

One Small Thing's response to the Justice Committee Inquiry on the future of prison population and estate capacity

About One Small Thing

One Small Thing's vision is a justice system that can recognise, understand, and respond to trauma. Our mission is to redesign the justice system for women and their children.

We want a compassionate system that recognises the vicious cycle of trauma and disadvantage at the root of justice involvement and allows people to recover from trauma and thrive. Our core focus is on women and their children because of the additional discrimination and disadvantage they face.

How:

Redesign the way the justice system responds to women and their children in a way that can be replicated and scaled nationally.

Educate people within the justice system on the impact of trauma, and draw on our knowledge and expertise to help build capacity within organisations.

Influence politicians and policy makers to encourage culture change across the justice system and the people who work within it.

Response Summary

At One Small Thing our mission is to redesign the justice system for women and their children. We are therefore pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Justice Committee's inquiry on the future of prison population and estate capacity, highlighting the implications a rising prison population, and plans to addressing this, will have for women in the justice system.

We do not believe the Government's plans to deliver 20,000 prisons places by 2025, including 500 new places for women, are achievable or a good use of resources. Not only has it been reported that timelines and demand will not be met, we believe these plans contradict the priorities to reduce demand as described in the Female Offender Strategy. We are deeply concerned about the impact current conditions within prison are having on women, which will likely worsen as population rises, unless decisive action is taken to reduce the use of custody and invest in community alternatives.

Full Response

Is the Government's commitment to deliver 20,000 prison places by the mid-2020s achievable and sufficient to manage the projected demand for places?

1. We do not believe the Government's plan to build more prison places is achievable or sufficient even by their own projections, and investment in alternatives to custody is required as a matter of urgency. Significant delays to the project have been widely reported on in the media and by the Ministry of Justice's own admission, they will not be able to meet their proposed number of places by 2025, and even if they do, there would still be a shortfall of places by early 2025¹. Earlier this year Antonia Romeo, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Justice, acknowledged that fewer than half the 20,000 prison places would be operational by 2025². Moreover, we are concerned by the short-sightedness of the Government's prison building project, particularly the plan to include 500 additional prison places for women. This directly contradicts other current Government priorities, such as the Female Offender Strategy's aim of 'fewer women in custody'.
2. There has been a track record of over promising, and under delivering when it comes to tackling a rising prison population, and a consistent failure to meet targets. Of the 10,000 places promised by 2020, just 206 were completed³, and not a single residential women's centre of the five proposed in the Female Offender Strategy have been operationalised. Considering this, as well as increased police recruitment and longer sentences that contribute to a rising prison population⁴, the government shouldn't be surprised that their plans are not sufficient to meet demand, without a significant refocus on widening access to alternatives to custody.
3. We are concerned that the Government's focus on building new prison places, particularly the 500 new places for women, redirects resources away from efforts to reduce demand such as described in the Female Offender Strategy. As Lilly Lewis, our Women's Involvement Advisor who has lived experience of the justice system highlights,

'The idea that the government is to add 20,000 additional prison places by mid 2020s, including 500 new places for women, goes against what we know reduces crime, and repeat offending. Even though they say these will be more open prison spaces for women, the money would be better used for community-based rehabilitation. Instead of building more prison spaces the government should be focused on building safe spaces for women such as Hope Street⁵ with dedicated staff focused on trauma informed working, and where mothers and their children can stay together. Where we can get to the root cause of low level offending and support these women to

¹ <https://insidetime.org/well-run-out-of-cells-admits-moj-in-withdrawn-memo/>

² <https://insidetime.org/new-prison-places-will-not-be-built-on-time/>

³ <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Improving-the-prison-estate.pdf>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/113813/5/Prison_Population_Projections_2022_to_2027.pdf

⁵ Hope Street is One Small Thing's residential community for justice involved women and their children. From within a healing, trauma-informed, residential environment, women and children have access to a range of specialist support. By taking a positive and compassionate approach, we aim to create a blueprint for change that can be replicated across the country and achieve better outcomes for women, their children and society: <https://onesmallthing.org.uk/hopestreet>

address overlapping issues they may have. More prison places are not the answer and is further traumatising women who have already been through so much trauma.'

What are the implications of the rise in the prison population for the resources required to manage prisons safely and effectively?

4. A rise in prison population and overcrowding can have a huge effect on a prisons ability to operate safely and humanely, and can impact the running of purposeful activity and education – the latter of which has been shown to significantly reduce reoffending⁶. Compounded by the recruitment crisis in prisons, a higher prisoner to officer ratio can mean less time out of cell and sometimes conditions akin to solitary confinement, as One Small Thing's Women's Involvement Advisor highlights:

'Overcrowding also leads to less time outside of your cell as there has to be a certain ratio of officer to prisoner in order to be let out of your cell for association. For women who have a single cell this can lead to longer periods of isolation and little association with other women to talk to.'

5. Prisons are already struggling to provide adequate standards of purposeful activity and time out of cell⁷. An increasing prison population would be catastrophic and further add to the current hardship and dearth of resources for those inside, including access to physical and mental health support, substance use support and pre-release support.
6. We are particularly concerned about the impact this would have on women, many of whom present a low risk to the public and should not be in prison in the first place. A thematic review of Weekends in prison by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in March 2023, revealed that two-thirds of women were unlocked for less than two hours on weekends⁸. The implications of rising prison population are very much evident now, considering the prison system as a whole has been overcrowded in every year since 1994⁹.

'Higher prison population for women will have a devastating effect. Women are already sharing overcrowded rooms and dormitories. Whilst I was residing at one prison I stayed in a dormitory with 6 other women, this was extremely uncomfortable for me. 6 different personalities, 6 different layers of poor mental health. One toilet.' Lilly Lewis, Women's Involvement Advisor at One Small Thing

⁶ P53 <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/January-2023-Bromley-Briefings.pdf>

⁷ HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2022–23

⁸ P3 A thematic review of Weekends in prison by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons March 2023, <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2023/04/Weekends-in-prison-web-2023.pdf>

⁹ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/January-2023-Bromley-Briefings.pdf>

7. For women who on average are held 63 miles away from their communities, but often significantly further, an increase in demand for prison places can mean they are even further diverted away from their support networks. As Lilly Lewis, One Small Thing's Women's Involvement Advisor shares from her own experience in prison:

'When I was working in the reception at one prison there was a white board which detailed the number of beds to number of prisoners being held. I think that the capacity at this prison was just under 400, and prison vans would often be diverted to female prisons much further away. This would make visits from family and friends extremely difficult.'

8. The implications of a rising prison population will have far reaching effects for women caught up in the justice system – from worsening conditions, to an increased lack of access to the very resources we know to reduce reoffending such as education and work, and contact with family and friends. These implications extend beyond individual experience and have the potential to perpetuate cycles of reoffending and trauma for families, communities and society as a whole.
9. We are aware that the plans for the 500 new women's prison places includes some better equipped provision and more 'open' prison places, however, these are still attached to existing prisons. Women will still be part of these historical prison regimes when they pose no risk to the public and do not need to be incarcerated. These new 'open' spaces are no substitution for investing in the community provision that was recommended in the Female Offender Strategy, as Lilly speaks to from experience:

'I feel there is a misconception around open prison, yes you have more freedom, you would usually have a key to your own door and can move around the prison more freely. However, you are not free, and this has an added fear and pressure that if you make a tiny mistake, you may get sent back to closed prison. For women who were in open prison yet not able to leave the prison for work or ROTL (release on temporary licence), some would pressure you to bring in phones, make up, drugs, alcohol for them. Open prison is definitely the lesser of the two evils, however I still experienced harsh punishments such as I once got a '5 week lie down' meaning I could not go out, just for having a t-shirt for my daughter delivered to my place of work in the community. I felt these harsher punishments were also often directed more so towards black and minoritised women'

What is the impact of an ageing infrastructure and are Victorian prisons fit for purpose?

10. Conditions within prisons in England and Wales is a crisis unfolding, with an estimated 500 prison places being taken permanently out of action each year due to their poor condition and disrepair¹⁰. In September 2023, Charlie Taylor, the Chief Inspector of Prisons, said that *'about 14 Victorian jails were so poorly designed, overcrowded and ill-equipped that they could not provide proper accommodation for inmates'*¹¹.
11. With widespread reporting on the unsanitary and dilapidated condition of many prisons in England and Wales, there are serious questions about the prison estate's ability to uphold the safety, and dignity of those who live and work inside. We are deeply concerned about the impact this will have on women in prison, many of whom are suffering from mental ill health, and who have deep experiences of trauma – both of which can be exacerbated by the prison environment. In a 2022 inspection of HMP/ YOI Eastwood Park, Charlie Taylor describes some of the conditions inspectors witnessed on their visit:

'The cells were appalling, dilapidated and covered in graffiti, one was blood-splattered, and some had extensive scratches on the walls which reflected the degree of trauma previous residents must have experienced. No prisoner should be held in such conditions, let alone women who were acutely unwell and in great distress.' Charlie Taylor quoted in *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP/YOI Eastwood Park, 2022*¹²

12. Considering the extensive trauma many of those in prison have experienced, particularly women, settings that do not take this trauma into account and take measures to avoid retraumatizing, are not fit for purpose.

'Prison conditions for women are awful. You are locked inside a metal box 1.8 metre wide by 3 metre long, and locked away for up to 23 hours a day, damaging an already fractured mental health.' Lilly Lewis, Women's Involvement Advisor at One Small Thing

13. Although many of England and Wales's remaining Victorian prisons have been altered and retrofitted, they were designed to be unpleasant as a way to deter reoffending, with a focus on hard labour, poor conditions and solitary/cramped confinement – known as the 'separate system'. These Victorian attitudes to dealing with crime, which influenced the way prisons were designed, do not chime with current knowledge on how to reduce reoffending or attitudes on how we treat those in prison humanely and with dignity.

14. It's important to emphasize that whilst Victorian prisons have challenges in maintaining their ageing infrastructure and dilapidation, more modern

¹⁰ P3 <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2486/documents/24751/default/>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/25/one-in-10-prisons-in-england-and-wales-should-be-shut-down-watchdog-says>

¹² P3, Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP/YOI Eastwood Park, <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2023/02/Eastwood-Park-web-2022.pdf>

prisons, many of which are modelled on Victorian era designs¹³, also have the capacity to cause harm (as seen in Charlie Taylor’s description of conditions in HMP/ YOI Eastwood Park¹⁴). To address this, we must look beyond seeing prisons as an answer to crime, and explore ways to reduce demand on the system and explore new community alternatives.

15. In July 2023 One Small Thing opened Hope Street, a residential community in Hampshire supporting women in the justice system and their children. Hope Street offers a community alternative for women, designed to allow children to remain with their mothers in a safe home environment with tailored and ongoing support. Hope Street was designed through consultation sessions with women with lived experience of the justice system to ensure that the physical space does not retraumatise, but is conducive to healing and recovery:

Having been in the consultations for the design of Hope Street, seeing the final building I felt proud to have played a small part in an amazing project creating a safe, secure home and the realistic hope of recovery for vulnerable women and their children. I noticed a homely, not clinical environment with a strong and committed staff team focused on delivering trauma-informed care, unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. I felt heard, seen and understood by those I was surrounded by in the consultation sessions, and felt really lucky to be a part of it (Consultation participant).

We are launching new briefings on the learning from our design and build of Hope Street on 30th November which we can share with the Committee.

Response author: Sarah Smith, Policy and Communications Officer. With contributions from Lilly Lewis, Women’s Involvement Advisor.

¹³ P14, The Long Shadow of the Victorian Prison, by Professor Dominique Moran, Professor Yvonne Jewkes, Dr. Eleanor March, Professor Matt Houlbrook, Prison Service Journal September 2021

¹⁴ Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP/YOI Eastwood Park, <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2023/02/Eastwood-Park-web-2022.pdf>