



NORTHERN
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PRISON SERVICE URGED TO RECONSIDER PLANS TO TRANSFER WOMEN PRISONERS

The Human Rights Commission today urged the Prison Service to abandon its plans to transfer women prisoners from Mourne House in Maghaberry Prison to Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre. The Commission recommends that the Prison Service reconsiders its decision and convenes a meeting of all interested parties to determine the long-term future of custody for women in Northern Ireland. The Commission's grave concerns about the move are detailed in a research report on the transfer published today.

Following its 2002 visit to Maghaberry, the Prison Inspectorate, in a highly critical report, made many recommendations concerning women and girls in custody in Northern Ireland. The Human Rights Commission's more recent research has found that, far from implementing the Inspectorate's recommendations, the regime at Mourne House has been allowed to deteriorate still further, with all efforts channelled into the planned transfer.

One of the report's authors, Professor Phil Scraton of the Queen's University of Belfast, commented:

“No convincing case has been made for the transfer of women from Mourne House to Hydebank Wood. The Northern Ireland Prison Service has failed to provide the necessary safeguards for women prisoners in a male prison in the Mourne House context and has not demonstrated that it can meet them at Hydebank. While a reduction in security levels for women prisoners in Northern Ireland is long overdue, the designated house is adjacent to a house accommodating young men. There are profound implications in this decision for the women and girls and also for the boys and young men. We anticipate that women will face intimidation and harassment in this context.”

Chief Commissioner, Brice Dickson stated that:

“Academic research and international standards recognise that women’s experiences in prison are significantly different from those of men. It is therefore expected that regimes for women should be distinctive and discrete. The facilities being prepared for women in Hydebank do not meet these standards. We understand that not only will the female unit be situated in physical proximity to the male units but there will be shared visiting facilities and no separate health care centre for women. International standards and the Prisons Inspectorate’s expectations will not be complied with in this situation.”

The co-author of the report, Dr Linda Moore (Investigation Worker for the Commission), said:

“One of the main anxieties for the women prisoners we spoke to was that they are moving from cells with in-cell sanitation to smaller cells with no such facilities. As one woman told us, “It’s awful. We’re used to having our own screened toilet and washbasin. Now we’re having them taken away”. The Commission shares their concerns – it is totally inappropriate in the 21st century to build a women’s unit with only communal ablutions.”

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. The full title of the report released today is *Report on the Transfer of Women from the Mourne House Unit, Maghaberry Prison to Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Unit*. It will be available on the Commission’s website at www.nihrc.org.
2. The report authors are: Professor Phil Scraton, Professor of Criminology, Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Queen’s University of Belfast and Dr Linda Moore, Investigations Worker, Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Professor Scraton has written widely on imprisonment and punishment.
3. At Mourne House, Maghaberry, women are housed in a “small self-contained unit, which is discrete accommodation housing up to 49 prisoners and is separate from Maghaberry male prison”. Maghaberry Prison is 20 miles from Belfast City Centre (source: Northern Ireland Prison Service Equality Impact Assessment consultation document). In 2003 women made up just 1% of the total prison population in Northern Ireland.

4. Women will soon be transferred from Maghaberry to Ash House, a unit in the Hydebank Young Offenders Centre, which up to now has been a YOC for young male prisoners, four miles from Belfast City Centre.
5. The report's authors recently met the Director General of the Prison Service to share their concerns about the proposed transfer.
6. For further information, please contact Dr Linda Moore on 07818 008442 (mbl).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I'll be honest with you, if this move takes place I don't know how I'll survive because I'm absolutely no good with confrontation. You might think I'm assertive ... It's got that way that you don't voice anything and I can't see how I could handle the things we'll face with the move. (Woman prisoner in Mourne House)

It took me [a long time] to settle here ... now I'm to be uprooted. How long will it take me to settle there? I'm really used to being here ... it's just not fair and they are taking us back in time. Surely if they're going to move us they should be taking us ahead in time, improving things instead of taking things away. *(Woman prisoner in Mourne House)*

1. This report arises out of independent research carried out on behalf of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission into the treatment of women and girls in custody.
2. On 24 April 2004 the Northern Ireland Prison Service announced its decision to re-locate female prisoners (including immigration detainees) from Mourne House,¹ Maghaberry to Ash House a unit within Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre Belfast.²
3. This transfer is expected to happen before the end of June 2004.
4. The issue of this proposed transfer of women and girl prisoners has formed part of the research and, in the circumstances, it is considered appropriate that a separate report on this be submitted. The full research report will be submitted in July 2004.

¹ Male immigration detainees will be moved to the 'working out centre' at HMP Belfast, Crumlin Road.

² Maghaberry Prison is situated 20 miles from Belfast and is a high security prison housing a wide range of adult male and female prisoners. Hydebank Wood currently detains young male prisoners. At Mourne House women are housed in "a small self-contained unit, which is discrete accommodation housing up to 49 prisoners and is separate from Maghaberry male prison" (Northern Ireland Prison Service, EQIA p12). In 2003 women made up just 1% of the total prison population in Northern Ireland.

5. This report outlines the relevant human rights standards on the treatment of women in prison; summarises the context of the proposed move; outlines the views of key players as expressed to the researchers and makes conclusions on the proposed transfer.
6. International human rights principles and the Prisons Inspectorate standards state that women prisoners should preferably be held in female-only establishments. Where a mixed-gender location cannot be avoided certain safeguards must be met including complete physical separation, separate management, health, education, visiting and transport.
7. In its most recent inspection of Maghaberry in 2002 the Prisons Inspectorate recommended that Mourne House should be declared a discrete female facility; the prison service should draw up a policy and strategic plan for the treatment of women in custody for delivery in Mourne House; all staff and managers should receive specific training on dealing with women in custody, security levels in Mourne House should be reduced and the discrete healthcare facility for women on the site should be reopened.³ Since that inspection, however, both the regime and facilities for women in Mourne House have been allowed to deteriorate to the detriment of the women imprisoned there.
8. In deciding to transfer women and girl prisoners to Hydebank Wood little consideration appears to have been given to the central issues of concern raised by the Inspectorate and its recommendations.
9. Women are being moved from a female unit in a high security male establishment to a female unit in a lower security male young offenders centre. The problems associated with holding women in male establishments have not been adequately addressed.
10. In contradiction to the Inspectorate's recommendations for the treatment of women: there will not be full physical separation in Hydebank; there will not be autonomous management for the women's unit; there is no separate health care facility for women; there will be mixed gender visits and kitchen duty; the cells are smaller; there is no in-cell sanitation ⁴(which women in Mourne House currently have); staff have not been effectively trained in dealing with the needs of women; there has been no full needs assessment of the women currently held in Maghaberry.
11. The main concern voiced by all women prisoners was that they would have to live in a predominantly male environment where core facilities would be shared.

³ HMIP Mourne House Inspection, paras MH.06, MH.07, MH.09, MH.10 and MH.11.

⁴ The installation of in-cell sanitation was one of the main recommendations of the Woolf report, published in 1991, after the Strangeways riots. Yet, the Northern Ireland Prison Service is electing to move women prisoners from cells with in-cell sanitation to cells with no such amenities.

Some women were very afraid that they would not be able to cope with the transfer.

12. In conclusion, while the research will demonstrate the unacceptability of the regime at Mourne House, the report recommends that the Northern Ireland Prison Service abandon the move to Hydebank and consult more widely on the future of women in prison in Northern Ireland.
13. The speed with which the transfer is scheduled to take place raises further concern. The first months of the transfer will be traumatic for women yet the facilities essential for their care will not be in place.

Ends