



A national plan for tackling coronavirus in prisons

Women in Prison (WIP) briefing for MPs and Peers

Women in Prison (WIP) is a national charity which provides independent, holistic, gender-specialist support to women facing multiple disadvantages, including women affected by the criminal justice system. We work in prisons, the community and 'through the gate', supporting women leaving prison. We run three Women's Centres and 'hubs' for services (in Manchester, Surrey and London), including diversion schemes for women at an early stage of involvement in the criminal justice system. Our combined services provide women with support and advocacy, relating to domestic and sexual abuse, mental health, substance misuse, debt, education, training, employment, and parenting.

Summary

This briefing is an update to [Covid-19 & the Immediate Planned Release from Prison](#) and follows the latest Government announcement of a national lockdown. This briefing also follows a dramatic increase in the number of people testing positive for coronavirus across the prison estate and the recent 51% spike in the number of coronavirus-related deaths in prison.¹

This briefing outlines the current issues facing women in prison and in the community during the pandemic and details our call **on the Government to roll out a national plan for tackling coronavirus in prisons with a focus on three priority areas:**

1. **Health and protection of life**
2. **Release and resettlement**
3. **Improving digital access**

¹ HMPPS Weekly Covid-19 data – 4th January 2021 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hmpps-weekly-covid-19-data-4-january-2021>

1. Health and protection of life

People in prison remain at an increased risk of testing positive for coronavirus due to the inability to socially distance and isolate in prison settings. Cells are often shared between two or more people with toilet facilities being located within the cell itself. Laundry and showering areas are shared. This combined with chronic understaffing within the prison system and additional staff sicknesses due to self-isolation, access to basic sanitation and health provision that is far below that available in the community², mean that prisons are incubators for the virus³. As reported in The Lancet⁴, an outbreak of Covid-19 across the prison estate could overwhelm the sparse health services available within prisons as well as placing additional demand on community health facilities that are already in crisis.

Women in prison have overall poorer health outcomes compared to the general population and are disproportionately affected by underlying health conditions. This includes health conditions relating to problematic substance use, e.g. blood borne viruses. This may result in a higher number of women in prison needing urgent intensive medical support, including transfers to outside hospitals which are difficult and resource-intensive to manage and require several members of staff per transfer.

Recommendations:

Roll out a prison-wide vaccination programme

The Government must expand the vaccine delivery plan to include prison residents and staff, due to the increased risk of testing positive for coronavirus and the high number of coronavirus deaths in prison settings. The Government must also acknowledge the increased risk to prison residents and staff by identifying them as a 'priority group', ensuring that this population receives vaccination before the Autumn 2021 goal of all adults having access to the vaccine.

Ensure all women released from prison during the pandemic are connected with their local GP surgery

Prisons must ensure all women are signed up with a GP in their local area. In cases where there is not enough time to ensure women are signed up with a GP, women should be given details of clinics that accept walk-ins. They should also be made aware that they are not required to present ID in order to access medical care.

² Nuffield Health "Locked out? Prisoners' use of hospital care" February 2020:
<https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/files/2020-02/prisoners-use-of-hospital-services-main-report.pdf>

³ The Lancet "Prisons are "in no way equipped" to deal with COVID-19" May 2020:
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30984-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30984-3/fulltext)

⁴ The Lancet "Prison and custodial settings are part of a comprehensive response to COVID-19" April 2020:
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30984-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30984-3/fulltext)

2. Release and resettlement

Since March 2020, Women in Prison have been calling on the Government to urgently reduce the numbers of women in prison through a planned programme of early release. The Ministry of Justice pledged to release up to 4,000 people from prison through the End of Custody Temporary Release (ECTR) scheme. This was set to include the release of pregnant women and mothers with babies in custody, following calls from Women in Prison, Birth Companions, INQUEST and other leading organisations. The scheme was ‘paused’ at the end of August, having released only 316 people in total from across the prison estate which includes 8 pregnant women released on compassionate grounds.⁵ Extensive assessment criteria and license conditions rendered the scheme unworkable with the majority of women eligible under ECTR not released.⁶

The changes made to prison regimes as a result of the pandemic have seen many women in prison in their cells for 23 hours a day, with limited time to shower, exercise and engage in meaningful activity. We’ve heard consistent reports of declining mental and physical health from women accessing our services and from front-line staff. Government statistics, published in October 2020, report an increase in self-harm across the women’s estate⁷. Moreover, external support services are limited within prisons due to the pandemic, which means women do not have access to the support they would usually receive. Following evidence of declining mental and physical health and medical evidence that shows people in prison as an at-risk group, due to cramped conditions and limited access to hygiene and sanitation facilities, we are calling on the Government to make a renewed commitment to early release to reduce the prison population, enabling women to safely isolate in their communities.

We know that women released from prison during the pandemic are experiencing the sharp edge of lockdown conditions. In particular, the pandemic has exacerbated issues relating to housing supply and affordability, compounded by the closures of, and additional precautions taken by housing support services, hostels, refuges and local authority housing services following Government guidelines around social distancing and staff absences. Recent data shows that over half of women leave prison homeless⁸, meaning that any future plans for early release must be made in partnership with local community-based services, like Women’s Centres,

⁵ HMPPS “COVID-19 Official Statistics” September 2020:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925232/HMPPS_COVID19_SEP20_Pub.pdf

⁶ Prisoners’ Release: Females: Written question – 58090. June 2020: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-06-10/58090>

⁷ MoJ “Safety in custody: quarterly update to June 2020” October 2020: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/930458/safety-in-custody-q2-2020.pdf

⁸ Independent Monitoring Boards “Resettlement: A survey by Independent Monitoring Boards of women being released from prison” August 2020: <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/imb-prod-storage-1ocod6bqky0vo/uploads/2020/08/IMB-Womens-estate-resettlement-report-August-2020-FINAL-.pdf>

Recommendations:

Make a renewed commitment to early release

In addition to those able to be released on Home Detention Curfew (HDC), any plans for early release should include women and prioritise people who are:

- Pregnant, or mothers and babies on prison Mother and Baby Units
- Already resettling on Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL)
- Particularly vulnerable to the virus due to age or underlying health conditions
- On remand
- Serving a sentence with six months or less remaining
- In prison having been recalled for administrative breaches

Immediate measures must also be taken within the Courts. We should significantly reduce the use of prison overall for sentencing, imposing no short sentences of less than 6 months and end the use of remand in custody. This would be in addition to not using powers of recall to prison during this crisis.

Work in collaboration with community-based services, like Women's Centres, to ensure support is in place for women released from prison during the pandemic

Any plan for early release must take account of seriously depleted community-based support for all those leaving prison. It is vital that the Government works in collaboration with the voluntary sector working at the frontline, including Women's Centres, domestic violence, housing and substance misuse organisations. This will ensure available services (predominately provided remotely due to lockdown measures) are deployed where needed for advice, support and practical help. The plan needs to include arrangements for suitable emergency housing, financial support and benefits (e.g. immediate access to Universal Credit).

Newly-created sources of emergency accommodation made available to women released from prison

Following the announcement of additional support to help rough sleepers through the pandemic⁹, we are calling on the Government to make newly-created sources of safe accommodation and housing support available to women released from prison. We welcome continued investment in the Everyone In scheme, and urge Government to publish clear guidance to ensure councils provide safe emergency accommodation to everyone at risk of homelessness.

Increasing the Prison Discharge Grant

Following the introduction of the early release scheme in early 2020, the Ministry of Justice introduced a temporary uplift of the Prison Discharge Grant, increasing the amount from £46 to £80. We are calling for this uplift to be permanently reinstated for all people leaving prison, as the grant has been fixed since 1995 and no longer covers the cost of what people need to spend money on when leaving prison. All women leaving prison should be given the discharge grant, including those on remand, those who have been recalled and those serving sentences under 15 days.

⁹ DHCLG "Extra covid protections for rough sleepers and renters" January 2021: www.gov.uk/government/news/extra-covid-protections-for-rough-sleepers-and-renters

Immediate access to Universal Credit

Women released from prison should have immediate access to Universal Credit. Applications for Universal Credit take on average 5 weeks to be processed, and applicants can request an advance payment to cover that, but this needs to be paid back. Switching this advance payment into a non-repayable grant will ensure people are not plunged into debt with future Universal Credit payments reduced to repay this advance, and will enable women leaving prison to cover the costs of their first few weeks of release. To aid this process, women should begin their Universal Credit application in the final weeks of their sentence by having free access to the recently announced DWP hotline for prison leavers.

We are also calling for maintaining the £20 Universal Credit uplift and the Local Housing Allowance rates at the 30th percentile of rents.

3. Improving digital access

To mitigate the impact of suspending in-person prison visits, the Ministry of Justice have rolled out virtual visiting facilities across the prison estate; however, digital access remains a prominent problem facing women in prison, particularly in accessing both personal and legal visits. Government guidance states that virtual visits with loved ones are limited to once monthly for 30 minutes, which falls far short of the frequency of in-person visits before the outset of the pandemic. Virtual visiting facilities are particularly inaccessible for women with small children who find it difficult to engage and bond with their parent without the ability to see them physically. Moreover, Women in Prison staff have reported a lack of available virtual visiting slots with waits being upwards of 3 weeks, leaving women with limited access to support from external agencies (which is key to supporting to release planning).

Recommendations:

A digital upgrade in prisons

The Government must invest in better digital infrastructure in prisons, and initiate a national roll-out of laptops and tablets. This would not only increase the capacity for personal and legal video calls needed during the pandemic, but in-cell technology constitutes a long-term investment that would give people greater access to education, training, mental health support, restorative services, rehabilitative programmes and resettlement support.

Ensure digital access for women leaving prison

The Government should ensure all women leaving prison are provided with a basic mobile phone and credit to enable them to stay in touch with key services, and smooth the transition into the community.

Further information

For a meeting to discuss the points raised or for further information please contact:

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