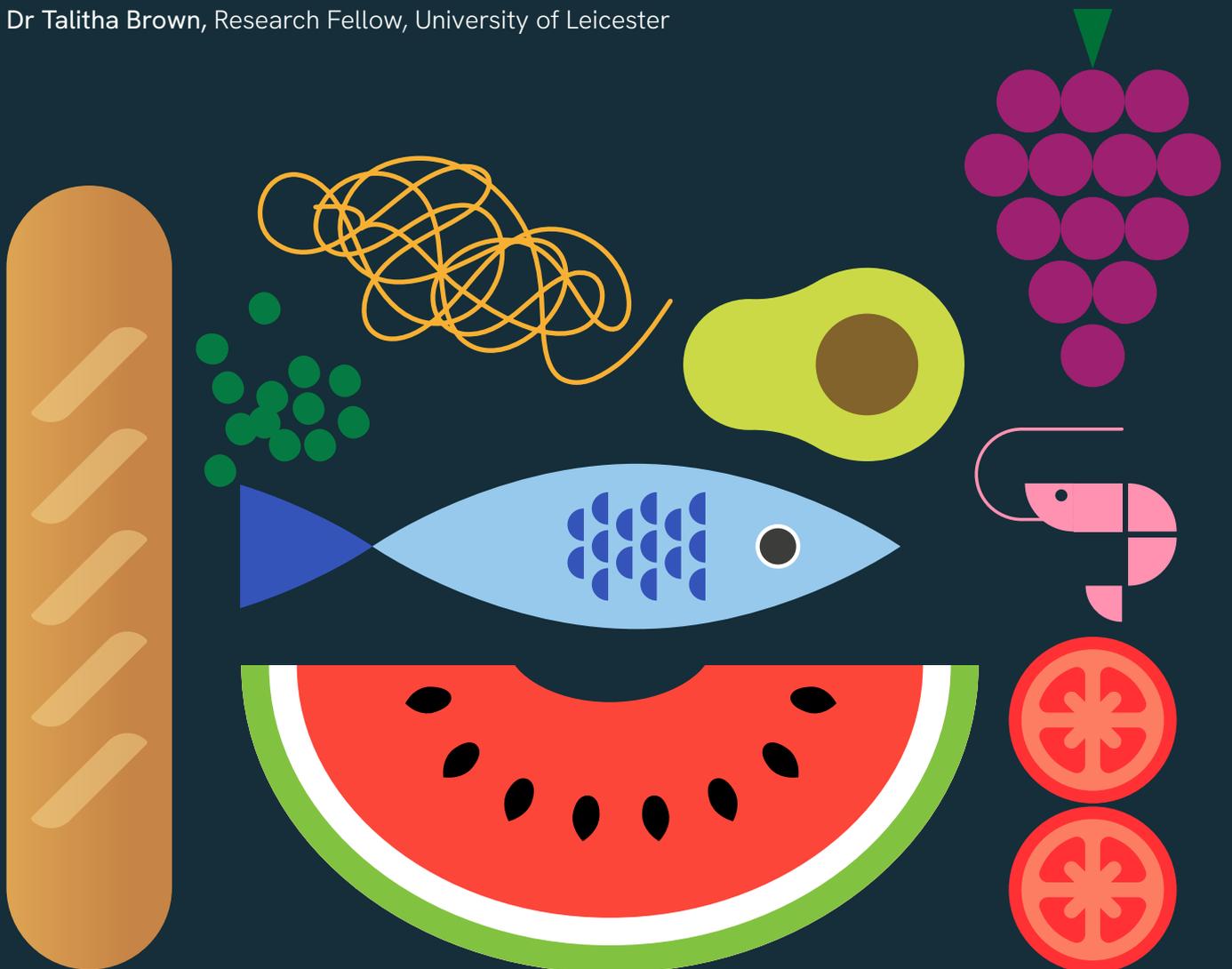


New approaches to women-centred food policy and practice in prison

A toolkit for women's prisons

Dr Maria Adams, Associate Professor of Criminology, University of Surrey
Professor Jon Garland, Professor of Criminology, University of Surrey
Professor Vicki Harman, Professor of Sociology, University of Reading
Professor Daniel McCarthy, Professor of Criminology, University of Surrey
Dr Erin Power, Lecturer in Criminology, Liverpool John Moores University
Dr Talitha Brown, Research Fellow, University of Leicester



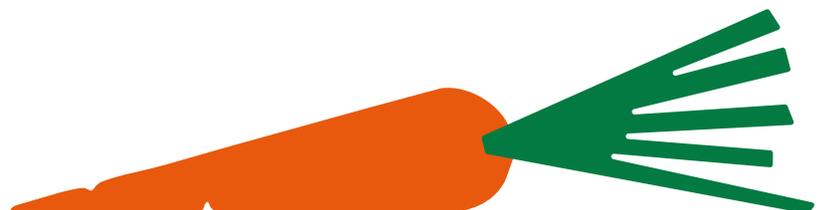
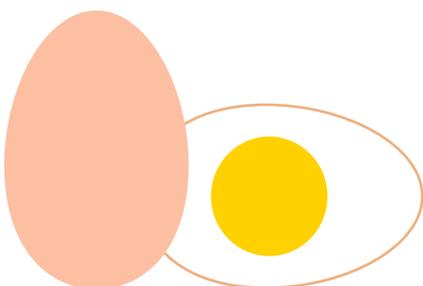
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1. About this Toolkit

1.1 What is the toolkit?

This toolkit is designed for prison governors and staff to improve the quality of food. It will help those involved in the preparation and production of food in women's prisons to reflect on existing practices and to identify ways forward to improve the relationship between women and food in prison. The material in the toolkit is drawn from ESRC- and British Academy/Leverhulme-funded qualitative studies that focused on the role of food in women's prisons. It has been devised in partnership with His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and charitable organisations including Women in Prison, Food Behind Bars, Food Matters and PACT. This toolkit has five sections:

1. **Diversity** This investigates the opportunities and challenges centred around food and women's identities, including factors such as gender, race, age and social class.
2. **Governance** This examines the structural processes that have governed the role of food and how these are experienced by women in prison.
3. **Health and Well-being** This explores the factors that contribute to staying healthy in prison and the promotion of well-being in relation to cooking and eating in prison.
4. **Access and Affordability** This investigates the factors relating to key challenges that are posed in terms of access to food. This part will explore the economic and social inequalities that are navigated around food in prison.
5. **Family Contact** This explores the role of food in prison visiting rooms.

Definition of quality food

The sections that follow will contribute to improving the quality of food in women's prisons. The definition of quality is connected to the idea that food is an integral part of prison life. It contributes to those in prison's mental, physical, emotional and social well-being. Therefore, it is important to ensure women in prison have a quality diet that accommodates social, emotional, cultural and nutritional elements.

How to use this toolkit

- Read the voices from the women to gain a sense of their diverse perspectives on prison food
- Digest the recommendations at the end of each section
- Go to pp. 22-23 for summaries of those recommendations
- Read the charter on p. 31
- Monitor your prison's progress using the traffic light system on pp. 32-33
- Check out the templates and discuss how they could be used in the context of your prison

You can find other resources from this project via:

[Doing Porridge – Understanding women's experiences of food in prison](#)

1.2 Methodology

The findings that inform this toolkit have come from a two-year qualitative study that used a range of methods including observations, focus groups, diaries, art workshops and semi-structured interviews. We captured the views of 108 women across these multiple methods which included interviews with 80 women. Women make up 5% of the prison population in England and Wales, totalling over 3,000 people held in women's prisons (House of Commons, 2023). National figures highlight that approximately 83% of serving women are White, and in comparison, our sample included 67% white and 33%¹ minority women.

Two thirds of our sample were aged over 35 which largely mirrors national trends (Ministry of Justice, 2022). The women were serving a variety of sentence lengths ranging from two years up to life. Our coverage of four women's prisons comprises 33% of all women's prisons in England and Wales (n=12), making it one of the largest studies undertaken of women's imprisonment, and food specifically. We also recruited and interviewed 10 staff members including governors, catering managers, physical education practitioners, dietician and uniformed staff. As a part of an extension to this study that focused specifically on prison visiting rooms, we interviewed an additional sample of 2 members of staff, 9 women and 9 family members including mothers, fathers and other extended family members of women in prison.

1.3 Diversity

The need to cater for diverse ethnic and cultural needs was one of the key issues raised by the women in prison who participated in this study. Their concerns centred around how prison managers understood these issues and then provided menus that recognised the cultural, religious and ethnic identities of the women in prison. Many women noted a lack of awareness among prison staff and managers of the significance of the cultural meanings attached to food, which often meant that they felt that their own needs were not catered for. For some women, this meant that the food associated with their own national or ethnic background, such as Irish Travellers or those from Eastern Europe, was rarely, if ever, provided for them. For others, such as those from Black British, Caribbean or African backgrounds, these needs were recognised and addressed but often only during Black History Month, which occurs annually in October. For the rest of the year, they considered their cultural needs as not being listened to, a source of frustration for many.

Other women mentioned that their suggestions for diversifying menus were either ignored by prison managers or that they felt that they were misunderstood or didn't have a voice at all. Some of those in prisons where self-catering was available mentioned the importance of women being able to cook their own food that reflected their religious, cultural or ethnic needs, and that the food that they prepared in this context was appreciated by others, too.

Notwithstanding the issues detailed above, some women did have more positive views on how things had changed for the better over their time within the prison system.

1. 6% missing (5 women not disclosing their ethnic identity).

1.31 Voices from the women

Understanding and awareness of diverse needs

[They] do a Chinese themed week or something and there may be something a little bit different but it's always the same processed chicken.

(Eva)

We had a Hindu festival last week, so they gave out different desserts and stuff like that. It depends what it is, Easter is coming now, so we'll obviously do an Easter meal, we have a Sikh festival, ... so obviously we'll do some Asian food but it's nice because we get to actually cook it ourselves. We had a Jamaican day, we have got a Jamaican lady in here, she cooked all the food and then we did, I think she's Chinese, I'm not quite sure but she cooked all the egg fried rice and everything, for the Chinese New Year.

(Daljinder)

The girls that have been to the equality, the BAME focus group and the black girls are saying they get Black History Month once a year but they're saying what about the rest of the year. They said can't they have like one black dish once a month instead of cramming it all in one month and the rest of the year they don't get it.

They don't really know about things like that, Diwali and Eid and Black History Month. There was nothing for Black History Month.

(Faith)

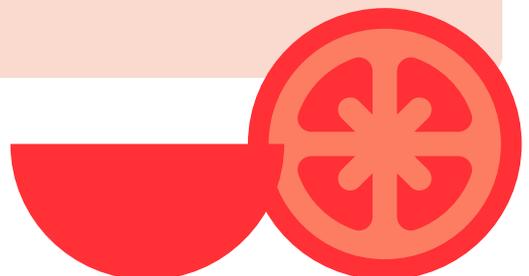
They don't cater for different cultures as much. We have a Hungarian stew but none of the Traveller food is on the menu, none of the Spanish food is on the menu. There is very few Italian food on the menu.

I've just started my eleventh year, so I haven't even had my food at all, like Polish food. That has never popped out on the menu. Or any Polish dish or any Hungarian dish. Any dish from Eastern Europe or from Europe.

(Faith)

There's a lot of people that could actually cook meals down there that don't get the opportunity to cook. There's different people from different countries, so we could have different meals on the menu that we normally don't have. But nobody asks them so if everybody could put in input, like "What can you make?" "I can make a little portion and let everyone try it." You said that to the Irish girls only then, he [the catering manager] should say it to everybody, like have a meeting once a week. "Right, is there anything you guys want to try to cook?" And you could say "Okay, right, make me a little portion for myself." He could try.

(Aaina)



Positive stories of the catering for diverse dietary needs

And that was amazing, absolutely amazing. The food tech guys done all the Eid food. And it's not very diverse up there, you know, it's up in the North East. There was one Asian woman in the jail and three black people, that's it.

(Courtney)

She wasn't eating because we weren't getting Halal but now she's got Halal and it's a fridge now just for Halal food of different varieties. And we've got her own cooker, air fryer, do you know what I mean, her own frying pan so we made sure you know. So even at Christmas we are making sure we've got her Halal food so she can be involved, do you know what I mean. It's nice isn't it.

(Audrey)

That's changed a lot, and a lot of traditional cooking has changed a lot. So, when I first came to prison there was, like your Sunday roast, a weekend fried breakfast, but I've found it's changed now so they take into consideration the ethnic people's tastes more, so it's more varied from all around the world, not so much English food, you know, which is nice.

(Kris)

Cooking and agency

Yes, I'll say I'm a good cook, definitely. Grew up, had to learn to cook, that was part of the Caribbean family, you have to learn to cook and it's always a good thing in the end so yes, I enjoy cooking, baking, yes, because I like eating.

(Monica)

I think it's amazing, they have girls in the kitchen who can cook, so every Friday, this girl does spicy fish and then it's always curry sauce, chips, beans but that's every Friday, without a doubt and then Saturday is a fry-up. But I did work in the kitchen, it was good and they did let the prisoners chip in, if they could cook, they let them do a dish and bake cakes and everything.

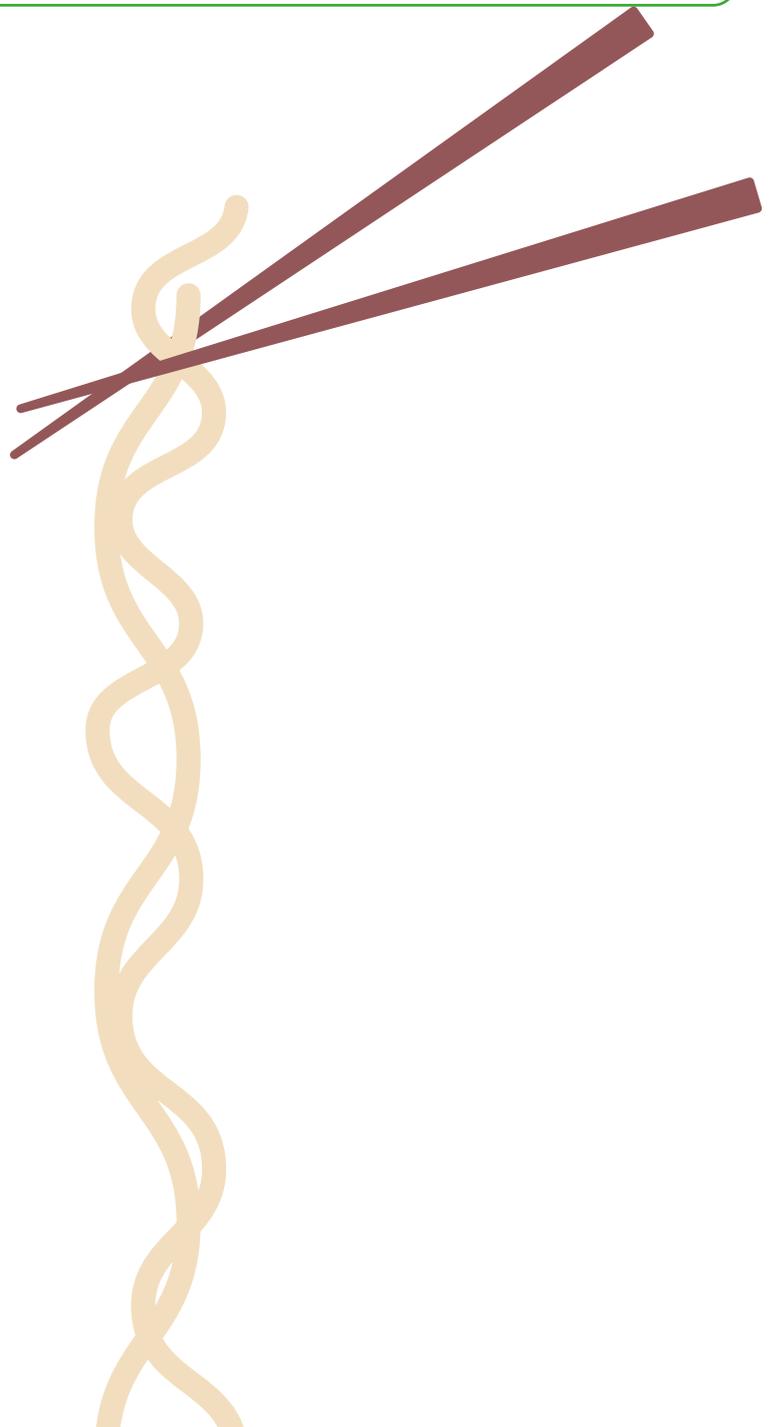
(Zoe)

Let me see what they've got and then I can incorporate what I know and what I've been taught with what they have and being able to provide for the women and give them some of, you know, the food that will give them life, give them energy so to speak.

(Daljinder)

1.32 Recommendations

- The creation of a wider range of menu choices that reflect women's diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
- The provision of this wider menu choice all-year round.
- The instigation of a mechanism for collating women's ideas for wider diversity in the menu.
- The full involvement of the women in the celebration of significant religious/ethnic/cultural events and landmarks.
- The creation of the role of food diversity reps that can ensure that the voices of women are heard via the instigation of food diversity meetings.



1.4 Governance

This section will identify the way food is governed by the infrastructure that is formed by prison rules and regulations. These regulations are based around prison times, employment, education, prison transfers and the incentive scheme that influence food practices. Many of the women spoke about whether the distribution of food influenced perceptions of 'fairness and humanity', and in this, we gained a detailed understanding of feelings of justice and injustice about the quality of food. Consequently, this altered the way women experienced food, and how women relate to other women, which created examples of self-governance such as social hierarchies and attempts to reproduce areas of home life.

In this toolkit, we have put together two sections that are focused on the area of governance including: 1) Governing at a distance; and 2) Food as a personal value.

1.41 Governing at a distance

In our study, most women spoke about food in connection to the rules and regulations of prisons, including the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) Scheme, prison food times and opportunities to access cooking facilities. Women spoke about the disconnect between eating practices outside and in prison, including their lack of autonomy in cooking for themselves. Women spoke in detail about the complexities faced about where and when they ate and identified unsettling feelings of eating too early or being left hungry for long periods between meals. Also, women spoke about the relationship between food and the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme, which led to different food experiences depending on their IEP status. The IEP scheme limits how much women can spend on canteen or the levels of access to cooking equipment. Many of the women spoke about the negative outcomes of the IEP policy, in which food has potential to be used as an additional punishment. In light of this, some spoke about how food waste has been a critical topic in prisons, but that a good deed, such as giving people extra food in order to reduce food waste was perceived as a rule breaking and has caused individuals to be sanctioned. The Prison Service has competing responses to this issue, namely the prevention of bullying between those imprisoned. This involves individual officers deciding whether food sharing constitutes a genuine welfare practice or constitutes bullying behaviour. In reality, there is likely to be some variations in the perceptions and enforcement of these situations.

Another aspect of the governance of food is the perceptions of women about the fairness and respect in terms the quality and the choice around food. This was framed around the supply of food, as some felt that the food was an extra form of punishment. These kinds of perceptions, even if not always commonplace nor universal across all prisons, still have capacity to undermine legitimacy. These perceptions of legitimacy - attitudes based on the broad understandings of respect, dignity and fair treatment during the sentence - can have broader consequences for women's compliance with the regime and potentially the quality of relationships which may occur between the women and staff (encompassing prison officer, as well as other staff within the prison).

1.42 Food as a personal value

Many women described the food as low quality or poor, however these perceptions did vary across prisons. There were some instances where women identified good practices where women were appreciative of the effort made by prison staff or being able to cook for themselves, where self-catering provisions were seen as a positive example. Women spoke about having the personal freedom to cook for themselves and others, which contributed to their empowerment and creativity of cooking. Over half of the participants described broadly negative experiences of food compared to those whose experience was either mixed or positive. This included references to food which was regarded as 'inhumane', 'uncooked' or 'uncleaned', in which women felt they were treated as 'less than'. This was also compounded with other effects of incarceration including loss of family ties or during the pandemic, lengthier periods than usual spent in cells. Many women felt devalued and spoke about the lack of transparency in terms of the distribution of food, ingredients of dishes and the consumption of food waste.

1.43 Voices from the women

Mealtimes in prison vs on the outside

The issue with {Prison} was because it was 23 hour bang up and I hadn't understood canteens, that once we had dinner, which was literally like 3.30, I would spend the evening really hungry. So I started to order stuff just to fill that gap, like cream crackers, noodles, chocolate. I used to have boxes of cereal, I don't buy cereal much here, but I used to buy boxes of coco-pops and cornflakes literally just to eat in the evening because I was so hungry. Because 3.30 is too early. You're having your lunch at 11.30, your dinner at 3.30 and then you've got to wait until 7.30 the next morning for food. It's not normal. So the one big difference is, on the outside I never ate to a set schedule. I ate when I was hungry, so if I didn't want breakfast at eight, I'd have breakfast at 10. If I wanted lunch at 12, I'd have lunch at 12, or I'd have it at two. So it was more like my appetite dictated how I ate and I wasn't overweight on the outside.

(Kara)

IEP status

Now if you're enhanced in here, you're able to order food through Bistro. Bistro is the kitchen area in here that provides food for the staff when they're on their breaks. And it's pretty much upscale compared to the normal kitchen standard. So, we're able to order real chicken breast with a quantity limited to two but it's still more than good enough. You were able to order real chicken breast, your own vegetables, fruits, salads stuff and your baking products. So, your icing sugar, your cocoa powder, anything to do with that. Now it did used to be a bit prolonged than that.

(Tanisha)

Food waste

Yes, they waste a lot of the food, that's another thing as well, in the previous jail I've just come from, if there is food left on the servery, we ask people if they want it. Here, I'm a servery worker, I've literally been given a negative IEP for giving people extra food, but it all goes in the bin. But yet, when the officers want to eat, they can eat, do you get it, they will eat, if there some left, they might take some but then we're not allowed to give it to the inmates. I don't understand, it all goes in the bin, so it's just mad.

(Kiera)



Personal value

I said anybody there on long-term will get cancer because of the cheap food [...] They're in it to make profit. They're not in it to make you fit and healthy, are they?

(Adinah)

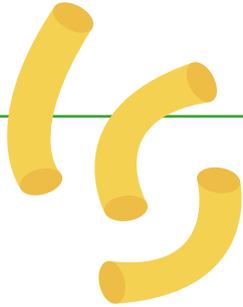
Oh, it was horrible, it just makes you feel upset all the time, you feel like crying because you're so hungry at times and it's so frustrating and then obviously little things like trying to find a job and going out to work is just such a slow process in prison. Then they don't have enough staff and stuff as well, so everything is just harder and then obviously being locked behind your door, being out for three or four hours a day and then being locked behind a door, it doesn't help.

(Daljinder)

First impressions was wow and then it was just getting worse and worse and worse, the more the days went on, just like what the hell is this. The pasta was overcooked, the rice was undercooked, the chicken was undercooked and not cleaned, it had hairs and everything, all over it. The only thing we did look forward to, the fry-ups on the Saturday, the hash browns were soggy, the baked beans were cold, nothing made sense, it was just like, what and because you're starving you have to eat.

(Zara)

1.44 Recommendations

- 
- Food should be considered as a key part of broader framework of Quality of Prison Life which is currently a performance measure used by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.
 - All prisons to be consistent in ensuring that women are involved in feedback and consultations when there are decisions made about preparation of food.
 - Eating times to reflect mealtimes outside of prison, as far as possible. This will enable women to have an easier transition from being released to back into the community, and work life.
 - Breakfast should be served in the morning, and for lunch and dinner to be appropriately timed so that women are not facing long periods without food that lead to hunger pains.
 - Increasing the provision of self-catering spaces, cooking programmes and kitchen utilities on the wings.
 - Review the sanctioning of women via IEP which takes away opportunities that can improve their experience of cooking or eating quality food.

1.5 Health and Well-being

The women discussed the themes of health, body image and mental health with the research team. These issues varied somewhat between prisons and in relation to the social background and/or relationship with food which the women had before incarceration. Many had experienced changes in weight, either losing or gaining weight and attributed these changes to the stress of circumstances, the lack of choice in the menu and the quality of the food. Food was often characterised as 'carb-heavy' and/or greasy, with women feeling this had had a detrimental effect on their weight and body image. Hunger was also experienced by some women, and they described how it led to them supplementing their diet by buying snacks from the weekly canteen.

There were also conversations about the relationship between food and mental health, with women who had faced traumatic experiences prior to incarceration finding that these had impacted on their attitudes to food. Some of the women had histories of anorexia and bulimia, and some spoke about the fact they were victims of domestic abuse and had had their food tampered with, which led to worries about the same happening to their food in prison.

1.51 Voices from the women

Concerns about a carbohydrate-heavy food provision and the impact on mental and physical health, weight and body image

So, the food at [prison] was awful, so when I first got there I lost a little bit of weight because I wasn't eating properly, but going through the court process which was really scary I started eating carbs again.

(Georgia)

Within 6 months my weight had fallen to 6.5 stone, my bowels lost all sense of routine and I became lethargic, my mental health had me feeling suicidal and I had raging insomnia ... [there were a] vast number of women on weight loss medication.

I do think they could still work on carbohydrates. Sometimes I do feel like the lunch ... obviously your lunch is probably where you want your carbiest meal, so you can work it off throughout the day. But I just filled in a menu while I was waiting for lunch, for the following week and I just thought well all the lunch options were quite carby. Like I've got beans on toast twice and I think two jacket potatoes, two bean and jacket potatoes, which is quite a lot of carbs.

(Amber)

I'm trying to cut down as well because I eat so much food, I've got to the point where I am gaining a lot of weight and I've only been here since November. So, I have tried to cut down on my sweets and chocolate but it's still the biscuits, in the night-time, when you want a coffee or a hot chocolate and the biscuits.

I think a good eating regime does help a lot more to obviously make your mind go because if you're not eating well, your brain doesn't work really, does it. Then you're very lazy or you're very tired and you're very moody and then the atmosphere in the prison will obviously change due to just eating right.

(Daljinder)

I just think a lot of the girls, it is like ...being a woman you are always conscious of your weight, so constantly being fed potatoes and carbs and all that, I think if they was to look into the menu properly, and I don't see this in any jail, I've been in three different jails and not seen it in any of them, you're calorie counting. That needs to be added on, so they can see a meal and see how much calories they are eating. Because a lot of girls are putting on ...like me, I've been in two years, I have put five stone on in two years. I've never been this big in my life, like never.

(Autumn)

Food choice and agency to cook for themselves

I hardly ever eat bread, but it always seemed that was the only thing that was available. Obviously in the evenings you'd get sandwiches, and it was like pasta, potatoes, with everything. And rice, there was a lot of carbs with everything. [...]. And obviously when you're outside you can decide yourself when you decide to eat, but when you're in prison you're being told what time to eat.

(Isabelle)

How can you lose weight when that is all you are being fed? It is either that or starve yourself, and that is not a healthy option is it really? But yeah, just the main thing is your calories really, and so you can have a lot more healthier, fresher options as well.

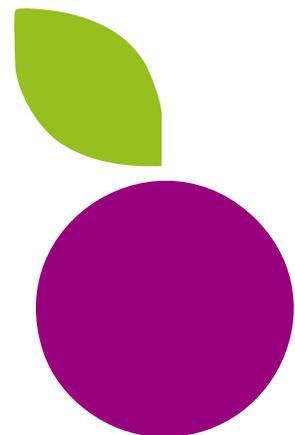
(Autumn)

And also you've got people with mental health issues that are worried about people tampering with their food and their size and think people are going to victims for it, so the self-catering option I think is a good alternative. And it is, it's far healthier. I mean I don't eat down here, this lady cooks for me a lot and I am amazed at what she creates in a microwave with the limited things that we can buy.

(Isabelle)

It's massive. It's massive. I can't explain the feeling. We all know we're in prison, we're in custody. We all know that, but being up here, this does not look like a prison and being able to cook your food, alright, and I don't have a mobile phone to phone or to sit down on the internet here. But being able to cook and do things for yourself, it's massive. It would lift anyone's mental health, yes?

(Adinah)



Food quality

You're hungry. So, you eat it, but it is just a biscuit and a packet of crisps and it's like that's not even going to fill up.

(Amber)

The food was not up to standard, it was disgusting ... I lived off of packets of crisps, never ate the sandwiches, never ate the meat and one girl said, in the kitchens, the chickens that she had, that came in, chicken legs or whatever it was, it just said, on there was, for HMP only.

(Emily)

It's the same girls in the kitchen who I love ... They're like, "What's that?" and they've not seen a sweet potato before, or they've not seen a pepper before ... it just hasn't been part of their lives, so I do think it's beneficial for some of the women working in the kitchen, because they learn different skills and stuff.

(Alice)

1.52 Recommendations

- Resources should be committed to providing a greater range and choice of healthy and fresh food.
- Portion sizes and sizes of breakfast packs need to be increased, so that women do not go hungry.
- Use fresh/home-grown vegetables where possible, as well as home-reared livestock (like chickens) where possible.
- Educational resources should be added to the weekly menus, for example, exploring ways to develop and guide women about issues related to well-being.
- There should be increased opportunities for kitchen workers to learn and develop new skills.
- Women should be encouraged to eat together, and opportunities should be provided for them to be able to do so.

1.6 Access and Affordability

The study found that access to food which the women enjoyed and felt like met their dietary requirements were not equal across or within institutions. Women felt that the quality of the food provided, and the care that was put into the food preparation, varied significantly across the different prisons in which they had been housed. Often this was attributed to the kitchen staff, particularly the catering manager. The women also described having access to fresh fruit and vegetables in some establishments while others only provided 'really rancid fruit', or none at all.

The biggest variation across prisons was in the comparison between open and closed prisons. The women felt that being in an open prison afforded them more consistent access to nutritious and higher quality food. This was due both to the resources available to the prison, in comparison to closed prisons, and to the catering staff's attitudes towards food and the women themselves.

There was also a disparity between cooking resources across prisons, and even across wings in the same prison. Women noted that this impacted how they could supplement their meals, and what they bought from canteen, as the ability to consume many of items on canteen depended on a microwave or other mechanism of heating food being available.

Within each prison we found that women who had struggled to access nutritious and good quality food outside of prison were more likely to struggle to access it inside of prison. This was for two reasons: food education and food inequality.

1.61 Food education

During the interviews with the women, they were asked about their food practices earlier in life and prior to incarceration. We found that those who had access to food education as a child (both formally at school, or informally, in the home), and who had cooked for themselves prior to incarceration were better able to negotiate prison food, as they were able to buy ingredients from canteen which could make the prison-provided meals more appealing to them, or to replace their prison-provided meals with meals they made solely from food bought from canteen. Those who had less experience of cooking for themselves prior to incarceration tended to rely more on the prison-provided food and expressed a lot of dissatisfaction with their diet.

1.62 Financial inequality

As noted above, the ability to buy supplementary food from canteen was key to a nutritious and high-quality diet. Many participants purchased sauces and condiments via canteen to help improve their overall food experience, including gravy, curry sauce and ketchup. Others existed on a 'canteen-only diet' which included wraps, tinned fish and fruit. For these women, they felt that it was the only option available to them if they wanted to eat a balanced and healthy diet. However, this was only accessible to women who had financial support from family or friends or, in one establishment, who had a relatively high paying job with a private employer. Those whose only source of income were prison wages were unable to access this sort of diet. Many women noted that the high canteen prices felt inconsistent with what they would pay for similar items in the outside world. They noted that canteen prices had been rising since the cost-of-living crisis and that their wages had not risen in line with this.

1.63 Voices from the women

Accessing high quality food in open prisons compared to closed prisons

I don't know if it's because it's now an open prison and the attitude towards us as residents has changed. It almost feels like you're on your way out to being a human being again, so we are going to feed you as a human being rather than just as a calories, here are some calories.

(Victoria)

Oh coming here, it's a completely different world. The food is fresh, it's very nicely prepared. There's a quality that goes into it and there's a care that goes into it.

(Jasmin)

Unequal access to cooking resources across prisons

Respondent: The biggest bug bear on canteen, we've got no microwave to cook.

Interviewer: Have you had microwaves in other places or other landings?

Respondent: Yeah, [prison name] and [prison name]...

Interviewer: You had a microwave in both places?

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: How does that affect what you buy in canteen?

Respondent: A lot, it affects a lot, because sometimes I don't like eat the food, I'll go without, but I can only buy noodles on canteen...

Interviewer: If you had a microwave, what sort of stuff would you buy?

Respondent: Well anything really from the canteen, anything, because you can, you can warm it up... I could even buy like Pot Noodles, noodles, sausages, cooked sausages, chicken sausages, I could buy all that, pasta.

(Madison)



Food education prior to incarceration

It's weird, because when you speak to some women in prison and they actually eat a lot better in prison than they have ever done in the outside world. So, depending on where you've come from, or how you've been raised, like they actually, it's the same girls in the kitchen who I love, but they've not seen... They're like, "What's that?" and they've not seen a sweet potato before, or they've not seen a pepper before, because it shows you that even though we're in this sort of day and age, that not everyone is as... I don't know, open to... it just hasn't been part of their lives, so I do think it's beneficial for some of the women working in the kitchen, because they learn different skills and stuff.

(Alice)

Using money from family and friends to supplement prison-provided food

If you were someone that didn't have money sent in or you weren't working in the prison and you didn't have money, I could imagine that food would be even more horrendous because you can't make it better by adding stuff to it.

I have to beg my friend to send me money because I'm telling her I'm not eating the food here.

(Eva)

The relationship between wages and canteen prices

To thrive, you would need about, to be able to spend and have all the things that you need off that ridiculous canteen list, which is horrible stuff anyway, at least £40 a week. You could manage on £35 but £40 because all the prices have gone up, haven't they?

(Sophie)

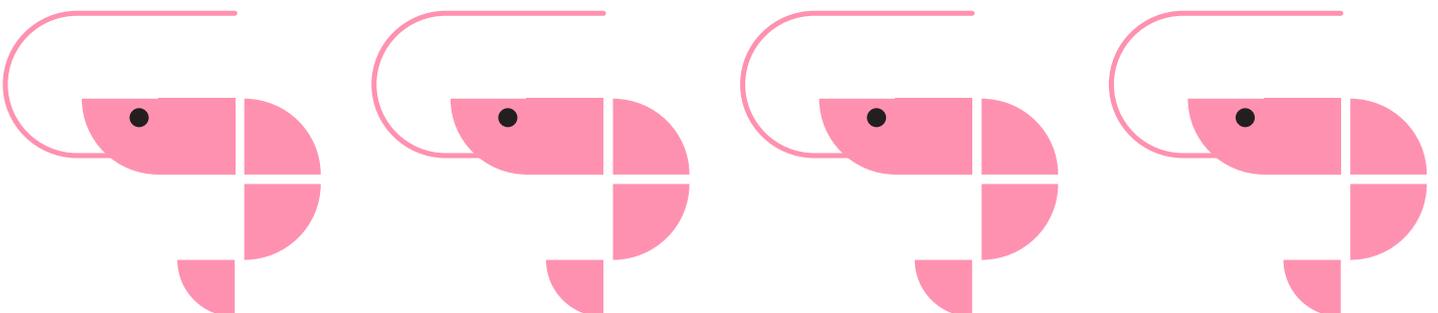
Most of them can't afford the canteen because that's where you get the crisps and the chocolate and stuff, so most of them can't afford stuff like that. So, even little jobs in the prison, you make a pound or two a day, it's not very much money, so to buy chocolate and you're working a whole day, it is quite a lot.

(Daljinder)



1.64 Recommendations

- Consistent training of catering staff, particularly catering managers, and a shared understanding of their role and function across establishments.
- A review across the women's estate of what cooking facilities and food preparation resources are appropriate and necessary for groups of women, and mechanisms put in place to provide access to these as appropriate.
- A review of the best way to assess and monitor the quality of food provision across establishments in the women's estate.
- A mechanism for establishments to share best practice around food practices and a supportive forum for catering managers to ask questions and seek advice.
- Reliable provision of food education in prison, utilising the experiences of incarcerated women with more cooking experience as well as external educators.
- An examination of prison wages in the context of the cost of items on canteen.
- An examination of canteen prices in the context of food price increases because of the cost-of-living crisis.



1.7 Food and Family Contact

As part of the extension to the project on food in women's prisons, we also interviewed an additional sample of women and their family members in a separate study. This included 9 women, 9 family members and 2 family support workers. Both women and the family members spoke about food as a tool to build relationships in the visiting room. In this, many of the findings focused on the consumption of food in this setting, including the layout of the visiting room, the importance of eating together and the selection of food items available. At the time of the data collection, the visiting rooms were still under pandemic restrictions and many prisons were still handing out food packs which consisted of sandwich, drink and packet of crisps.

1.71 Layout of the visiting room

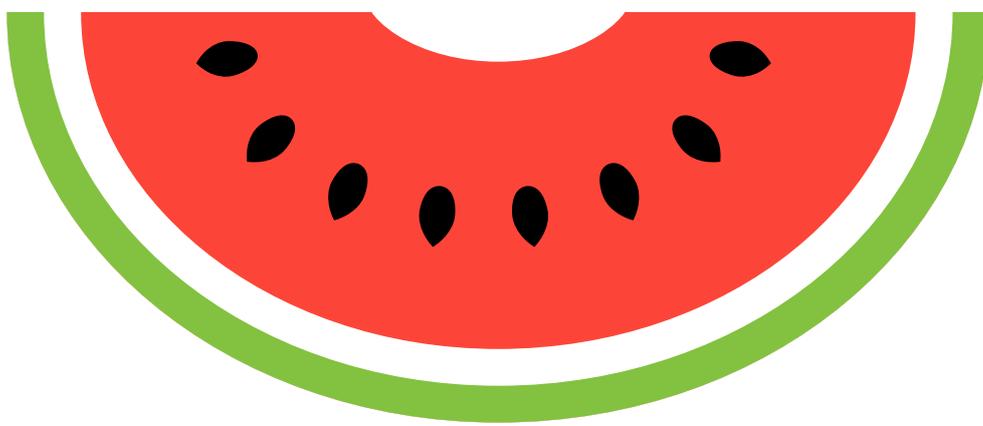
Many of the women and their families spoke about the role of food regarding social situations. A lot of the discussion focused on the layout of the prison visiting room, and the idea that this is too rigid and not family friendly. There were comments about the restricted nature of the movement of incarcerated loved ones, especially for children of those who are in prison, as well as the presence of uniform staff. Many of the women and their families also spoke about the fact that they would appreciate more relaxed spaces to encourage interaction.

1.72 Eating together

In this study, many of the women and their families spoke about how the role of food connected to the outside world, and the contribution this had to social identity and well-being. Many felt these social connections were so important to recreate in the visiting room.

Many of the women and their families spoke about the importance of improving the selection of food on visits to include food items that women in prison could not have in prison. It was felt this would help to create a positive environment and a special experience with their families.

Some of the women and their visiting family members suggested having access to simple food-preparation resources like toasters and microwaves and increased choices around breakfast foods like cereals, to recognise the distance that many visitors travel. Participants spoke about the desire to access more healthy breakfast options for children.



1.73 Voices from the women and their visiting family members

Home comforts in the visits hall

Lots of toys... and a coffee table, so that's about it really. It does look inviting, like it looks like a living room, it's got bean bags and cushions and stuff... I can't speak about other cultures, but within my culture, we tend to, because we have big families and stuff, we always cook together, it's a big thing to like to cook together, and it just reminds you of that experience.

(Sinead, Woman in Prison)

Eating collectively

Food makes it more comfortable. It makes it more ... normal for families. I think that if ... I mean I keep saying it, but if you're sat having a coffee and a sandwich, it doesn't matter where you are, as long you're with the people that you want to be with.

(Alice, Woman in Prison)

Well, us as a family always sat round the table, you know, it was a big part of your day and saying, you know, what's happened, what's happened at school and blah, blah, blah. So, me personally, and I think a lot of people are the same, associate it with just catching up and interacting. And as I said that to me is normal, you know, and I think for the prisoner it just brings something back. I mean especially now they're sat in their room eating on their own.

(Katherine, Family Member)

Accessing variety

I think for us as prisoners we look forward to having something different to what you get food wise in here, because the food gets very samey, or the food is on like a four-week rota, so you get the same meals all the time... So, with visitors, it's like, "Oh, you can get something different". Even if it is like snacky stuff, like crisps and chocolate, it should be things that are not on the canteen that you can get, so it's like, "Oh, yeah I'm looking forward to having a can of Vimto" you can't get that on the canteen. You know, just something different, and that's how it felt when you were at [other prison]. Whereas here, there's no real excitement around the food or visits, because there's not much variety and it's pretty much the same as you what you can get on the canteen and... there's not a selection of stuff.

(Sinead, Woman in Prison)

Increased access to food preparation resources

For the breakfast, for the children, for the early visit, I said you need to get some breakfast options, whether you get a toaster or something behind and I can just make them a slice of toast with some jam or something or the pots of porridge, where you just add the water to, just so they're having something, rather than having crisps.

(Kate, Woman in Prison)

You know, it's not a big area but, I don't know, have a microwave so you can, you know, when the kids arrive, they could have hot porridge or cereal, the small boxes of cereal, like I'm talking breakfast you know, pasta that you can warm up in the microwave. I don't know, just different things that are easy to do.

(Katherine, Family Member)

1.74 Recommendations

- Identifying and sharing good practice from other prison visiting rooms.
- Encouragement of the provision of amenities such as microwaves and sandwich toasters.
- Develop a mechanism to notify prisons of cultural and dietary needs for visitors.
- Forums for women and families to be able to share their feedback about their experiences.
- Exploring possibilities for incorporating selected aspects from family days into the experience of prison visits.



1.8 Summary of Recommendations

Diversity

- The creation of a wider range of menu choices that reflect women's diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
 - The provision of this wider menu choice all-year round.
 - The instigation of a mechanism for collating women's ideas for wider diversity in the menu.
 - The full involvement of the women in the celebration of significant religious/ethnic/cultural events and landmarks.
 - The creation of the role of food diversity reps that can ensure that the voices of women are heard via the instigation of food diversity meetings.
-

Governance

- Food should be considered as a key part of broader framework of Quality of Prison Life which is currently a performance measure used by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.
 - All prisons to be consistent in ensuring that women are involved in feedback and consultations when there are decisions made about preparation of food.
 - Eating times to reflect mealtimes outside of prison, as far as possible. This will enable women to have an easier transition from being released to back into the community, and work life.
 - Breakfast should be served in the morning, and for lunch and dinner to be appropriately timed so that women are not facing long periods without food that lead to hunger pains.
 - Increasing the provision of self-catering spaces, cooking programmes and kitchen utilities on the wings.
 - Review the sanctioning of women via IEP which takes away opportunities that can improve their experience of cooking or eating quality food.
-

Health and Well-being

- Resources should be committed to providing a greater range and choice of healthy and fresh food.
- Portion sizes and sizes of breakfast packs need to be increased, so that women do not go hungry.
- Use fresh/home-grown vegetables where possible, as well as home-reared livestock (like chickens) where possible.
- Educational resources should be added to the weekly menus, for example, exploring ways to develop and guide women about issues related to well-being.
- There should be increased opportunities for kitchen workers to learn and develop new skills.
- Women should be encouraged to eat together, and opportunities should be provided for them to be able to do so.

Access and Affordability

- Consistent training of catering staff, particularly catering managers, and a shared understanding of their role and function across establishments.
- A review across the women's estate of what cooking facilities and food preparation resources are appropriate and necessary for groups of women, and mechanisms put in place to provide access to these as appropriate.
- A review of the best way to assess and monitor the quality of food provision across establishments in the women's estate.
- A mechanism for establishments to share best practice around food practices and a supportive forum for catering managers to ask questions and seek advice.
- Reliable provision of food education in prison, utilising the experiences of incarcerated women with more cooking experience as well as external educators.
- An examination of prison wages in the context of the cost of items on canteen.
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Food and Family Contact

- Identifying and sharing good practice from other prison visiting rooms.
- Encouragement of the provision of amenities such as microwaves and sandwich toasters.
- Develop a mechanism to notify prisons of cultural and dietary needs for visitors.
- Forums for women and families to be able to share their feedback about their experiences.
- Exploring possibilities for incorporating selected aspects from family days into the experience of prison visits.



2.0 Templates

Here are some templates that could be used by women, catering managers and other staff in the prison estate to help improve the quality of food.

2.1 Reflective sheets for women

This is a useful tool for women to reflect on the food they are cooking or preparing in prison.

About Me

Please tell us a bit about yourself and what your favourite food is (and why)?

What food do you not like (and why)?

Diary example

Day 1: Day and time	What you ate/drank	Why did you choose this food/drink?	Where were you?	Thoughts/feelings
Morning 1am-11.30am Tuesday 8am	Breakfast pack: Cornflakes, digestive biscuit. Cup of tea	Would rather have toast but I'm not enhanced so no access to toaster	In my room	Wouldn't normally eat a digestive for breakfast but felt a bit down and biscuits are comfort food to me.



Day 1: Day and time	What you ate/drank	Why did you choose this food/drink?	Where were you?	Thoughts/feelings
Morning 1am-11.30am				

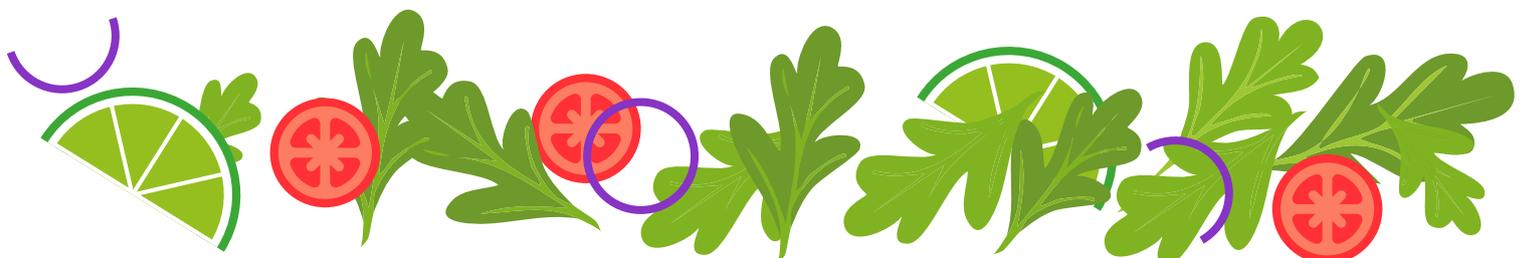
Afternoon 11.30am-4pm				
--------------------------	--	--	--	--

Evening 4pm-1am				
--------------------	--	--	--	--

Optional Activity

Tell us about a recipe you've learned in prison or a prison food memory...

Write or draw in the space below



2.2 Checklist on food diversity, ethnic and cultural representation

Here is a checklist to assist with meeting the diversity needs and dietary requirements of women in prison:

We have organised a diversity forum and recruited food diversity representatives in our prison.

We have organised ways for women to share ideas that will diversify the menu so that it will reflect the prison population.

We have designed a strategy to ensure full involvement of the women in the celebration of significant religious/ethnic and cultural events.

We have received feedback from women and staff about the food diversity strategy, and have amended it in accordance with that feedback.

We have the key ingredients that will ensure there is full inclusivity for women to consume and enjoy the food prepared.

We have actioned our food diversity strategy at an appropriate time, and have the resources to undertake this.

Our food diversity strategy has been communicated to other staff members and has been implemented as a prison priority.

We have introduced a mechanism to collect and monitor feedback from women and prison staff about the changes implemented as part of the diversity strategy.



2.3 Recruiting and establishing food diversity representatives

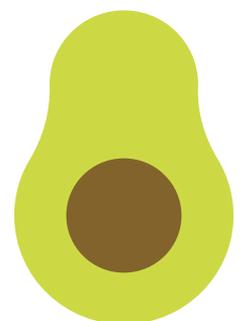
The information below will help prison staff to recruit women for food diversity meetings and communicate with them about the role. It contains examples which can be tailored to individual prisons.

Food diversity representatives should:

- Act as a spokesperson for other women on matters surrounding food in prison
 - Use questioning and listening skills to find out about views on prison food
 - Be inclusive and treat other women's perspectives in a fair and equitable way
 - Summarise the key points and convey these at the food diversity meetings
 - Provide feedback to the women on the outcomes of the discussions
-

Support

- The prison undertakes to provide you with support and training to fulfil your role
 - The prison will undertake to provide a forum in which you will feel comfortable to represent a range of views which at times may be critical of current practices
 - You can go to {named person} for support and advice on your role as Rep
 - Staff will give you feedback every [6 months] on your performance as a Rep
 - You will be encouraged to provide feedback and suggestions on the process of gaining views about food in prison
 - The prison will provide information about how your contribution will be recognised
-



2.4 Food diversity meetings checklist

This checklist can help prisons prepare for food diversity meetings.

Staffing

<input type="checkbox"/>	An appropriate person has been identified to chair the meetings
<input type="checkbox"/>	There are staff members invited to meetings who are connected with different areas of food provision (eg kitchen, servery, menu planning)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Staff attending meetings have sufficient knowledge and understanding of issues related to food equality and diversity
<input type="checkbox"/>	Staff are aware of who to contact if they have queries about their role and participation in meetings

Attendees and scheduling

<input type="checkbox"/>	Mechanisms are in place to enable women to attend meetings
<input type="checkbox"/>	Meetings are taking place at appropriate times of day which avoid clashes with other commitments as far as possible
<input type="checkbox"/>	There is an appropriate balance of representation from women and staff members

Meeting administration

<input type="checkbox"/>	Meeting agendas are co-created by staff and food diversity representatives
<input type="checkbox"/>	Appropriate time is built into the agenda to allow for discussion
<input type="checkbox"/>	Key points from the meetings are recorded alongside decisions and actions

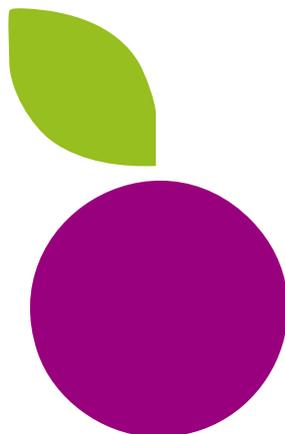
Lines of communication

<input type="checkbox"/>	Processes are in place to take forward action points from meetings
<input type="checkbox"/>	Meeting outcomes are communicated in a timely fashion

2.5 Charter

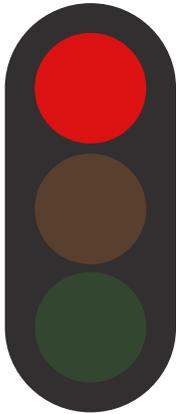
Based on the findings from a two-year study of the provision of food in four women's prisons, the Doing Porridge project team has drawn up the charter below, which has the aim of effecting positive and lasting change in this area. The charter states that:

1. respect, humanity and rights should be at the forefront of women's imprisonment;
2. food has social and cultural values which impact upon the quality of life in prison;
3. food has a key role to play in rehabilitation in women's prisons;
4. those involved in the provision of food in prison should be encouraged to think creatively to respond to gendered, social and cultural needs in relation to food;
5. those in prison should have the right to be listened to and contribute to food choices in prison;
6. the positive role that food and refreshments can play in strengthening family ties should be recognised;
7. cultural diversity should be embedded in the prison menus and in the provision of catering in visit halls;
8. the prison service should strive to improve the quality, consistency and affordability in canteen;
9. eating times should reflect those outside of prison in order to produce a sense of normalcy inside the prison;
10. all those involved in the provision of food in prisons should be committed to embedding a gender-responsive approach to food in prison.



2.6 Traffic light system and charter principles

Below is a traffic light system for prisons to track the extent to which they have implemented the principles within the charter.



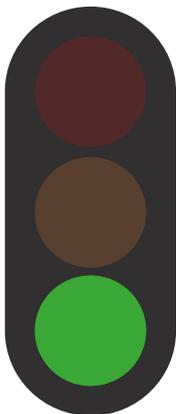
Red

We have not started the implementation process, but will be working towards undertaking these principles.



Amber

We have started the implementation process, but there are parts of the charter that still need to be actioned.



Green

We have implemented the principles fully.

Principles - the charter states that:	Track your progress		
1. respect, humanity and rights should be at the forefront of women’s imprisonment			
2. food has social and cultural values which impact upon the quality of life in prison			
3. food has a key role to play in rehabilitation in women’s prisons;			
4. those involved in the provision of food in prison should be encouraged to think creatively to respond to gendered, social and cultural needs			
5. those in prison should have the right to be listened to and contribute to food choices in prison			
6. the positive role that food and refreshments can play in strengthening family ties should be recognised			
7. cultural diversity should be embedded in the prison menus and in the provision of catering in visit			
8. the prison service should strive to improve the quality, consistency and affordability in canteen			
9. eating times should reflect those outside of prison in order to produce a sense of normalcy inside			
10. all those involved in the provision of food in prisons should be committed to embedding a gender-responsive approach to food in prison			

3.0 Useful Resources

Here is a directory of all of the services that are undertaking fantastic work within women's prisons.



Food Behind Bars

Food Behind Bars is a Registered Charity dedicated to transforming the food served in British prisons. We work with prisons across England & Wales on the subject of food - to improve the lives of those eating it and support the people making it. Our aim is to positively impact the health and wellbeing of prisoners, by training kitchen teams, developing recipes, delivering food education and promoting healthy eating. Our services include cooking classes, food growing projects and our Prison Food Education Programme - an ideas and inspiration programme for prison catering teams. We have worked with HMP Bristol, HMP Swinfen Hall, HMP Downview, HMP Manchester, HMP Stoke Heath and HMP Isis, amongst others. We know that good food in prison can create a happier, healthier prison system, with rehabilitation at its heart. This is the backbone of what we do.

"We believe that food has the power to change lives and positively impact society. We also believe that everyone deserves the tools and understanding to eat healthily - regardless of their background or circumstance. Better food in prison will lead to a better functioning prison system, in turn leading to a better functioning society. This remains our ultimate goal, and this is why prison food matters."

Website

www.foodbehindbars.co.uk



Food Matters

Food Matters works to see healthy, sustainable, fair food become a reality for everybody, every day. A major focus of our work is with women in contact with the criminal justice system, both those in prison and living in the community. We offer a range of services to prisons and to organisations working in community settings, such as women's centres, probation services and drug treatment programmes.

Courses, workshops, cooking sessions

Using participatory techniques, food tasting and cooking sessions, we help people inside the criminal justice system make better food choices to support their physical and mental wellbeing. We provide courses tailored to the needs of specific groups.

Distance learning

We have developed our popular face-to-face food and wellbeing courses into a 6-module distance learning format. This is being developed for use on digital platforms.

Her Wellbeing and His Wellbeing publications

We produce bi-monthly health and wellbeing newsletters for both men and women serving custodial sentences. Her Wellbeing is available in printed format in all women's prisons. Both Her Wellbeing and His Wellbeing are available on all digital devices in prisons. We also produce an e-newsletter version of Her Wellbeing with content relevant to women living in the community.

Consultancy

We provide consultancy on all aspects of food in prison. For example, we work with the kitchen, performing nutritional analysis of recipes, and recipe and menu development. We advise organisations in community settings on food provision for their client groups.

Telephone

01273 234781

Registered Charity Number:

1178078

Email

info@foodmatters.org

Website

www.foodmatters.org

X

[@FMInsideout](https://twitter.com/FMInsideout)



PACT (Prison Advice and Care Trust)

Visiting someone in prison can be stressful for families and significant others. Providing a welcoming and friendly refreshments service helps reduce anxiety and add a touch of normality to what can feel an intimidating and alien environment.

“At Pact, we believe that providing people in prison and their loved ones the opportunity to eat and drink together is crucial for maintaining positive relationships. For those separated by imprisonment, being able to enjoy a cup of tea or their favourite snacks together helps to reinforce attachments and improve the wellbeing of both prisoners and their family members.”

Address

Prison Advice & Care Trust
29 Peckham Road
London
SE5 8UA

Telephone

020 7735 9535

Contact

info@prisonadvice.org.uk



Women in Prison

Women in Prison (WIP) is a national charity that delivers support for women affected by the criminal justice system in prisons, in the community and through our Women's Centres. We campaign to end the harm caused to women, their families and our communities by imprisonment.

We have a range of gender specific services designed to meet the needs of women at different points in the criminal justice system. We offer support to women in the community at our women's Centres and Hubs in Manchester, London and Surrey and provide in custody and Through the Gate support in different prisons. We also have a magazine written by women in custody that is circulated across the female estate and on our website.

To find out about services available in your prison, contact us at FREEPOST – Women in Prison – no stamp necessary!

Contact

For general enquiries, feel free to drop us a line on:
info@wipuk.org

Address

Women in Prison, 2nd Floor, 232 Shoreditch High St, London E1 6PJ

Telephone

020 7359 6674

Food in prison holds deep significance for women, often serving as a connection to their roles as mothers and caregivers. It provides comfort and a sense of normality, allowing them to maintain familial bonds. Shared meals foster community, helping women to support one another and strengthen resilience in challenging and traumatising environments.

Women in Prison



Contact Details



Doing Porridge Project
School of Social Sciences
University of Surrey
Stag Hill
Guildford
GU2 7XH

Email

Maria Adams
m.n.adams@surrey.ac.uk



Website

Understanding women's experiences of food in prison
www.doingporridge.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48683/1926.00121675>

