Written evidence submitted by Ruth Doubleday (PPW0024)

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Section A: Introduction

1. I am currently completing my PhD in Criminology and Criminal Justice at Cardiff University, Wales. Throughout the past seven years I have spent a considerable amount of time conducting research in HMP Cardiff, first for my BSc and MSc Theses, and presently for my PhD Thesis.

2. During this time, I have submitted reports to NOMS and to Cardiff prison Senior Management Team (SMT) which have been designed to provide recommendations for prison practice based upon robust evidence. These include: What does a ‘decent prison’ look like? The Practical Implications of the Decency Agenda in HMP Cardiff (Doubleday 2013) and Enhancing the utility of the Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL) in HMP Cardiff (Doubleday 2015). Within these reports, and indeed during all my research to date, I have considered imprisonment specifically within the Welsh context.

3. I am therefore uniquely qualified to contribute to the present review by the Welsh Affairs Committee into Prison Provision in Wales. I will discuss the benefits of housing prisoners close to home. To do so, I will draw upon empirical data that I have gathered during my time spent with prison staff and prisoners in one of Wales’ most well-established public prisons.

4. In brief, my research in Cardiff prison has involved long-term engagement with the prison regime. In 2015 and 2016 I conducted 80 individual and group interviews with staff and prisoners, alongside making detailed observatory notes about the nature of prison life. I completed a thorough review of relevant academic literature and policy documents. I analysed establishment statistics on safety and violence; and reviewed HMP Cardiff’s Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL) report, Staff Quality of Life (SQL) report, and Her Majesty’s Chief Inspectorate of Prisons (HMCIP) report. It is upon this data that the present submission is based.

5. HMP Cardiff is a Category B Local Prison holding around 800 adult males. The prisoner population within Cardiff is highly transient, with many prisoners serving sentences of less than 12 months. Evidence has shown that this prisoner group suffers from the highest rates of reoffending (see, for example, Ministry of Justice 2015). This report will outline the link between prisoner placement and reoffending. It may therefore be particularly useful for the Committee to understand the experiences of those prisoners serving short-term sentences in Cardiff.

6. The aim of this submission is to provide evidence to the Committee about the importance of housing prisoners closer to their communities. As acknowledged by the Committee Chair David TC Davies when launching this inquiry: “Evidence suggests that the best outcomes are achieved when prisoners are housed nearer their communities.” The present submission will provide evidence to strengthen this argument by demonstrating that housing prisoners closer to home may have a positive impact on both pre- and post-release outcomes for Welsh prisoners.

7. By housing prisoners closer to their local communities, the Ministry of Justice is facilitating the maintenance of family ties. On a practical level, it may be easier for prisoners’ families to attend visits
when their family members remain local because of the reduction in travel time and monetary costs.
Family contact is linked to reduced reoffending. It can also reduce prisoner distress, increase prison stability, and strengthen engagement with constructive activities.

Section B: Housing Prisoners Closer to their Communities: Pre-Release Outcomes

8. One of the most difficult aspects of imprisonment is a lack of contact with family. The majority of prisoners consulted during my research cited ‘missing family’ as their greatest source of distress whilst serving a prison sentence. Prison officers working in Cardiff also recognised this as one of the most painful aspects of life inside. As outlined by one prisoner in HMP Cardiff:

“[The] hardest thing about being in prison...[is]...not being around my kids. All you get then is through a letter, but then you’re not there to see it...it’s definitely not being around my family...you were there when they get up, and there when they go to bed, and all of a sudden you’re not” (Prisoner, HMP Cardiff).

9. Facilitating family contact may therefore contribute to reducing prisoner self-harm and improving well-being. For many prisoners, receiving a visit from family is one of the most positive aspects of life inside. By providing Welsh families with easier access to their loved ones, individual prisoners may feel more content and the Prison System will actively be reducing further suffering beyond prisoners’ loss of liberty.

10. It is within the interests of the prison system to consider prisoner welfare in relation to prison order. The inquiry by Lord Justice Woolf (1991) into the 1990 prison disturbances revealed that the treatment of prisoners can affect their likelihood of accepting or rejecting the conditions of their imprisonment (Sparks and Bottoms 1995). Safety and order are enhanced when prisoners are afforded ‘justice’ in the form of adequate material conditions as well as respectful treatment by staff: “The achievement of justice will itself enhance security and control” (Wool 1991: para 14.437). If prisoners feel that the establishment is actively trying to respect their right to family contact, it may help to forge positive staff-prisoner relationships and encourage compliance with the prison regime.

11. Prisoner compliance is also hinged upon finding the right sorts of relationships between staff and prisoners. The majority of staff working in HMP Cardiff are from the surrounding area, as are the majority of prisoners housed in the jail. This mutual local connection appears to breed respectful relationships which encourage prisoner compliance and make for a better working environment for staff. As outlined by one member of staff in Cardiff prison:

“I think prisoners here take ownership of their jail in Wales, and I think, well now if they make a mess of it there’s a good chance they’ll end up in Bristol of farther afield, they don’t want to be in England...I think if other prisons around the country had a local prison, with prisoners from the local area, there would be a lot less trouble” (Prison Officer, HMP Cardiff).

12. The placement of prisoners may even influence levels of engagement with constructive activity in prison. The prison experience itself can work to either discourage or reinforce deviancy (Doubleday 2013). Supporting change does not begin at the point of release. Rather, the prison environment itself may foster an ethos which encourages desistance. Prisoners and staff in HMP Cardiff suggested that there was a reluctance to offer workshop placements to prisoners that may be transferred to another
establishment. If individual prisoners are offered more stability in a prison close to their local communities, the proportion of prisoners in work and activities could be increased.

13. Prison visits should also be considered in relation to the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme. The IEP aims to encourage prisoners to “earn additional privileges through demonstrating responsible behaviour and participation in work or other constructive activity.” (PSI 30/2013: 3). If the likelihood of a prisoner receiving visits is hindered due to being housed too far away from home, this could greatly undermine the efficacy of the IEP scheme.

14. In terms of enhancing pre-release outcomes for prisoners, the careful placement of prisoners may help to maintain family contact, which then improves life inside at the individual and institutional levels.

Section C: Housing Prisoners Closer to their Communities: Post-Release Outcomes

15. Maintaining family contact may also improve life after prison. In 2017 the Ministry of Justice commissioned a review into the importance of maintaining prisoner family ties (Farmer 2017). In the resulting report, Lord Farmer stated that “there is an unacceptable inconsistency of respect for the role families can play in boosting rehabilitation and assisting in resettlement across the prison estate.” (Farmer 2017: 4). Prioritising the housing of Welsh prisoners closer to local communities would be a clear step towards addressing this inconsistency in Wales.

16. It has repeatedly been shown that receiving visits whilst in prison can reduce the likelihood of reoffending (see, for example, Loucks 2005; Farrall 2004). Indeed, receiving visits from a partner or family member has been found to reduce the odds of reoffending by 39% (May et al 2008, cited in Farmer 2017: 7).

17. Fatherhood has also been positively associated with desistance from crime (Moloney 2009; Helyar-Caldwell 2012; HMIP 2016). Family contact may also play a role in reducing inter-generational offending (Farmer 2017). As summarised by McNeill et al (2012: 9): “Desistance can only be understood within the context of human relationships; not just relationships between workers and offenders (though these are important) but also between offenders and those who matter to them”.

18. Increased contact with family can clearly have a great impact upon post-release outcomes for prisoners. Through housing prisoners closer to their communities, Welsh families could more readily attend visits. This submission therefore suggests that unless there are exceptional safety and security concerns, Welsh prisoners should be housed in Wales and as close to their local communities as possible.

19. It is important to note that HMP Berwyn was cited in the Farmer Report as an example of good practice: “Encouragingly, new-build HMP Berwyn has been keen to get family work right from the outset (not least in order to mitigate the long distance many men will be away from home)” (Farmer 2017: 19). The positive work that is clearly already occurring in Wales may be further strengthened by the conscious placement of Welsh prisoners locally.
Section D: Prison Provision in Wales: Other Considerations

20. Any proposed plans for new prisons in Wales should carefully consider the available evidence on the effects of prison size. Smaller prisons often boast better outcomes for staff and prisoners (Liebling 2008). Local, well-established prisons such as HMP Cardiff can offer a great deal in terms of officer experience and expertise, as noted by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate in 2013 (HMCIP 2013: 6). Cardiff prison specifically also boasts good links with transport, housing and Probation services.

21. Staffing levels must also play a prominent role in all decision-making about Welsh prisons. Since officer numbers were reduced with the introduction of New Ways of Working in 2013, prisoner self-harm has risen sharply. In 2012 there were just over 23,000 incidents of self-harm in prisons in England and Wales. By 2016 this almost doubled to over 40,000 incidents across the Estate (Ministry of Justice 2017). Staff in Cardiff prison have spoken candidly to me about feelings of ‘loss of control’ and even ‘fear’ when the ratio of staff to prisoners was halved in 2013, changing from an average of 1 officer to 30 prisoners, to a ratio of 1 to 15 abruptly. The effects of this were also felt acutely by prisoners, as evidenced in the 2014 MQPL survey where 63% of respondents agreed that Cardiff prison suffered from too few staff – more so than in 2011 (Doubleday 2015: 3). Through recruitment drives and changes to the Core Day, Cardiff prison and other establishments are working to rectify the damaging effects of these staff cuts. It is hoped that such a situation may be avoided when planning new prisons in Wales in the future.

22. A case has been put forth in this submission for the placement of Welsh prisoners in Welsh prisons. Accordingly, English prisoners should also be placed close to their local communities in England. There is a concern that the building of a large new prison in Port Talbot may create an unnecessary surplus of prison spaces in Wales which could result in the mass placement of English prisoners in South Wales (Saville Roberts 2017). For the reasons outlined above, housing English prisoners far from home could likely result in worsened outcomes for these individuals pre- and post-release.

23. Offenders should be diverted away from the Prison System where possible. It has repeatedly been found that re-offending rates are higher amongst offenders serving Custodial Sentences in comparison to those serving non-Custodial sentences such as suspended sentence orders and community orders (Ministry of Justice 2015). Building new prisons in Wales should be pursued with the aim of providing better material conditions and better outcomes for prisoners. New prisons should not be created simply to enable the housing of more offenders in more jails, or to provide a temporary solution to overcrowding in English prisons.

Section E: Conclusion

24. This submission has provided further evidence for the need to house prisoners closer to their communities to improve the lives of offenders both within prison and on release. Enabling prison visits helps to promote a stable prison environment by strengthening the IEP scheme, improving engagement with constructive activity, improving staff-prisoner relationships, helping to maintain order, and reducing prisoner distress. Family contact has also been proven to increase offenders’ motivation to desist from crime, reduce inter-generational offending, and reduce recidivism.

25. Housing all prisoners close to their local communities may therefore be a significant step towards facilitating family contact, and therefore improving the outcomes of prisoners in Wales.
26. Plans for building new prisons in Wales must balance prison size and staffing levels with efficiency. Better outcomes for prisoners and better working conditions for staff are more likely to be achieved in smaller establishments tied to local communities with a high ratio of staff to prisoners.

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References


PSI 30/2013. *Incentives and Earned Privileges* [Online]. Available at: https://www.justice.gov.uk/offenders/psis/prison-service-instructions-2013

