

Written evidence from Sue McAllister CB, Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

Re: Inquiry into Women in Prison

I previously submitted written evidence to the Justice Committee's Inquiry into Women in Prison on 7 June 2021. I am writing to provide further information relating to specific investigations carried out by my office that you may find relevant to this inquiry. My office has investigated the death of a baby that occurred in September 2019 and a stillbirth in another prison in June 2020. While I appreciate the deadline for submitting evidence to the inquiry has passed, I am only just in a position to share some of the details of these investigations with you.

My role

The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) carries out independent investigations into deaths and complaints in custody. Our role and responsibilities are set out in our Terms of Reference¹.

We have two main duties:

- To investigate complaints made by prisoners, young people in detention (young offender institutions and secure training centres), offenders under probation supervision and immigration detainees.
- To investigate deaths of prisoners, young people in detention (including residents in secure children's homes), approved premises' residents and immigration detainees due to any cause, including any apparent suicides and natural causes.

The purpose of these investigations is to understand what happened, to correct injustices and to identify learning for the organisations whose actions we oversee so that we can make a significant contribution to safer, fairer custody and offender supervision.

My submission to the inquiry

The call for evidence for the inquiry into women in prison asked whether the female prison estate takes a Whole System Approach (that considers all of the offenders' needs) to those in their care. I am submitting this evidence to share my findings that some needs of pregnant women in prison are not being sufficiently met.

As mentioned above, my office has carried out two investigations into the deaths of babies in prison. These investigations are at different stages and neither of my investigation reports have yet been published. However, due to the significance of this evidence to your inquiry I can provide an overview of the findings from these investigations.

The first of the incidents subject to investigation occurred in September 2019 after a woman gave birth alone in her cell overnight.

¹ www.ppo.gov.uk/about/vision-and-values/terms-of-reference/

The second incident subject to investigation occurred in June 2020, after a woman gave birth to a stillborn baby in prison without proper clinical support or pain relief and with untrained staff.

While I am unable to share specific details at this time, I can confirm that following both of these investigations, I have made recommendations designed to improve antenatal care for women in prison who either refuse to engage with antenatal services or who have a 'denied pregnancy' (the clinical term for when a woman is unaware of, or unable to acknowledge, the existence of her pregnancy).

In your call for evidence you asked whether the custodial estate offers a trauma-informed environment for women. In relation to the cases referred to above, I have found that the care available to pregnant is insufficiently trauma-informed.

We will share the full investigation reports with you when they have been published (which I hope will be in the next few months).

Sue McAllister CB
Prisons and Probation Ombudsman