



Women in Prison Briefing Justice Select Committee – 2nd April 2020

This briefing focuses on experience of our frontline support services in prisons and communities, through women's centres and other specialist services, and builds on our previous [Covid-19 Briefing](#)

1) In prison

We are hearing extremely worrying accounts of the impact of restrictive regimes, stopping prison visits and limited ability to self-isolate (e.g., cell sharing, 'revolving door' in and out of prison, staff movement round prisons, practice of 'cohorting'). Family members have been contacting charities in high levels of distress after phonecalls with loved ones in prison. All of this, including 22 hours a day in cells exacerbates mental ill health, risk of suicide and high levels of self-harm (a particular issue in women's prisons). Anxiety levels across the prisons are extremely high.

One key barrier to supporting women through this difficult time is that there is no national position on having free and accessible phone calls in and out of prison. This means family and support workers are unable to call women, including organising needs assessment/release preparation, e.g., assessing risks and issues on release; discussing self-isolation and providing emotional and practical support. This must be addressed urgently and nationally, not left to local decisions.

2) Plans for reducing prison population

There does not appear to be a clear plan to stop the flow of people into prison. It is vital now that strong measures are taken to stop short sentences, and use of prison for recall and remand, using community options and deferred sentencing etc. Post sentence supervision (PSS) (introduced under TR) should end with a focus on support, ending the counter-productive 'revolving door' of recall.

In various letters to Ministers/Prime Minister over the last 2 weeks we have appealed for a plan for prison release on public health and human rights grounds to protect lives in prison, in communities and to protect our NHS. One email to us this week from the husband of a woman in prison has told of his wife's desperation, and she has a home and family to return to, a job lined up and is not a risk to the public. It doesn't make any sense at all for her still to be in prison. We know that many women can be safely released and will often only have a very short time of the sentence to serve. It is a major risk to public health to keep them in prison and inhumane to them and their families.

Currently any plans for release do not appear to involve criminal justice charities, including women's centres and other specialists, such as Birth Companions and Hibiscus. We welcome the announcement about releasing pregnant women and those on Mother and Baby Units (made on Tuesday 31st March), but this is only a tiny step and should have happened at the beginning of this crisis. We also have serious concerns about the release planning process even for this small group.

In general there needs to be clear national arrangements for 'Through the gate' including clear guidance for charities on 'face-to-face' meetings (and personal protection equipment (PPE) made available where necessary). Each person released needs transport arranged given difficulties with public transport (ie family collection, taxi to location), a charged mobile phone to enable them to stay in touch with services and an adequate discharge grant (currently a pitiful £46, which has remained static for years). Again, there appears to be no national plan or direction on any of this. Our view is that establishing a clear plan and practical measures to support the release of women during the Covid-19 crisis can be applied to release in the male estate. This is why it is vital that issues in (3) and (4) are addressed urgently. The roles of HM Prison & Probation Inspectorates and Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) have never been more vital.



3) Community Support services on release & for community sentences

Our general observation based on delivering services across the country, and working closely with partner women's centres, is that there has been a chaotic response to the entire Covid-19 crisis. Women's centres have lacked communication or messages from CRCs. Even when HMPPS/MoJ have had opportunities to give reassuring and supportive messages about contractual obligations they appear fixated on contract compliance rather than responding to the crisis as it unfolds.

Since social isolation measures began women's centres, and other support services have been gearing up to provide intense support via phone, online and other means. Virtual Women's Centres now exist across the country so women can have a dedicated member of staff to help connect them with services, access emergency supplies and participate in virtual group and peer support.

There has been a complete lack of communication or system of engagement to enable charities to plan and use these resources effectively. The most pressing example of this is in relation to the release of pregnant women and those on MBUs. Despite advice and guidance which Birth Companions, ourselves and others have provided to MoJ/HMPPS over the last two weeks, the department still does not appear to have a coherent national plan in place and has not given the voluntary sector the information and processes needed to prepare for women's release.

Advice that does not appear to have been accounted for includes: practical difficulties of Friday release; Need for specialist midwifery input to ensure women's successful transition to community services. Earlier this week partners at Trevi House had identified 7 potential spaces for pregnant women in rehab residential units across the country and yet there has been no follow up on this. At the same time HMPPS seem to be asking services to house women without committing to funding.

Despite enormous financial challenges faced by the voluntary sector, flagged directly at Ministerial level, and highlighted by Clinks and many others, there is no acknowledgement of the precarious funding situation faced by so many of the voluntary sector organisations expected to pick up this work. Without funding to provide services and to support core functions, many of the organisations MoJ will be reliant on to protect women may not exist in a few months' time.

Together Birth Companions, Women in Prison and other specialists have vital services, ready to put into action including a helpline number through which pregnant women released and those supporting them can access information and support on issues relating to pregnancy, birth and early motherhood; Access to specialist midwifery support so women will be able to get midwifery information and specialist advocacy; A network of virtual Women's Centres ready to provide key workers and links to a range of community services; Ability to provide women with practical essentials such as baby equipment, particularly those released to London. We now need national leadership and urgent funding to help set this work in motion.

4) Urgent emergency funding for community-based support charities

There appears to be absolutely no provision to fund charities to support release. As the state steps back and buckles in this crisis, charities like women's centres are stepping up and into that gap. Yet Government does not appear prepared to help pay for that. If they do not then vital services just will not be here in a few weeks or months time. Even before the Covid-19 crisis there were multiple warnings to the government about the cliff edge of funding that starts for many women's centres this week. That has not changed and has in fact worsened over the last month.