



Sir Robert Neill MP
Justice Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

2 December 2021

Dear Sir Bob,

WOMEN IN PRISON

I welcomed the opportunity to attend and contribute to the Committee's Women in Prison Inquiry on 2 November 2021, alongside Jo Farrar and Kate Davies. Please find below, as promised, further information on some of the points raised.

The expansion of the Women's Prison Estate

Firstly, I would like to clarify that the refurbished buildings at HMP Styal described are not part of the planned expansion of the Women's Prison Estate. However, these existing units at Styal demonstrate the need for new, gender-specific and trauma-informed units for women, and the Committee will have the opportunity to see both the old and refurbished accommodation during their visit to HMP Styal as part of the inquiry.

The expansion of the Women's Prison Estate will deliver new open and closed facilities. The five sites that the new gender-specific and trauma-informed accommodation will be delivered at are HMP Drake Hall, HMP Eastwood Park, HMP Foston Hall, HMP Send and HMP Styal. We are close to determining what can be delivered at each site in terms of numbers of mix of open and closed places and we will write to the Committee in the next few weeks to confirm this and expected timescales. At that time, we would also like to detail the benefits and positive impact this will have across the Women's Prison Estate.

Definition of homelessness

The Committee raised an issue around the lack of a single definition of homelessness and safe or suitable accommodation. Consistency of data recording is an identified issue that HMPPS is looking to address, building on more streamlined processes following unification. The Target Operating Model for probation services in England and Wales, published in February 2021, included performance measures for prison leavers housed on release from custody (90%), and settled accommodation for all supervised individuals (those released from prison and those on community sentences) three months after commencement of their supervision (80%).

To ensure consistent and accurate data recording, HMPPS has recently updated the Accommodation & Employment Recording Guidance to ensure Probation regions have a clear and consistent understanding of the accommodation status definitions, and how to record accurately. The revised document will be cascaded via national communications and, as part of this, Regional Probation Directors will be expected to put in place plans to ensure accurate data recording. A Task & Finish group has been established to

focus on enhancements to the NDelius Accommodation screen to support Community Probation Practitioners and enable more accurate reporting.

The Accommodation Recording Guidance defines homelessness as where an individual is rough sleeping, squatting, residing in night shelters, emergency hostels or campsites. Where an individual is temporarily residing or sofa surfing with family and friends, then this is defined as transient accommodation. The Community Probation Practitioner is expected to make a referral to the LHA under the Duty to Refer framework (Offender Pathway in Wales) if the individual is at risk of becoming homeless in the next 56 days.

HMPPS worked with colleagues in Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities and the Welsh Government to agree a definition and they continue to work with them to ensure consistency and data quality.

Women on remand

We committed to providing further information on the support for women on remand. At the moment, embedded pre-release teams provide immediate resettlement needs and pre-release support for unconvicted people in prison. The minimum is to assess under Basic Custody Screening Tool 2 and undertake specialist immediate needs work around accommodation and debt.

However, we are looking at how we can extend specialist accommodation and rehabilitative support to women remanded to custody.

The residential women's centre in Wales

The Committee asked to understand the progress made with regards to residential women's centres. We are actively seeking to secure a site for the residential women's centre (RWC) in Wales. Our initial site search produced a short list of potential sites, but unfortunately these were either taken off the market or did not meet our technical requirements. We are therefore undertaking a second site search, and this time are working with local partners to identify the most appropriate site. Having learnt from our previous experience, we believe this approach is likely to be more successful and we anticipate we will identify a suitable site that we can then take forward for planning permission.

Whilst we are still committed to opening the Wales RWC, we are unable to provide a firm prospective opening date at this time. Once we have acquired a site and secured planning permission, we will be able to provide an indicative timeline as we will then be in a position to determine how long it will take to refurbish the site, staff it and ensure service provision is in place. I will update the Committee at that time.

I would also like to reiterate that the RWC will not be a place of incarceration. Instead it is an alternative to custody enabling women to remain close to their families and communities whilst receiving the intensive, bespoke support they need to address the causes of their offending behaviour. Women will be able to come and go, within the requirements of their sentence, and will not be locked in.

Baby death at HMP Bronzefield

The Committee asked whether appropriate action has been taken in response to this tragic incident, including whether any members of staff have left Bronzefield as a consequence. Two members of prison staff, a Prison Custody Officer and an Operational Support Officer, involved in the incident were subject to disciplinary proceedings, and both have been removed from prisoner facing duties on a permanent basis. A Prison Custody Officer is required to be certified by HMPPS to perform prisoner escort arrangements or

custodial duties at a prison. The certification of the Prison Custody Officer involved has since been withdrawn.

I hope the above answers the questions asked at the oral evidence session. I will update the Committee on the expansion of the Women's Prison Estate and residential women's centres where a further update is required in due course.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Victoria Atkins". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Victoria" and the surname "Atkins" clearly distinguishable.

VICTORIA ATKINS MP