

Written evidence from Prisoner Learning Alliance

Women in Prison

The Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) very much welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The PLA is a network of organisations and individuals with an interest and expertise in prison education. We use our collective voice to advocate for improvements and we hold the government to account by monitoring prison education. We have over 200 members, across the sector including education providers, professional bodies and voluntary sector organisations. The Prisoners' Education Trust provide our secretariat. While we have gathered information through ongoing engagement, this submission does not necessarily represent the views of any individual or organisational member of the PLA.

Our submission covers:

The need for better data and evaluation of the effectiveness of education

The need for a coordinated education strategy, to avoid the fragmentation created by the current commissioning models

The need for a whole person approach to education including developing family learning opportunities, trauma-informed approaches, increased use of technology and supporting additional learning needs more effectively.

The need to understand the links between education and employment and for progression routes to aid successful resettlement.

Progress on the Female Offender Strategy, reducing women's imprisonment and using community sentences.

Progress in these areas is glacial. There is a massive amount of evidence and significant agreement about what works to reduce women's offending, which is just not being translated into policy or practice. The women's estate is continually impacted by ministerial and administration changes, with no long-term strategy to create sustained momentum or the necessary change. The progress that has been made is incremental, and real progress requires leadership, political will and significant investment.

The PLA supports the development of alternatives to short sentences for women including the use of diversion, robust community sentences and women's centres. Women who are a low-risk to the public should ideally be diverted from the criminal justice system - they are likely to have multiple complex needs, and gender specific support is essential. The processes for deciding when to remand or recall women require overhaul. Alternatives to prison offer the best options for low-risk women and reduce the trauma of unnecessary custody.

Women's centres could provide an alternative to short sentences and reduce the use of remand and recall for women. The Corston Report found 99 women centres offering a wide variety of services, including education and recreational courses, social groups, counselling therapy and group work, health and therapies, after-school programmes, childcare, internet access, and advocacy. The picture now is much depleted – while it is difficult to obtain up-to-date figures, a 2019 report put the figure of women's centres at about 50¹.

Women given community sentences are much less likely to reoffend than those who are imprisoned (26% compared to 55.8%).² And community orders cost an average of £2,800 per woman per year,³ compared to an average yearly cost of a prison place, at £45,619.⁴ Along with the clear financial benefits and those of reducing reoffending, numerous reports have found that community sentences and centres support the improved participation of women in education and training and, where appropriate, employment.

Two other key recommendations in the Corston Report, for small custodial units and community residential centres, have also made scant progress. Residential women's centres could provide a range of services (health, housing, employment, training, education and childcare) and accredited programmes, alongside safe accommodation for women and their children. Although committed to again in the Female Offender Strategy, none have been commissioned or opened although it has been announced that one will open in Wales.⁵

Similarly, while the Prison Safety and Reform programme in 2016 committed to five small custodial units outside women's prisons, only two have been opened. In June 2018, the government announced it had abandoned plans to build five 'community prisons' for women in favour of new—and loosely-defined—'rehabilitation centres'. Overall, despite the efforts of many involved in the criminal justice system, progress on appropriate alternative accommodation for women is slow.

Women in prison – education

Many women entering prison have had a disrupted education – 32% have been expelled or permanently excluded from school. And 31% have experienced being taken into care as a child, which may have meant moving home and school and periods of absence from education, alongside emotional upheaval. It is unsurprising, then, that many women entering prison have not passed exams at school – but a figure of 71%⁶ without any qualifications at all is staggering. However, figures vary, and a later report found that 47% of women entering prison had no qualifications.⁷

¹ https://www.tavinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Women-and-Girls-Briefing-Report-Final_web.pdf

² Hedderman, C. and Jolliffe, D. (2015) 'The impact of prison for women on the edge: paying the price for wrong workingitout.qxp_Layout 1 22/01/2020 15:31 Page 40 decisions', *Victims and Offenders: An international journal of evidence-based research, policy and practice*, available at: <http://www.womensbreakout.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2015/02/hedderman-and-jolliffe2015-impact-of-prison-women-on-the-edge.pdf> [accessed on 27 August 2019]

³ Ministry of Justice (2012) *A distinct approach: a guide to working with women offenders*, London: NOMS Women and Equalities Group

⁴ Table 1, Ministry of Justice (2018) *Costs per place and costs per prisoner by individual prison, HM Prison and Probation Service Annual Report and Accounts 2017-18 Management Information Addendum*, London: MoJ

⁵ <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2020-10-01.98198.h>

⁶ e Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) in 2002, *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*

⁷ Ministry of Justice (2012) *The pre-custody employment, training and education status of newly sentenced prisoners. Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*,

Unfortunately, available data is old, and no statistics on educational achievements before and attainment or improvement during prison have been published for the last three years. As such, there is also no up-to-date data on the effectiveness of education provided. This significant data gap would not be acceptable in any other adult or community education setting. In theory, the Monitoring Information System introduced by HMPPS in April 2018 should be able to provide real time data for individual prisons, but nothing has been published yet. It is difficult to know how there can be a strategic approach to educating women in prison, if the data about their needs and qualification levels is unclear.

Education in women's prisons is fragmented due to the commissioning arrangements. Four women's prisons are in a contracting lot with education provided by Novus, four are under two contracts with Weston College, and Milton Keynes College and Sodexo have two prisons each. There is no national strategic approach to education for women, although we are aware that department heads from women's prisons do meet informally. There is much positive work and some excellent initiatives but education in women's prisons can be subsumed into regional or contractual arrangement that focus on male prisons.

Ofsted reports often score women's prisons higher than men's for education, training and skills. However, both Ofsted and PLA members have expressed concern that the curriculum offer for women remains too narrow, with insufficient progression routes. Given the difficulty of providing a wide range of courses for a limited prison population, mechanisms such as ROTL placements, partnership work, distance learning and imaginative use of ICT could help diversify the curriculum. There are numerous women-centred community and voluntary sector organisations who could meet the specific learning and resettlement needs of women. However, again funding arrangements and the complexities of the Dynamic Purchasing System⁸ make this difficult.

Women in prison and a whole system approach

Despite the best efforts of most prison and education staff, insufficient resourcing and understaffing make a whole system approach to supporting women in prison extremely difficult. There are challenges coordinating departments and activities. As in the male estate, the system is managing a population too large for the available accommodation and infrastructure. Women can be transferred at short notice and this disincentivises them from starting courses they may not be able to complete. Lack of joined up information means that women moving prisons are sometimes asked to do the same assessments or courses again.

The Learning Prison

Our publication 'Smart Rehabilitation'⁹ advocated for 'learning prisons'. This includes embedding learning in work and industries and options for women to work and learn part time. Regimes are being reviewed following the Covid-19 lockdown and this is an opportunity for reform that brings in evening and weekend activities as standard practice. A

London: MoJ Analytical Services

⁸ Electronic tool used by individual establishments to purchase bespoke education services

⁹ <https://prisonerlearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/PLA-Smart-Rehabilitation-Report-FINAL.pdf>

culture of learning and creative opportunities outside of the core day, would better replicate the community as many working people have access to learning and educational activities at evenings and weekends to develop them as a ‘whole person’. To develop women in prison as ‘whole people’ a similar approach should be taken. A learning prison also incentivises women to achieve through a culture of aspiration and celebrating success.

Trauma-informed environments

Many women in prison have experienced significant levels of trauma both prior to and since coming into contact with the criminal justice system, Women with experience of trauma are particularly vulnerable and in need of appropriate and trauma-informed support to heal. It is important that prison staff are trained in trauma-informed approaches and there has been some good work in the women’s estate. This must include education staff, including those employed by the PEF ¹⁰education providers.

Trauma often significantly impacts on individuals’ ability to learn, as traumatised learners are likely to be more ‘focused on immediate survival rather than on learning and cooperation’,¹¹ In many ways, the prison environment is antithetical to trauma-informed practice, which requires conditions which enable a sense of emotional safety.¹² This can be difficult to create in prison, given both that incarceration is by its very nature coercive, and that current conditions can be characterised by high levels of violence, addiction, self-harm and mental health problems. High staff turnover among prison staff presents an additional significant challenge, given that ‘continuity of relationships is of great importance’ within trauma-informed teaching practice.¹³

Additional learning needs

One area of particular concern is the lack of support for women with diverse needs and abilities.¹⁴ While we are pleased that routine and standardised screening for learning difficulties and disabilities when women enter prison is now in place, this is a relatively recent development and women who entered prison previously may have needs that are unrecognised and unmet.¹⁵ In 2018 the Ministry of Justice reported that 40% of women (compared to 35% of men) in custody were identified as ‘having a learning difficulty/challenge’.¹⁶

¹⁰ Prison Education Framework (PEF) covers the contracts for the majority of education services for prisons in England, and covers a core curriculum of English, maths, ICT and varied vocational provision

¹¹ Wartenweiler, T. 2017 'Trauma-informed adult education: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. The Online Journal of New Horizons in Education, 7(2), pp. 96-106 (p. 97).

¹² Carello, J. and Butler, L.D. 2015. Practicing What We Teach: Trauma-Informed Educational Practice, Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 35(3), ppp. 262-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059> (p. 264).

¹³ Wartenweiler. 2017 (p. 101).

¹⁴ Women’s Budget Group (2018) The Female Face of Poverty: Examining the cause and consequences of economic deprivation for women, available at: <http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/FINAL-Female-Face-ofPoverty.pdf> [accessed on 27 August 2019]

¹⁵ Ministry of Justice (2018) Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2017, London: MoJ

¹⁶ Ministry of Justice (2019) Community Performance Quarterly, update to March 2019, Offender Employment

Some women lack the ability to read notices around the prison or complete applications. Prisons remain paper based, and it is hard to cope or understand what is going on if you cannot read. Ideally all documents produced in prison would be in easy-read. Despite high levels of need, the information flow between health, education social care and residential officer teams is sometimes poor, meaning assessments are not shared and support needs are not always known about. Support from SENCos¹⁷ and additional learning support in education is insufficient in some women's prisons.

Support for family work

Support for women to maintain relationships with their children and families is improving. The Farmer Review¹⁸ has had a positive impact and in particular the provision of family liaison workers has been extremely beneficial. Family and children are a big motivator for change for many women in prison. Conversely, if there are difficulties with children, it is very hard to get women to focus on their education. There are numerous family learning opportunities that could help to engage women in education. Far more could be done to support family learning, through family visits, and the use of video calls for visits could be extended to support after-school homework clubs. Improving the ability to communicate with family and children can remove barriers to learning for women prisoners.

Personal and social development

Education supports all areas of social development - connections forged between teachers and fellow students develop understanding of relationships, broadening of experience, empathy and thinking skills. Education also offers a positive identity to replace that of 'offender' with 'student'.

The Corston Report¹⁹ identified emotional literacy as the basis from which all learning must start. The report says 'respect for one another, forming and maintaining relationships, developing self-confidence, simply being able to get along with people without conflict must come before numeracy and literacy skills. Life skills, for example, how to live as a family or group, how to contribute to the greater good, how to cook a healthy meal, are missing from the experiences of many of the women in modern society who come in contact with the criminal justice system. The chaotic lifestyles and backgrounds of many women result in their having very little employment experience or grasp of some very basic life skills.'

While many women's prisons support enrichment activities effectively, community organisations are underused and many activities they could provide would enhance women's experiences. For example, reading groups or creative activities can promote understanding and discussion of a range of personal issues including self-image and relationships.

Circumstance table (April 2017 to March 2019), London: MoJ

¹⁷ Special Educational Needs Coordinator

¹⁸http://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/809467/farmer-review-women.PDF

¹⁹<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130206102659/http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf> pg 44

Suicide and self-harm prevention

Despite much dedicated work by prison staff, educators and others, prisons remain the worst environment for many distressed, damaged or disturbed women they hold. The combined impact of poor environmental conditions, overcrowding and cell-sharing, fewer experienced staff, and less ongoing investment in prisons have exacerbated the mental health problems which many women in prison experience. The lack of contact with children has been particularly savage for women during the Covid-19 lockdown. If women are not engaged with the regime and activities, then they are more likely to get involved in negative behaviours, including self-harming. Limited access to counselling and therapeutic support can exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions.

Education can have a positive effect on mental health outcomes and mental illness.²⁰ A BIS funded study²¹ found that the effect of education is greater for mid-level qualifications, for women, and for individuals at greater risk of mental illness. Research has also found that arts projects had positive effects on people in prison (80% men and 83% women), including improved behavior and improved mental health. It also reported significant gains in self-confidence and self-esteem.²²

Digital technology

In-cell digital technology could be rolled out safely for the vast majority of women in prison. The security risks of women accessing the internet are very low, and women could have access to personal devices to aid study, as is currently happening in the children's estate. There are also many programs and technology that can support additional learning needs. Although the Virtual Campus²³ remains underused, we are pleased that HMP Foston Hall is enabling small numbers of women to access laptops for learning and that there are plans to include women's prisons in the next roll-out of in-cell technology. However, the security and risk concerns that surround technology in prison rarely apply to women who should not continue to be disadvantaged by disproportionate risk assessments more relevant to the male estate.

Women's' perspectives on education in prisons

The most comprehensive assessment of women's views on prison education is from the surveys disseminated during HMIP inspection reports. Almost 700 women responded to the HMIP survey²⁴ last year. Only 16% of women report being out of their cells for 10 or more

²⁰ BIS: Chevalier and Feinstein (2005)

²¹ <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/CEE/ceedp71.pdf>

²² Dept. BIS, 2013

²³ Virtual Campus is a secure intranet system, which has been developed for use in prisons in England and Wales, which allows students to access a range of information, communication facilities and other resources which would otherwise only be available online.

²⁴ https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/10/HMI-Prisons_Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2019-20-WEB.pdf

hours a day. Over a quarter (27%) report attending the gym twice or more a week and 57% access the library at least once a week. Nearly two-thirds (59%) believe it is easy to access education but only 38% think it is easy to access work or vocational training. Over four-fifths report having attended education in their current prison.

Notably, three-quarters believe the education they have received in prison will help them on release and nearly two-thirds (69%) think staff have encouraged them to do activities in the prison. However, when it comes to resettlement planning only 21% say they are being supported to set up education/training on releases and only a quarter are receiving help to get a job. There are numerous challenges in supporting women leaving prison (see below) and distance from home is a huge barrier in liaising with agencies in the community.

Education, resettlement and reducing reoffending

The importance of education as key to equipping women with the skills needed for training, further study or employment on release should not be understated. This is particularly relevant because people who do not take part in education or training can be more than three times more likely to be reconvicted, and because the Social Exclusion Unit²⁵ found that basic skills learning can contribute to a reduction in reoffending of around 12%).

PLA members have highlighted the importance of having clear referral routes for women after education courses have finished, both in custody and through the gate including for those on short sentences. Women with caring responsibilities, in particular, need realistic resettlement advice that takes account of caring responsibilities. Careers advice and employment support are resource intensive because of the multiple needs that women have. The Prisoner Work Coach (PWC) scheme for Staffordshire and Derbyshire District has worked closely with a group of six women at HMP Foston Hall, both one-to-one and in a group, to develop CVs and prepare for interviews. At HMP New Hall, Novus Works now contact women 8-10 weeks before their release date and offer help with looking for employment or further education, ideally using their training or experience gained prior to, or during their time in prison. Support for women leaving prison needs to be individualised and bespoke.

Despite many positive initiatives, the unemployment rate for women leaving prison remains very high. The latest statistics²⁶ show that only 4% of women leaving prison have a job six weeks after (the figure is 10% for men). For some women, it can be a long and difficult process to get employment on release from prison and it is not helpful to set them unrealistic targets. Lapses are common and to avoid unnecessary imprisonment, it is better to provide women with support and prepare them to cope with setbacks by increasing their confidence and self-esteem.

There are a variety of needs and standards of attainment, particularly among women who traditionally suffer discrimination in the job market and their employment needs are different

²⁵ Social Exclusion Unit 2012

²⁶ Table 11, Ministry of Justice (2020) Community performance quarterly MI, update to March 2020, Employment circumstances, London: Ministry of Justice

from men's. The "woman-centred" approach that Corston advocated applies equally to the area of education, training and skills. Many women in prison understand the importance of building esteem and confidence and finding security and identity before accessing education and employment. The Corston report recognised that only once women had accomplished these basic skills would they be equipped to move on into formal education, training and employment.

Prisons can support women's life chances by better links to employers, apprenticeship providers and education institutions, both inside prison and on release. There is clear evidence that improving qualifications and developing transferrable skills can enhance employability. For example, Ipsos MORI and London Economics on behalf of BIS found that 35% of men and 29% of women who had undertaken further education and skills training indicated that they had got a better job, while 18% of men and 12% of women indicated that they had received a promotion.²⁷

²⁷https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69179/bis-13-597-impact-of-further-education-learning.pdf