

Submission to the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry into Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

from Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons

Introduction

1. We welcome the opportunity to submit a response to the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry into violence against women and girls (VAWG).
2. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMI Prisons) is an independent inspectorate whose duties are primarily set out in section 5A of the Prison Act 1952 and include reporting on the conditions for and treatment of women in prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs) in England.
3. As part of our inspections of all prisons and YOIs that hold adult women, we inspect outcomes for women who have experienced domestic or sexual abuse, trauma and trafficking. We expect that women with these experiences will be identified and supported to address their specific needs. We also inspect outcomes for women involved in sex work.ⁱ
4. Our below response is based on evidence from nine inspections of prisons holding women, for which reports were published between June 2018 and May 2020.ⁱⁱ It also includes findings from a Scrutiny Visit (SV) that was conducted at a prison holding women, for which the report was published in April 2021.ⁱⁱⁱ Overall, although some prisons provided good support to women who have experienced violence, abuse or trauma, too many women were not receiving the support they needed. The lack of support for women who had been trafficked was a particular concern. Staff needed more training, but it was positive that many staff had received training on how to consider the trauma that some women may have experienced. We set out these findings in the first section of our response, which covers support for women in prison who have experienced violence or who have been trafficked and the training provided to staff in order to identify and support those women. This section also covers support for women previously involved in sex work. The second section of our response outlines the provision of accommodation for women on release from prison. Inspectors found that accommodation outcomes need to be more robustly monitored in order to better determine how effective and sustainable housing provision is on release, particularly for women relocating due to domestic abuse or other situations where they may be vulnerable. We hope that our response will assist the Home Affairs Committee in its inquiry into violence against women and girls.

Support for women in prison who have experienced violence

5. Needs analyses conducted by prisons between 2018 and 2020 showed that there is a high proportion of women in prison who have experienced domestic, physical and sexual abuse. At the time of our last inspection at HMP & YOI New Hall, a needs analysis showed that 53% of women had experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse in their childhood. Of the women using the counselling service provided at New Hall, 53% of women said they had suffered domestic abuse, 56% said they had experienced more than one kind of abuse and 44% said they had been raped. Similarly, at HMP & YOI Askham Grange, we found that 40% of the prison population had experienced domestic abuse according to their needs analysis.
6. Support services for women who had experienced violence and abuse were too limited at some prisons that received a full inspection between 2018-2020. We found that the services that were in place were not fully developed and were only available for a small number of women, which meant there were some women who had experienced domestic abuse with unmet needs. Inspectors found that the provision was limited for several reasons, including some external

programmes no longer being available; relationships with community projects lapsing; and short staffing. Inspectors found waiting lists at two prisons. At HMP & YOI Low Newton, 45 women were on the waiting list for a six-week programme to support those who had experienced domestic abuse. At the time of our inspection of HMP & YOI Styal, there were 42 women awaiting assessment for counselling, although most were seen within four weeks of their initial referral.

7. Some prisons recognised the level of unmet need and were trying to make improvements. For example, an independent domestic violence advisor (IDVA) had recently been recruited at HMP Eastwood Park, who had started to support a small number of victims and aimed to conduct group work in the future. At HMP Send, leaders had overcome funding difficulties to ensure all women received support.
8. Inspectors found that women were well supported at HMP & YOI Bronzefield, HMP & YOI Drake Hall and New Hall and reasonably well supported at Styal. All new women arriving at Bronzefield were supported to disclose any experiences of trauma and the prison had both trained trauma peer workers and a lead member of staff. In the year prior to our inspection, 30 women who had experienced domestic abuse had completed a group work programme to support them to develop healthy relationships. Similarly, women at New Hall had a range of support to address domestic and sexual abuse which was offered through individual counselling, courses, group work and drop-in services. This support benefitted a significant number of women. There was also a good range of courses, one-to-one support and counselling available for women at Drake Hall who had experienced abuse. NHS England had commissioned sexual violence counselling services and all women who inspectors spoke to valued this service. Inspectors found a range of support in place for women at Styal, including Flourish, a four-stage programme for women who had experienced domestic abuse or trauma, where they could also be referred for one-to-one support from the psychology team, and Room to Talk, which ran an average of 47 counselling sessions a week. A groupwork programme was also available for women serving short sentences in prison or those who were not yet ready to engage in formal counselling. In addition, there had been some good work to support women who had experienced historic sexual abuse. Healing Trauma, a programme aimed at helping women identify their previous experiences of personal trauma, was running at Bronzefield, Drake Hall, HMP & YOI Foston Hall and Send. Inspectors found that women found this programme to be positive and valuable.
9. During our Scrutiny Visit of HMP & YOI Peterborough, inspectors found that a dedicated team of prison staff and peer trauma champions had continued, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, to provide face-to-face support for women who had experienced domestic abuse, trauma or rape, which was positive.

Trafficking

10. We expect that women who are potential victims of trafficking will be provided with support and referred to appropriate community services. Across all of the prisons inspected, the processes in place to identify and support these women through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) varied, but most were inadequate. Overall, we found that staff at most women's prisons had limited awareness and understanding of both the NRM process and the prison's safeguarding policies regarding women who had experienced trafficking. Some prisons which had a strategy in place still lacked focus on how potential victims of trafficking would be identified and supported. For example, at Foston Hall, inspectors found that a comprehensive safeguarding policy had been introduced, but little support was available for women who had been trafficked. In addition, at New Hall, a comprehensive safeguarding policy and training was in place to help staff identify women who had been trafficked, but more still needed to be done to adequately safeguard these women.

11. In contrast, inspectors did find two prisons with good identification and support processes in place. At Low Newton, staff attended the local sexual exploitation forum and worked with specialist providers from the community to provide support to women who had been trafficked. At Bronzefield, inspectors spoke to staff who had a good understanding of trafficking. Staff were trained to identify women who had been trafficked.

Sex work

12. We expect women who have been involved in sex work to be supported to address their specific needs. At Eastwood Park, the prison's needs analysis showed that 29% of women reported having been sex workers and 44% of those women reported having a mental or physical health problem as a result of sex working. At Styal, 16% of women surveyed in the prison's needs analysis had been involved in sex work. We found that women who had been involved in sex work at Eastwood Park and Send had been identified, but their access to services was too limited. Support services for women who had been sex workers were good at Bronzefield, Styal and Low Newton. At Bronzefield, inspectors found that advice on physical safety and sexual health was offered. Women at Low Newton had access to an appropriate range of support and at Styal, the National Ugly Mugs scheme provided support and protection for women who had been sex workers. We found that the support available at these three prisons also focused on the release and resettlement needs of women previously involved in sex working – good post-release assistance was provided at Low Newton and women being released from Bronzefield were provided with contraception and given information about local advice groups.

Staff relationships and training

13. Between 2018-2020, inspectors continually found that relationships between staff and prisoners were positive across the women's estate. Across the nine prisons where full inspections were conducted, 82% of women who responded to our prisoner survey said that there was a member of staff they could turn to if they had a problem and 77% of women said that most staff treated them with respect.
14. Inspectors found that some staff had a basic awareness of abuse, vulnerability and victimisation but more staff needed to be trained in this area. Staff at some prisons told inspectors they felt they would also benefit from mental health training. At one prison, residential staff were due to receive additional awareness training on female genital mutilation (FGM), which was positive.
15. In addition to this basic awareness training some prison staff had received, inspectors found that many staff in women's prisons had been trained specifically in trauma-informed approaches, in order for them to consider the trauma women may have experienced in their lives and to promote trauma-responsive practice. Inspectors found that the application of these principles was reasonably effective at almost all prisons where staff had received trauma-informed training, but it could be improved at Foston Hall. At the time of our inspection, only 37% of officers working with women at Foston Hall had completed the training, and some others were not yet effectively applying this training in their work.
16. At other prisons inspected during this period, we found early signs of the positive impact of trauma-informed training for staff. Staff that inspectors spoke to at Bronzefield understood how traumatic experiences affected some women's behaviour, well-being and their offending. At Styal, we found that staff were working to promote a trauma-informed environment for women. Some women at Send had been trained to deliver the Healing Trauma course to new staff and their peers, which inspectors recognised as a model of good practice.

Accommodation on release

17. We expect that all women will have suitable, sustainable and safe accommodation arranged prior to their release and that all women wishing to relocate due to domestic abuse are assisted to do so. Inspectors found that there were many significant gaps in providing accommodation for women and despite support, too many women were released homeless or to very short-term accommodation. For example, at Eastwood Park, 42% of women had been released homeless or to temporary or emergency accommodation. Most of the prisons inspected did not accurately measure the sustainability of the accommodation women were released to (or did not measure this robustly enough), which was concerning.
18. The number of women leaving prison homeless or to short-term accommodation at Peterborough was lower than inspectors had found before the COVID-19 pandemic: 16% of women were released to no fixed address and 20% into short-term transient accommodation. However, this was still too high considering the vulnerabilities of many of those being released. Inspectors found that staff were supporting vulnerable women, such as those at risk of domestic abuse, to travel to their accommodation. Staff at Peterborough had driven women to their address or paid for a taxi and provided follow-up telephone support.

Conclusion

19. Overall, inspectors have found that support services for women were not well developed at a number of prisons. There were gaps in the provision for women and training for staff, which are outlined below. We found some examples of good practice which could be replicated across the estate to improve outcomes for women in prison who have experienced violence and abuse.
- Support services for women who have experienced violence and abuse (particularly trafficking) need to be developed so more women can access them;
 - Support services for women involved in sex work also need to be expanded at some prisons;
 - Staff working with women who have experienced violence and abuse should receive training regarding the NRM, abuse, vulnerability, victimisation and mental health, as well as trauma-informed training. Staff who have received trauma-informed training should be supported to adopt a trauma-informed approach; and
 - Accommodation outcomes should be robustly monitored in order to better determine whether housing provision on release is adequate for women who have experienced violence and abuse.

I hope that you find this information useful and should you require anything further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Charlie Taylor
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May 2021

ⁱ The independent criteria which we inspect against are outlined in our *Expectations: Criteria for assessing the treatment of and conditions for women in prisons*. Our Expectations are developed following consultation and are underpinned by relevant human rights standards. We published an updated version of our *Expectations* for those held in women's prisons, which have an increased focus on the impact of trauma on some women's life experiences, in April 2021. Our current set of *Expectations* is available here:

<https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/our-expectations/womens-prison-expectations/>

ⁱⁱ The nine prisons inspected between 2018-2020 are HMP & YOI Askham Grange; HMP & YOI Bronzefield; HMP & YOI Drake Hall; HMP & YOI Foston Hall; HMP Eastwood Park; HMP & YOI Low Newton; HMP & YOI New Hall; HMP Send; and HMP & YOI Styal. The full inspection reports are available at:

<https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/inspections/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Full inspections of prisons were suspended in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and an adapted inspection methodology was developed. HMI Prisons' conducted Scrutiny Visits (SVs) from late July 2020. SVs are short inspections that focus on how establishments are recovering from the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and include a prisoner survey. An SV was conducted at HMP & YOI Peterborough (women) in March 2021. More information regarding HMI Prisons' COVID-19 methodology is available here: <https://www.justiceinspectores.gov.uk/hmiprison/about-hmi-prison/covid-19/>