support from one of our women's centres. She said that it was the longest time she had been out of prison in those decades because of that support.

Those are the sorts of changes that we can see can happen, so I am coming to you with hope, and I think we all are. We believe that this can change. It has been nearly four years now, and a lot of time has been wasted. We can now change this, but the prison building plans have to be stopped, and we have to focus again on the basics of this strategy and see that women's lives can be changed. They can transform their futures if

they are given the right support in the community and their problems are not made worse by prison.

Kate Osamor: Thank you so much for your very frank and open responses. I really appreciate it.

Q16 **Chair:** I should let our witnesses online know that the permanent secretary entered the room during that conversation. She is very welcome, and if she wants to come to the table she can do so.

I just want to mop up a couple of quick points that you raised. Earlier, Joy Doal mentioned children's services, and Andrea Coomber mentioned that good things are going on in Avon and Somerset. I wonder whether you could each identify where you think there are gaps in public bodies working together to deliver this, because as one of you rightly highlighted, this is not just about the Ministry of Justice delivering on the strategy. I will start with you, Joy, as you have already mentioned children's services. Is there anything else that you want to add?

Joy Doal: I just think it needs to be more joined up really. That is all. They need to get around the table.

Q17 **Chair:** You mentioned that, often, children's services are not. Are particular bits of the public-private system just not joining up in terms of the rehabilitation of women or alternatives to custody?

Joy Doal: I think that is the problem, partly because we have this fascination with dividing people by need. We are human beings, and there are a multitude of needs within one person. That is the biggest problem; women have to go over there to probation, over there to drugs services, and over there to children's services. It is all not joined up. It needs to be a little more enmeshed. It is about that will to join up. Things like co-location work so well. Years ago, we had a mental health nurse and probation officers co-located with us. The police used to come in once a week and do some domestic violence work with the women. It was there, as was substance misuse, but now it is all separate.

Chair: A bit like the Sure Start model, where lots of services are co-located.

Joy Doal: Yes.

Chair: Andrea Coomber?

Andrea Coomber: There is this problem with the strategy: the Ministry of Justice does not have its hand on the levers for all the things that need to change for the strategy to be implemented. Lots of the factors leading to criminalisation and penalisation require policy change at the Home Office, the Department of Health, and other Departments. We have done a lot of work on the remand for "own protection" of vulnerable people, many of whom are women, but when mental health beds are not available, magistrates decide to remand vulnerable people to custody, so it is not just a matter for the Ministry of Justice; it raises serious questions for the



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Department of Health. One of our concerns from the outset was that it was ambitious, but was it realistically ambitious?

Q18 Chair: That is a big question, which our next witnesses will no doubt pick up. Kate Paradine, which services are not connecting from your perspective in the world that you are working in?

Kate Paradine: Thank you so much for that question. I was in Surrey yesterday, at the Surrey women's support centre board meeting. You have the police, health and the local authority sitting around the table working out how they are going to provide this service. It is about the lack of those three partners routinely sat around the table in every area to talk about dealing with this issue, but there should be a fourth party around that table: the MOJ. We believe that match funding is the key way forward to really incentivise local authorities, the police and health to all put their bit into the pot so that this problem can be seen as a cross-Department problem and not a problem of the MOJ. If that £200 million was used as an incentive by the MOJ, this whole world could be transformed, and that would have knock-on effects on all sorts of things that link to this problem, including children's services and the link between children getting caught up in the criminal justice system, as well as adults.

For us it comes back again to the MOJ's leadership, their grip and their real determination to make a difference. There seems to be a sense of powerlessness in the MOJ that they cannot change things. We know what the Government's direction of travel is with prison building, but that does not mean that we cannot make a change in this area, and 20,000 new police officers should not mean any more women coming into the criminal justice system. If it does, that needs to be looked at because we want to know what those police officers are doing if they are bringing more women into prison.

Q19 Chair: We have looked at this before as a Committee. Just to be clear, we expect there will be more people going through the courts and into the prison system if more police officers are doing their job and catching people who commit crimes.

Can I pick up on the prison numbers point? Earlier, Joy Doal said she thought 200 to 300 was about the right number of prison places for women. There will always be some serious offenders who will have to serve a custodial sentence because of the nature of the crime. That is just the law and that is not going to change under any Government. Do you have any figures from the Howard League, Andrea Coomber?

Andrea Coomber: I don't know if we do. I am three months into the job and not sure if we have figures, but that sounds about right to me. It is a small number of women who need to be taken out of society for society's protection and then rehabilitated and given therapy and support, but the vast majority of women who are in prison simply should not be there.

Chair: No, we have got that point, Andrea.

Andrea Coomber: Two hundred to 300 women would be plenty.



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Q20 Chair: Yes. That would be enough to cover the need. That is what I am trying to drive at. Also, that would be a cost if prison places are going to be built new. Andrea, do you think that the current women's prison estate is up to scratch? One of the arguments—the Government will no doubt put their own argument—for having new prison places is that there has been some very poor-quality prison provision.

Andrea Coomber: Undoubtedly there is poor-quality provision, but if you did not have so many people in prison there would be, within the prison estate as we currently have it, more than enough room for quality provision for 200 or 300 people. The thing that concerns us with the new 500 spaces is that we are not hearing about decommissioning of other—

Chair: Okay. I just wanted to tease that out. Kate Paradine, anything to add on that?

Kate Paradine: Just that we don't know where these are being built and why, and what the plan is for decommissioning. The overwhelming problem for the women's prison estate is the number of women who do not need to be in prison and having to receive services. If it takes two babies to die and two reports from the prisons ombudsman and still we are not looking at what is going wrong in a system where prisons are completely unsafe and self-harm is rocketing, what will it take to have a serious look at this serious public health crisis in women's prisons?

Q21 Chair: I am sure we will tease out with our witnesses the challenge, which we looked at as a Committee, of dealing with a small cohort of prisoners and of providing services for them.

We covered data earlier, and we will cover that with the Department. On best practice, you said that there was good stuff going on in Avon and Somerset. Could you each give an example of best practice? Joy, I guess you are rather tied down to Birmingham, but perhaps you could tell us the bits of work that you think the Department ought to look at to see if it could replicate that elsewhere?

Andrea Coomber: Avon and Somerset police are working with the Nelson Trust, the local police and crime commissioner, local services and the women's centre in Bridgwater to provide real alternatives for women to stop offending, and to intervene so that women do not enter the criminal justice gateway. That is exactly what we need to be happening.

Q22 Chair: What's the magic ingredient? They are bodies working together, but what makes it work?

Andrea Coomber: They are bodies working together with a common mission to keep women out of the system.

Q23 Chair: Who has been the driver of that in Avon and Somerset?

Andrea Coomber: The strategy has been helpful to bring them together, but it has been a mix of the women's centres, a committed police and crime commissioner and the police leading it.

Q24 Chair: Joy Doal, do you have anything to add on best practice?



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Joy Doal: No. Obviously I am going to say Birmingham is the best—I've got to, haven't I? The women's centre model works. It is a really good model.

Chair: A one-stop shop, basically.

Joy Doal: The one-stop shop. It works and let's do more of it.

Kate Paradine: A key feature is women's sector services and specialist services leading and being given trust to lead, in terms of support and funding, to ensure we are building services that women can trust over the long term, different to probation or state agencies, so they can build trust and really tackle the entrenched problems that have often got them there.

I have already mentioned Manchester. There is growing good practice in London, through a dedication to the whole-system approach. In Surrey, and all over the country, there are different women's centres and pockets that are making things work on a shoestring but struggling to make ends meet. That is the core problem that needs to be addressed.

Q25 **Chair:** In summary, are you all saying that there are models out there and, if they were implemented, the strategy could be delivered?

Witnesses: *indicated assent.*

Chair: I see nods.

Thank you to our first panel. You are welcome to follow this; someone will tell you which channel on Parliament TV it is being broadcast on. I am afraid we will have to switch off the screen in a moment. Thank you very much indeed.