



It Doesn't Have To Be Like This

Prisoner Policy Network Perspectives on Future Prison Design

A Prisoner Policy Network Consultation

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About the Prison Reform Trust

The Prison Reform Trust is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective prison system. For further information about the Prison Reform Trust, see www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/

About the Prisoner Policy Network

The Prisoner Policy Network (PPN) is a network of prisoners, ex-prisoners and supporting organisations. It is hosted by the Prison Reform Trust and will make sure prisoners' experiences are part of prison policy development nationally. Contact ppn@prisonreformtrust.org.uk or call 020 7251 5070 for more information.

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought an unprecedented experience of prolonged isolation to prisons with most prisoners locked in their cells for most of the last 18 months. Prisoners have had to go without social visits, work and learning, with limited exercise and very scant access to personal, social and interpersonal stimulation.

As prisons move to stage 1 of the national framework governing Covid-19 recovery in prisons and YOIs, there is a renewed focus on what a new regime could look like. According to the framework definition, those in stage 1 should be “delivering a meaningful, decent and fuller regime”, and “taking the first steps towards the future regime reform vision”, by maintaining Covid-19 vigilance and safety, and stabilising the service in preparation for reform.

As this report goes to press, life in most prisons is still a very long way from what anyone would consider “normal”, but the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS are actively considering what life in prison should be like in the future. There is little consensus in this debate which, as yet, has not been opened up for the formal consultation that is certainly required. We hope this report will help set the context for that wider consultation – it is not a substitute for it.

With this in mind, Prison Reform Trust (PRT) consulted with members of its Prisoner Policy Network (PPN) to explore what a future regime might look like. The consultation was welcomed by those within our membership.

Future regime needs to have the lived experience voice; this is vital and makes it valid.

From all our members we asked for aspirational thinking, in line with the HMPPS vision that reform must be “aspirational but also deliverable.” However, it was very clear when we started the consultation that aspirational thinking was going to be more challenging than we anticipated. For some this appeared to be a result of being a prisoner during the pandemic, with our team speaking with some very withdrawn men and women during the summer of 2021. We were shocked at the extent to which months of isolation have impacted on our membership.

Blue sky thinking seems like the impossible.

I have ‘regressed’ to the basics for so long that I’m not that bothered about the regime anymore. As long as I can phone my family, exercise and shower every day, I truly don’t care about anything else.

Prisoners reminded us time and time again about the deprivations that they have endured during the pandemic, and continue to endure. Importantly though, they told us that ambition to embed a new regime would be affected by the same structural and operational problems that frustrated efforts to reform before Covid-19 struck.

Contributions such as “I don’t have toilet roll, I don’t have a toilet seat, when that’s in place we can think about a new regime” act as a salutary reminder that issues of basic decency still have to be resolved. Only when these are addressed can there be the stable foundation on which to build a new, better regime.

Of course I want to talk about what should be here, but what difference is my talking going to make, when nobody listens, nobody cares and I’ve given up hope as well

Based on what we heard from men and women living in prison in 2021, we were able to organise this report into six key themes:

- What prisoners have endured
- What’s the point?
- Normality
- Safety and progression
- Humanising the system
- Finding purpose

2. Who we heard from

We received 117 written responses (46 letters, 70 Email a Prisoner emails).

We interviewed 12 people on the phone.

We visited 13 different prisons:

Aylesbury, Berwyn, Bristol, Brixton, Drake Hall, Hewell, Huntercombe, Isis, Leyhill, Long Lartin, North Sea Camp, Nottingham, Stoke Heath.

A further 37 different establishments were represented in the written submissions, taking the total number of prisons where we received some form of contribution to 50. The additional prisons represented in this consultation are as follows:

Ashfield, Barlinnie, Bronzefield, Bure, Coldingley, Dartmoor, Doncaster, Dovegate, Downview, Eastwood Park, Frankland, Garth, Gartree, Grendon, Hull, Isle of Wight, Littlehey, Low Newton, Manchester, Northumberland, Norwich, Oakwood, Portland, Risley, Rye Hill, Send, Spring Hill, Stafford, Stocken, Swaleside, Swansea, The Mount, The Verne, Usk, Warren Hill, Whitemoor, Wymott.

In total we estimate to have reached between 600-700 people via written correspondence, phone calls and prison visits.

3. Findings

3.1. What prisoners have endured

When asking people in prison to think about a future regime, there was a substantial focus on the past, of regimes both before the pandemic and since March 2020.

I don't know anyone who doesn't want normal association/regime to come back.

I believe we should at worst go back to the way they were before the lockdown and at best prisoners be given more time out of their cells.

Very few people were supportive of the restricted regimes introduced during the pandemic, although there were cases where people felt more settled.

I am more than happy to stay in my cell 22 hours a day as I can do my O/U studies, pray in peace, and write my film scripts, songs and letters, or listen to some music or watch TV.

For the vast majority, however, the prospect of the prison remaining on a restricted regime was met with negative emotions including anger, fear and resentment, as well as sadness and powerlessness. Prisoners told us how they felt about the regimes during the pandemic and the following quotes are illustrative:

I am stressed and depressed, I worry for my future.

I am going off my head, I don't know if I am coming or going.

My paranoia has enhanced, I feel so dehumanised.

One man described the experience of being in prison during the pandemic as a “catastrophe, in terms of rehabilitation, mental health, self-harm and the loss of the ‘jailcraft’ of officers which is vital to our mutual support during what is, after all, the most difficult time of all our lives.”

Prisoners were worried that backlogs to accessing offender behaviour programmes would hold up transfers and progression which was an underlying issue needing to be addressed, so that prisoners could manage expectations and their mental wellbeing.

People often remarked on their own mental health having suffered in the pandemic, as well as that of others.

Solitary confinement has not been good for my mental health let alone my progression into the community.

From talking to inmates, you'll find that their mental health is suffering as well as physical health.

COVID fatigue, or rather, lockdown fatigue, set in months ago. Everyone who hasn't already lost their marbles pacing up and down the same damned corridor every day for the past year, is hopelessly bored and desperate for some respite.

The concept of being dehumanised was common and contributed a sense of reduced self-worth and even shame for some people.

I feel lower than an animal.

I feel like a dog waiting for a treat. Like how a dog is waiting to be taken for a walk, they hear the keys jangling and they wait by the door, that's how I feel when I'm waiting to come out.

Some prisoners told us how their physical health had been affected. One man told us he had gained five stone in weight and now struggled with some of the tasks expected of him. Another told us he had taken up vaping in order to go outside and vape as in his establishment smokers were allocated more time outside to smoke. He was showing some concern about the potential consequence of this choice.

There were also concerns raised by disabled members, who before the pandemic had had some reasonable adjustments made for them. During the pandemic prisoners were moved around within their establishments as new isolation wings and Reverse Cohort Units (RCU) were established. This led some to some respondents being unable to access their exercise yards because the distance they would have to travel was too far.

My cell used to be closest to the exercise yard, now I can't get there on crutches and no wheelchair is available.

While the negative emotions probably won't come as a surprise to those reading this report, it is still important to acknowledge them. Prisons are not starting from a familiar position as they embark on a new regime plan. Before the pandemic, there were already fundamental issues in prison, particularly in relation to getting the basics right. As mentioned, we heard this again on this consultation:

We can't go talking about future regime when we've got no hot water in the showers, or I have to ring a bell to go to the toilet.

But since the pandemic, these basic issues have been coupled with new and unfamiliar concerns. There is a clear call from prisoners for improved mental health support following this difficult time, and any consideration of the future regime should take into account the impact of the pandemic on prisoners' mental health.

We seriously need more mental health services just to repair the damage of the last 18 months.

Mental health nurses need to be on the wings, holding groups and drop-ins, it's not good enough to put in an app to ask for help, they need to work from the position we all need help and just offer it, it isn't that easy to recognise you need help.

Despite being keen (or desperate in some cases) to return to normal, many prisoners were anxious and felt the transition would be difficult for them.

I think that coming out of Covid will be difficult for many men and women as it has become the norm to be sat in the cell for up to 23 hours a day. A steady approach should be taken when lifting the current restrictions.

After minimal interactions how are you going to handle interactions when you get out?

Some prisoners wanted to be able to choose whether or not to embrace social connection.

Prisoners should have the personal choice whether to mix or not.

Dinner – there should be an option for in cell or communal.

As long as we do no harm to others there should be no mandatory rules to join activities.

The experience of 'bubbling' over many months has been a feature of many contributions, that is, the experience of only having contact with a small and prescribed group of prisoners. Overall, prisoners have accepted this rationale during the pandemic and some have said that smaller groups have some positive effects, such as creating a sense of improved personal safety and deepening friendships with peers:

A split wing or bubble system is a good idea to ensure reduced risk of Covid.

But some warned of the negative side effects. For instance, many commented on the risk of further isolation if a prisoner was disliked or bullied in a smaller cohort, while others simply stated that limiting a person's interactions to a small group of individuals would limit their opportunities for personal growth and development.

Prisoners also identified that the current lockdown regime adversely affected the sense of belonging to a community, and this lack of belonging to community was cited as a substantial loss.

At the very least when you were on the wing in association with the lads we had a sense of family, we were all in it together and those laughs got you through some of the difficult times; we should get that back because that is important.

Loss of family contact through visits and phone calls was one of the most keenly felt hardships. Maintaining video calls, additional provision for family visits, including overnight stays, were identified as important components of any future regime.

Prisoners highlighted the mounting frustration they felt in watching the community ‘open up’ and see normality once more, while prisons remained in a restricted regime (albeit one which was gradually lessening). Prisoners expressed strong reservations about the legitimacy of the approach, and by association, the legitimacy of the prison.

If a GP in the community told me that I was going to keep myself safe in prison by locking myself in the bathroom and get someone to deliver my food to me and come out for 15 mins a day to exercise ... without even asking my opinion ... How do you think I feel when they say they care about me?

We heard from people that tensions were high in prison as a result of this, and a strong resistance to the consideration that prisons should have more lockdown even after the pandemic as it had “worked” at reducing violence or tension. This is addressed further in a later section.

No-one wants to see another Strangeways, but the threat of permanent lockdown in any form is almost guaranteed to push the worst affected over the edge. We have all endured restrictions for the greater good during COVID out of a sense of solidarity.

3.2 What’s the point?

Prisoners were perplexed and confused by the purpose of the regime and of the prison itself. Many contributions alluded to tensions between experiences of punishment and experiences of rehabilitation. Prisoners wanted to know that there was a purpose to their time inside. And they wanted the regime to make use of their time to deliver that purpose.

I get it’s punishment, but then if that is what it is, stop talking about rehabilitation. There isn’t much of that happening, and I am just getting wound up looking for it.

I have already been punished by being sent to prison, why I am also being punished whilst I’m here.

They should remove the word rehabilitation and just use punishment. It is hell in here. This is the lowest my self-esteem has ever been.

You’re chucked into the shark’s mouth, chewed up and spat out after a couple of years.

Prisoners consistently identified the tensions in the system, between punishment, care, rehabilitation, personal growth and progression. The balance of the competing priorities and the differing weights given to them at different prisons, as well as by different staff contributed to either gratitude to have landed in a “good” prison that delivered on needs, or despair at being in a “bad” prison that did not.

Thank God I am here and I despair for those left behind in my last prison, aimlessly waiting for help.

A clear vision of the purpose of imprisonment, shared by government, prison governors and the people living inside was described by prisoners as essential if a regime is to be legitimised, adopted and embedded. Being clear about the meaning of the words “punishment” and “rehabilitation” in the context of the prison experience was seen as crucial for any future design.

Is there a clear criminal justice definition of “rehabilitation” with a clear set of measurable outcomes which demonstrate when a person has reached “rehabilitation” and exactly what multi agency duties and responsibilities are in this process? I wanna see it.

They need to tell us what they mean by words such as punishment and rehabilitation. One prison officer will tell you the punishment is taking away your liberty; another will tell you, “where do you think you are, the Ritz, you are in prison” when you ask for cleaning materials to clean the toilet.

Another said:

I see the word ‘care’ about the place, but what does that actually mean, what standard of care am I entitled to? If I don’t know, and the officer doesn’t know, and the Guv doesn’t know, then what is it? Till we all know, how can it be universally experienced? Till then it is a hit and miss thing and just potluck.

Some of the people we spoke to were hesitant about commenting before they understood what the underlying direction of any future regime design would be.

What sort of regime are you referring to? One where we are locked up all the time or one where we are doing stuff to better ourselves?

PPN contributors in the main accepted punishment as a consequence of actions but were also seeking an opportunity for personal growth and change. They felt the current prison system required an overhaul and that a commitment to rehabilitation as a key ambition of the prison system should supersede the current focus on constant risk management and security. They told us that rehabilitative community based approaches would actually lead to a safer prison environment in which positive personal growth and maturity would become enabled and nurtured.

I reckon the regime won’t change in our favour, but to protect the public you need a fit for purpose prison system that rehabilitates

If the men could work through the reasons they are here, deal with trauma, see some role models and how it doesn’t have to be like this, then I think the prison system could be proud of how it is protecting the public. At the moment, its failing in that job, because people leave worse and more risky than when they came in. All because they think protecting the public means kicking us when we are down

They’re sort of failing in their duty to victims, as we come out no better after no rehabilitation.

Prison should be about creating a prosocial environment in which people can reflect on why they ended up in prison, address these issues and see there is another way. This must come with a radical change to the way things are being done over the last ten years – this is obviously not working. Prison currently damages people and then when out, damages society.

Prisoners wanted to be able to engage in a range of opportunities in prison to aid them in moving forward, including:

- Opportunities to become active citizens engaged in the development and sustainability of the prison community, being involved in making decisions, and supporting one another in a wide range of peer support initiatives
- Education for all, paid on a par with employment and in a range of subject areas and levels with opportunities for experiential learning and moving away from formal classroom-based learning. Suggestions included moving education beyond attainment of GCSE Maths and English, and the introduction of a varied curriculum to encourage attendance for those that had previously struggled in school
- Employment and training that is useful to society, builds skills and confidence and feels productive
- Personalised sentence plans focused on self-development (and a chance of achieving outcomes), moving away from sole reliance on offender management accredited courses to signal remorse, growth and maturity
- A more diverse range of activities on the wing to keep busy and create a sense of progressing in life and within the sentence
- Charity work and opportunities to retrieve self-esteem and to be seen as a contributor to both the prison and external community
- Sport and gym access to build healthy bodies and healthy minds
- Access to the internet in a secure form, including tablets, in-cell digital access and phones, including the possibility for both video and telephone incoming calls from children and relatives as well as professionals within the prison and in the community
- Increased access to family; including children and family members being permitted to stay overnight and at celebratory moments such as children's birthdays
- Access to outside activities, including gardening, farm work and working with animals, such as chickens, goats and dogs
- Access to legal teams and monitoring and accountability mechanisms that would monitor and oversee adherence to prison policy frameworks
- Increased opportunities for release on temporary licence to stay close to children and families
- Cooking facilities and opportunities to eat and cook communally

However, underpinning all of these lies a values framework by which the prison system and its staff members operate, and this was the subject of significant discussion. There were ongoing concerns about being treated with respect and decency. Concerns were also raised about the definitions of such terms and a need for a clear set of behavioural expectations for both prisoners and staff that could be upheld, monitored and supported by effective accountability mechanisms.

We need something more than the IMB and the PPO, we need to know that whoever steps out of line, be it the prisoner or the prison, it's serious and something will happen to put it right.

There were several contributions that mentioned the importance of the consistency of the regime to help prisoners prepare for their day or week, and to be able to rely on certain things happening at predictable times and to develop a routine.

Routine is vitally important for dealing with the time spent in prison and to develop working habits that will serve me well on release.

There's just a total lack of structure and routine. When I know how my day is going to go I'm happier and time flies.

Prisoners also wanted consistency in adherence to prison policies. They wanted them applied fairly to staff and prisoners alike. Prisoners felt it was harder to “toe the line” with discipline if they were not seeing the same standards being expected of staff. Examples were given where prisoners felt frustrated by what they perceived to be unfair treatment by staff, but didn't feel they had a voice or the belief it would be acted upon.

When staff stick to the rules and stick to being fair, this helps to build up trust in both them as people and with the prison itself.

We were told of a few cases of staff flouting Covid-19 rules while simultaneously using them to justify “bang up” and punitive repercussions for prisoners who flouted the same rules. This was a major reason why the initial period of goodwill that we were told about by prisoners back in March and April had deteriorated into cynicism and hostility, with the emerging attitude of: “Why should we if you don't have to?”.

People were upset with staff as they could hear them playing pool and using the Astro turf football pitch when the residents could not. This contributed to break down in trust between staff and residents.

We started collecting loads of food for a local foodbank and we got so much. The officers barely donated anything, we probably gave ten times more than them. And we walked into the office to see officers eating the food we've donated. It was mad.

You can't go to church if you've had a fight. I can go library, but I can't go church. You're using religion as a privilege.

In addition, having a complaints system that worked was considered by prisoners to be a critical need. Faith in the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) was low, as was faith in the Independent Monitoring Boards (IMB) to support infringements of prison rules.

The PPO, the IMB, yes they try, but its too long and in the end ignored; we know it, they know it; what we need is someone or something that makes sure that everyone does what they need to do.

Many examples were submitted of complaints forms that were signed or delivered by the subject of the complaint, and long drawn out processes of complaints ending in a letter delivered under the door, which was not signed by the governor when it should have been.

It's always one rule for one group and one rule for another.

What's the point in complaining here, the complaints never even make it to where they need to go, let alone get replied to.

Complaint received and investigated. No further action deemed necessary. Same tale, different date.

3.3 Normality

One of the most prominent themes of the consultation was a wish for the prison environment to mirror the outside community as much as possible.

How is lying in bed all day normal? How is always having to ask for a toilet roll normal, how is being allocated work normal, like you don't have to do an job application; because it isn't normal, well then abnormal behaviours develop that only work in prison, but not outside; so in losing normality, we lose our ability to be normal again.

One day I got a cell spin and had some medication that was out of date ... If it was in your possession for more than one month you have to get it reissued by the healthcare; well I had forgotten. I was in a panic, put on report and thought oh no, there goes my enhanced ... I was so upset ... till another prisoner on the wing told me, it isn't real life and one day I will laugh at the fact that I was in panic over migraine medication.

We heard how retaining some sense of normality inside can help personal growth in the criminal justice journey, and contribute to successful release.

I would also like to say that prisoners are not incarcerated forever, that we must go back into the social world at some point. If we are locked up for 23 hours a day and denied the ability to socialise with peers and learn and practice acceptable and correct social behaviours, you will be crippling us, stripping us of the tools we need to integrate back into society.

These activities should be geared to prepare prisoners for release as opposed to keeping them locked up 23 hours per day, and then to release them feeling bitter and unprepared for life outside.

Prison needs to be designed on the basis that we are going out, back into the community. You will go to shops, find a place to live, get a job. We're used to sitting in a cell.

Learning to mix with different people, controlling emotions, developing empathy and consideration all need to be practiced and put into action. This will lead to a safer community and environment for all.

I address the officer on the wing as Sir and he calls me by my surname and number? That isn't a good foundation for a normal relationship.

Even those who knew they would be living in prison for a very long time were aware of the abnormal nature of prison and its impact on their mental well-being; they told us how living under such conditions made them feel helpless and childlike, paranoid and anxious about getting things wrong. They felt dehumanised, with few experiences of social situations where they could mature and grow as people.

I can't help thinking that all this time spent on my own or with the same few people is just going to make it harder when I'm out. It's the encounters you have with new and different people, in different situations, and how you respond to them that make you grow and develop as a person. If you're stuck with the same few people for the rest of your life there's no way to learn how to manage different situations. I think all this time spent living in a 'bubble' is just making people less social, less able to live outside of prison.

In regard to the regime, prisoners were keen to see a longer working day, eating at normal times, and sleeping at normal times, as well as having free time to socialise and have recreational time in a way that mirrored the experience of working in the community.

A typical day should start with toast/cereal and a brew in each wing's shared area. Fold down tables may need to be purchased along with toasters. This begins the day in a way the rest of the world does. Lose the breakfast pack and eating breakfast in your bedroom/toilet, that's not normal and moves prisoners further away from social norms.

Work in prison currently runs across two short sessions; generally from 8.30 to 11, and 1.30 to 4 – totalling just 5 hours even if everything runs smoothly, with a long lunch break in between. Men and women told us they wanted to do a full day's work, and to feel tired but fulfilled at the end of the working day.

The working day should be just that, a working day where men/women are expected to work all day with appropriate breaks and lunch.

Occupation is an essential factor and five hours of working time is not preparation for the normal environment.

There were also calls to mirror real world job application processes, with application forms and interviews to provide experience and to create a sense of purpose and worth. It was also raised by several people that it would be more helpful if jobs provided the qualifications and experience that employers outside prison were looking for.

Prison work should be as normal as possible, i.e. some sort of application process should be available, making your own appointments which you have to stick to, and interview process, and a record of achievement with references from job supervisors that can form a sort of reference for when seeking future employment.

To improve prison work and the progression of prisoners to becoming prosocial members of society, prison jobs could better reflect those of the outside world.

Prisoners asserted that having some choice about whom they spend time with and what they do was an important part of making life normal.

We want more responsibility and freedom. How are you going to cope when you touch road if you aren't allowed to do anything on your own here?

At the heart of any regime should be an emphasis on enhancing individual autonomy.

One prisoner gave an example of how he was able to feel 'normal' in his prison due to the way the prison runs. Another explained how he felt on the day of the PPN focus group.

The single most 'normalising'/'humanising' thing in prison, for me, is to be in my cell with the door open, able to run errands, visit a friend, take a shower, sit in the common room etc.

It really is the little things that make a difference. Getting off the wing, having a change of scene. Like today, having a snack and a hot drink, it just makes you feel more human.

Prisoners wanted to be listened to and included in the work and business of the community, including better use of prison councils and a desire for suggestions for change to be taken seriously.

More input from resident councils and active citizenship groups into how the regime is managed in individual establishments.

Officers never want to listen even though we actually know the prison better than them.

We wanted to work with the work department to help fix the prison whilst gaining a qualification. As of yet this was not available.

Involvement in supporting the community needed to be seen as fair. Older prisoners told us they were expected to quell some of the anti-social behaviours exhibited by younger prisoners, often at the beginning of very long sentences. Older prisoners resented the fact that this responsibility was passed to them, feeling that the responsibility to maintain order on a wing belonged to staff, and that their interventions risked placing them in danger of damaging their progression chances if arguments and violence erupted.

I hate it here I am a lifer and if I get involved in anything with these young kids it will damage my chances of D cat; yet the officers do nothing and expect us to do it.

Finally for this section, one of the most important things for prisoners who were parents was to be able to create and maintain as “normal” a parental or familial relationship as possible, so that the children in the community were supported. Interventions such as Storybook Dads, being able to communicate often on phone and video, social visits that felt natural and relaxed, having the opportunity to be involved in a child’s schooling (parents’ evenings for example) were key requests from prisoners in terms of regime design. They talked of the possibility of overnight and day long visits with children and partners and cited the possibility of such visits as the single most important incentive for positive conduct in prison, and a key development that would enable long term prisoners to initiate and maintain relationships despite imprisonment.

I would want to see visits where I could move around and sit and play with my kids in the play area, not just sit and watch; he must think I don’t want to, not that I can’t.

I would feel like so much more of a parent if I could get up and go to the tea bar and buy drinks for the kids; I feel ashamed that I can’t.

Why can’t prisons have outside play areas where we could take the kids to go on the swings?

The best thing here is that they used to let the kids come and do homework with us, and let us phone into the school to find out how the kids were doing, would be good to get back to that.

3.4 Safety and progression

We received contributions focused on the fact that prison is not a safe place, even with 23 hour ‘bang up’.

I refer to the statement that prisoners feel safer with the current 23 hour lock-up. I feel that this statement has been horribly bent out of shape and is being used by those who wish to promote a 23 hour bang up system ... I have found it increasingly hard to find anyone who agrees with this statement.

I feel the rhetoric that people felt safer under lockdown conditions, is not a true feeling from the majority of inmates.

People generally felt the severe lockdown in response to Covid-19 had been a necessary evil, and it was accepted by prisoners as part of a global effort to control infection. However, any thoughts about seeing it continue because it had led to reduced violence were not well received. People were concerned that although violence had reduced on the wings, the consequences of long term isolation were significant and experienced differently by different groups within the prison system.

I cannot deny that violent behaviour has dropped in prisons, there is less bullying and conflict too. However, this is not because prison officers have been effectively and correctly intervening before anything happens or supporting organisations helping and guiding prisoners to make better decisions, teaching them anger management skills or conflict resolution and promoting correct social behaviours. Violence in prisons has been reduced because the prison community is currently segregated. ...and because of this segregation there has been a massive increase in self-harming, depression, anxiety and many more mental health issues.

Me myself suffer from ADHD so no 23 hour bang up. It is not a good thing, I need to be out and about.

One man responded to reports that self-harm had reduced in prison during the lockdown. He said:

But what I want to know is, how do they know? Sure they know about the severe cases, but actually what's changed is that no one sees anymore. The officers and healthcare don't see us anymore. The gym staff haven't really seen us. I see no less cuts on the arms or on people's thighs when I am in the shower. From where I'm standing it looks as bad as ever, but no one sees us, no one sees the cuts.

Prisoners stressed the need to explore why people feel unsafe in prison, and to provide interventions that addressed some of the problems.

If anyone feels safer in their cells then the cause of his fear needs to be dealt with.

If someone feels so unsafe outside of their tiny, oppressive living quarters that they would rather spend 23 hours a day there than live something approaching a dignified human life then that speaks to broader issues with that prison.

Association, full wing unlocks and mixing is being presented as the cause of the problem. Actually I see it as an admission that staff are failing to deal with the real cause of the problem; why are levels of violence, bullying, self-harm and mental health problems so high? Yet again treating the symptoms not the cause.

One of the main reasons that prisons have been so violent is that they simply fail to facilitate broad options, and it is a lack of choices that leaves prisoners feeling bored, frustrated and angry. The irony is that the POA is calling for less freedom and more restriction when precisely the opposite is required. We cannot afford to slide further towards the warehousing, brutalising techniques of the American Super-Max model-but this is exactly what the POA risks doing.

There was a concern that money was invested into 'safety' but also that the prison definition of safety was quite narrow. For example, one man thought it was extremely unlikely the prison service would invest in more counsellors to address safety to self, because he felt this was not a priority. A prisoner in open conditions remarked that:

There was a lot of money spent on security cameras. However, absconds are at an all-time low and “unheard of” with no reported violent incidents in the past year. Maybe the money for the security systems could have been spent elsewhere?

Many people referred to open space and fresh air in this consultation, more than in any other to date and with specific reference to making the prison a safer space to live. Prisoners made connections between open spaces and improved mental health, the importance of spending time in the sun (vitamin D) and having some connection with nature. One man suggested the development of a nature trail within the prison grounds given the variety of wildlife on site.

Prisoners have suffered from sensory deprivation for over a year. It would be nice if we could get some sections on our exercise yards of greenhouse, small wild ponds that have benches going around them. An organisation called Greeners Growth have done this in my previous jails. Free flow to outside space during association times would be a huge benefit to us.

The need for fresh air, outdoor exercise and physical sporting activity is paramount in the promotion of mental wellbeing.

Several people commented on the extensive grounds their prisons had available that were not being used. “There was a lot of space that was not being used which was frustrating.” We also spoke with one woman who made a case for the prison to ‘grow your own’ fruit and vegetables. She thought investment in polytunnels was valuable for several reasons: a) so that women were able to access fresh fruit and vegetables; b) so more jobs were available in the prison; c) there was potential to support women’s mental health through facilitating time outside, and; d) responding to climate change and environmental needs.

Contributors also pointed out the safety benefit of meeting outside as the pandemic rumbles on:

Longer exercise; especially since outside is the safest place!

It’s harder to get covid in the open air, so give more time on exercise yards.

Inside the prison, there was a sense that the physical space needed attention. Prisoners were not looking for luxury, but wanted to feel that someone cared about their living environment. They wanted to play an active role in improving the environment, and take responsibility for their own space. Prisoners wanted to be able to paint their own cells and be part of the works teams fixing and tidying inside and outside spaces.

There is a huge backlog of maintenance across the prison estate, with no proactive maintenance. Use and train prisoners! Good for the prison, good experience for the prisoners, better physical living and working environment and create a culture within the prison of responsibility and worth.

If people are invested in the environment in which they live, this modifies behaviour in a positive way.

Respondents also told us they felt prisons were 'outdated' in relation to technology and enabling digital access was necessary for future regimes to be progressive and purposeful.

The current outdated system cannot work as it is.

The regime has to modernise as society has moved forward and I don't want to be left behind.

There was a keenness to see in-cell telephony in every cell, which could be used for connecting with family, friends, to speak with healthcare (especially given the growth of triage during the pandemic) and with probation and potential employers.

Get in touch with reality and the 21st century. We should all have phones in cells by now.

Thinking about the usability of phones in cell. OMU can phone in, why not your children?

Access to a controlled online space was also considered important, especially for those nearing release and looking to engage with housing support, employers and other outside agencies.

The fact that you cannot own an email account makes progression in a d-cat difficult as you need to apply for bank accounts and employment via emails and online.

There were a great call for the use of technology. If people had access to a controlled internet applying for employment at a jobcentre would be easier.

However, prisoners did state that they still believed human connection to be at the heart of the prison service, not technology. The ability to have social encounters with staff, other prisoners, and people from outside was vital. Prisoners articulated how having "encounters" with a wide range of people was a vital part of developing maturity. In cell learning, written material, videos and other remote communication tools were not an adequate substitute for face to face interaction, be it with staff, family, other prisons or external organisations.

When it's all digital the staff are disconnected from people's lives because they won't necessarily know what people are up to, what they're upset/stressed about because staff prisoner relationships have been removed as the primary way of communicating.

We have found that when prisoners do not see anyone, all they do is overload the system with applications and requests; it's essentially a cry for help and attention from a human being.

3.5 Humanising the system

Human interaction is a massive part of being able to cope in these stressful environments.

Connecting with others was without doubt the most common theme arising from discussion groups and one to one communication with people in prison. Contributions covered communication of all kinds: staff to prisoners, prisoners to prisoners, and prisoners to loved-ones.

Prisoners wanted staff to know their role, adhere to prison policy and be able to work with people who are living under constant tension and pressure, many harbouring past trauma and/or mental health issues. There was a recognition of the need for officers to exert authority and maintain professional distance, but a hope this would not be abused.

Only display and use power when it is essential. Safety must be built on trusting relationships, not punitive actions or fear of reprisal.

Staff think custody means behind your door, but the word custody comes from custodian – being looked after, in their care.

Although prisoners told of prisons which appeared to have cultivated a genuinely strong relationship between prisoners and officers, many others did point to this generally being strained and power-led.

They are going to do what they want, when they want because they can get away with it, they do not see me as a human so what is the point of going on?

Communication was said to be inconsistent, and needed to improve, with concerns that little accurate information was being shared between staff and prisoners, particularly in the last 18 months. Notices to prisoners were welcomed, but prisoners also wanted information to be endorsed and conveyed by staff on the wings, especially as there are many prisoners who do not read.

Visibility of staff and in particular senior staff emerged as an important requirement of any new regime; visibility assured prisoners there was oversight and conveyed feelings of safety and care.

We need to see the Gov, so he can keep in touch with what is going on on the landings.

More visible ranked Governors on the landings.

Many respondents felt there was a training gap in terms of the way officers spoke to and worked with prisoners, something that needed to be addressed as a fundamental need prior to any regime restructuring.

They feel like they don't need to listen to us because in 1-2 months you're gonna be gone.

Lots of the issues here would be improved if staff had better people skills.

I've seen a guy who self-harms go to the office and ask for razors and the staff have just given them to him.

We need greater understanding between officers and us. They should talk to us more human; good communication.

Additionally, there was a worry that many officers who had joined the service since March 2020, had not yet experienced lots of prisoners being unlocked at once. People were worried that this would lead to further fractures to the relationships if newer officers were expected to know how to interact and manage complex issues.

Work must be done to rebuild functioning relationships among prisoners and staff and I feel communication has broken down and staff have lost a lot of respect because of this. New inexperienced staff, unused to the whole wings being unlocked will need to learn how to interact with prisoners, and prisoners will have to relearn basic social skills.

Suggestions for training were made so that these new officers were more prepared for prison life if and when it does return, but also to extend their confidence across other areas such as managing conflict.

Staff could be much more proactive in tackling violence and bullying, they know what's going on, they just don't want the paperwork.

Staff to be well trained and well paid. Officers to be seen as role models. Key workers to be fully active, involved in sentence plan delivery.

In terms of safety, if the staff were trained more adequately, they would have a better knowledge and understanding and would have the tools to read situations and be able to assist and support prisoners much better.

One man explained he had flashbacks in the mornings when woken in a particular way, but the staff didn't change their approach, despite it causing distress.

They always open my cell door in the morning and shout at me to get up. I'm a grown man, I will get up in the morning by myself, they just don't get it. I'm not joking, it scares me. I've had the police raid my house and point guns in my face, getting woken like that is not good. My whole body shakes and my heart is racing. They just don't understand it.

However, despite the historic and current challenges with the staff-prisoner relationship, it was clear that people in prison did still want staff to be a more active part of their prison journey, so long as their approach was fair, respectful and genuine. The concept of a rehabilitative culture was welcomed, but it was agreed that everyone had to 'buy in' to the ethos for it to work.

Officers should spend more time listening, like peer supporters do. If you see someone is upset, go talk to him. Listen. Show you care.

Prisoner to prisoner relationships emerged as crucial. While some people did appreciate the smaller 'pods' or 'bubbles' that have been in operation in prison in recent months, it was abundantly clear that prisoners wanted to spend time interacting with other prisoners. They were keen to see more social and recreational association, and this linked with the idea of maintaining some sense of normality inside prison, as seeing friends is very much a 'normal' pastime for people in the community.

The past 18 months have shown all of us just how much we need each other.

Human beings need to mix with other human beings to retain their sanity, mental health and social intelligence.

Human beings are very social creatures and that removing or disallowing them from social environments is incredibly detrimental to their mental health, cripples their social skills and undermines their confidence.

We need more time out of our cell, to socialise; socialisation needs to be part of the day; it feels more normal and I get support too, as friendships are what keep us going when we don't have family around us.

Some older prisoners however preferred to keep together in their house blocks or units, viewing younger prisoners as a risk to their parole and re-categorisation chances.

We don't want to be vigilantes in prison. We want to keep our head down and get on. When you bring in someone at the beginning of their sentence, when their head ain't right, it disrupts the whole wing.

If I'm working to have no nickings, to go up to the parole board with the best chance of success, I don't want some 20 year old in my cell kicking off.

Young adult prisoners were very keen that they should be able to mix with other young adults, to be able to hang out freely. They were adamant that any new regime should enable young adults to mix in this way.

They're saying we can't go into each other's cells now. How does that make sense? You can go see your neighbours out there and have a cup of tea or play FIFA, where's the sense in stopping us hanging out like that?

I'm doing a 25-year life sentence, they want to sentence us like adults and then treat us like kids. How can you go and say I can't hang out with my friend in my cell? It's like they have to take everything away.

The value of peer workers was raised, and considered an important part of the future of prisons in this country. Access to peer workers within any new regime is an important one. One person talked about how some external services might be well meaning, but he feels 'put off' accessing their help because he doesn't see them as representative of him and his friends; "they don't look like us. Having ex-prisoners doing that work would make a difference."

[Train and use] mediation reps again. Mature, experienced prisoners, who were gang affiliated and lived a tough life, have now reformed, they are a great positive influence on these young men and then can talk, intervene and quash a lot of problems (ie violence).

Another significant area of concern about the future for prisoners was how often they would see family and friends, and what the quality of such contact will be. Online video calls have been made possible through 'Purple Visits' which has been successful overall in its roll out, as the quotation below suggests.

Huntercombe were so swift to bring in video calls; amazing, so easy to book, great staff in the visits hall and privacy too. Hope this stays and its made such a difference to serving my sentence.

Overall, people thought that virtual visits were good, although the system had its technical issues. Also, the system was hard to navigate for those at home who were not tech savvy. For this reason, it was suggested that the time allowed on a virtual visit should be extended to the same amount of time as a regular social visit.

One issue brought up by a number of respondents was the fact that with the only forms of communication being letters, phone calls (when you could get one) and video calls, families without a smartphone were unable to take advantage of the roll out of video calls in response to the pandemic. While some visitors might lack the skills to use a smartphone, others simply couldn't afford one.

There was also a suggestion that the option for video calls should be kept in place in the future for people who did not have visits, such as those whose families live far away, and for those who struggled to finance a family trip to a prison. One woman told us:

I don't want my children coming through security and seeing their mummy in prison. So a purple visit works for them. It don't work for me in that I can't see them in the flesh, but I know it's better for them to not be here.

Some felt they should have unlimited time to speak with family on the phone and there were concerns regarding proposed plans in some prisons to limit phone calls to three x 20 minutes a day, ostensibly because of staff resources being stretched in monitoring. Concerns related not just to breaking family ties, but to in-prison safety as well.

The phone restrictions are going to promote bullying, already people are lining up to use other people's minutes.

Several people suggested a new prison regime should incorporate overnight family visits, with the unanimous view that they would have a drastic impact on building a more humane and normalising regime, and building safety and diminishing violence in prison. In fact, one prisoner stated: “If I had conjugal visits once every six months I would be a model prisoner!”. Another listed what he believed the benefits of conjugal visits to be:

Less violence

Maintaining family ties

Less staff/prisoner inappropriate relationships

Better behaviour

Humanising.

We heard of some prison visits that had provided more privacy for family visits and opportunities to cook together and eat together, which prisoners experienced as more normal and less austere, supporting moments of emotional intimacy and vulnerability.

Visits also provided potential to maintain links with a wider community, which is an important consideration for the future of visits.

Prison should not make it so difficult to maintain links within the community, especially those that could form the bedrock of a future support network, be it while serving their sentence in custody or once they are released back into the community. People in prison want to maintain links with family and friends yes, but also their places of worship, external charities, local art groups, anything that can help them feel like they exist outside of the prison walls, and could eventually set them up when they are released.

3.6 Finding purpose

This section relates to personal purpose for those living in prison, rather than the wider purpose of imprisonment mentioned earlier in this report, although the two are clearly and closely linked.

People who contributed wanted to have something to get up for in the morning, something to keep them motivated during their time in prison. Overwhelmingly there was a focus on self-development and change.

A typical day in prison should provide a rehabilitative culture that offers meaningful activities that are progressive, inclusive, safe and give hope.

Prisoners reflected on how this had not been the case in prison for a long time, and there was a palpable sadness that young men in custody struggled to (or simply could not) imagine a prison service that could provide them with any aspiration or drive.

Bang ups will definitely weaken if not kill brains.

People [now] need coaching to leave the darkness of the cell, to look forward to the future.

On a day by day basis, people were looking to engage in activities that are stimulating or meaningful in the sense that they helped or served someone else.

So much of the activity labelled as 'purposeful' is the complete opposite.

All activities should have a purpose. Workshops should make something useful or repair something, ideally of use to the wider community to encourage prison society links and break down harmful barriers.

However, even less meaningful job roles were seen to be important as they provided something to do and feelings of self-worth.

[Outside work] is the most amazing experience, to be out in the fresh air, but more importantly to be trusted.

Prisoners should also be encouraged to lead or facilitate activities.

Achievement gives a sense of personal pride and meaning, as well as a reason to even start the day.

We heard from one man who had been denied any job based on his security record. He said he was now stuck and unable to work to something better.

Everyone should at least have the chance to have a job.

Many were looking to the future, and thinking how they could better use their time in custody to prepare for a successful release. People wanted to feel rehabilitated. They asked for sentence plans that focused on more than reducing risk and, as well as personal development plans that supported them in life goals.

A ground up review of sentence planning so right from the start an individual knows their goals which should include qualifications as well as interventions.

Prisoners wanted work that could lead to a qualification or to a better chance of employment on release, which included an honest appraisal of the labour market and the impact of any convictions on opportunities. They suggested that informed careers advice ought to be a feature of education, training and employment (ETE) support.

There is a Halfords cycle repair shop [HMP Drake Hall]. The women undertake a 9-month course in working at Halfords then are guaranteed full time work upon release.

More opportunities for distance learning or hands-on vocational qualifications to boost employment.

The men really wanted to learn a trade and apprenticeships, especially as ROTL opportunities have been limited.

I told my OM that I wanted to do youth work on the out, he laughed at me and said “you’d need a degree for that”. I’ve never even met the man and he just crushed my dreams in that one second.

A contributor suggested that prisons should trial a small personal budget for prisoners annually, linked to enhanced status.

A budget of £500.00 a year, available to prisoners for which each individual must decide what to do with (excluding work based wages). The money is budgeted so that year, the prisoners can purchase a keyboard, long distance education, charitable donations, educational laptop with access to preloaded tuition lessons for piano, tai-chi, guitar, beats-making, accountancy, mathematics, business planning, etc. etc. Successful applications similar to attempting to ascertain grants etc. with careful planning and intelligent application of one’s faculties. Unused finances are recycled back to the prison budget. The £500+/- budget must be available to every prisoner and marketed as the primary tool of rehabilitation.

Prisoners were clear that prison work ought to be paid at a level that enabled them to live in prison without relying on families to supplement prison wages. Prison poverty has been raised in all previous PPN consultations and is a serious issue on a number of levels, including safety and rehabilitation, and should be considered in relation to future regime.

[There should be] Good pay for work with outside contracts – £40 a week. You’ve got to be enhanced to get there. It would be good preparation for the community. That’s not the case on 13 quid a week. There’s no motivation.

One example of where a prison had acknowledged the effect of prison poverty and effectively acted upon it was HMP North Sea Camp, which had established a charity shop where they sold items of clothing for no more than £10. This included suits for work interviews and parole hearings. It is our understanding that a charity shop also exists in HMP Stafford, which also stocks women’s clothing for their transgender population, and examples like this can be found across the prison estate.

Improved access to education was considered to be fundamental to building hope and purpose within any new regime plan. The current emphasis on learning basic skills, with few opportunities to take education to a higher level, was a source of frustration and disappointment. For those who already had these skills and were looking at long periods in prison, this was a major problem. For example, we heard how an education department told someone who was facing 15 more years in custody that his education level was too high to come to education.

Everyone is doing level 1 and 2 Maths and English and then they do nothing with you.

Education sets a very low standard. If you want a degree you have to go through PET.

It's like a treadmill, they only care about your levels 1 and 2... bums on seats... which is a great shame because there are a lot of people here with potential who maybe hadn't been prepared to entertain the idea of educating themselves until they landed in jail.

Prisoners overwhelmingly spoke about the hope and purpose that engaging with rehabilitation services can deliver.

We don't know what we want to do, we just know what we don't want to do, and that's end up back on road.

People wanted to be guided through with the support of those whom they see as experts.

I see the day where psychs are around and not just turning up for assessments and/or deliver programmes. Right in the thick of it with me.

One example was given of a helpful course which helped to set the scene for those with long term sentences in terms of allowing prisoners the time and space to think about what needed to change for them and why:

Changing the Game is a course for long-termers that is really good. At first I just went along to get out for a bit, but gradually people started opening up and talking about how they ended up here.

They also wanted to see the possibility of genuine progression through the system and less 'dead ends', with fair and accessible opportunities. For example, we heard some people say they weren't able to undertake certain courses because of the length of their sentence, or they were at the bottom of the waiting list.

Prisoners told us of the need to move all the emphasis in prison away from progression through security categories, to a concentration on building meaningful lives within the prison community.

This man here has had his hopes up thinking he is on a waiting list for a course that doesn't exist anymore.

Because most people in here are doing short sentences, they get places on courses before me. Because I'm serving a long sentence I'm always bottom of the list. I'm really trying to help myself but everything is a setback.

There was some confusion and frustration about categorisation. Prisoners suggested that seeing a journey map of the sentence early in their journey with timelines to aim for and anticipated prison transfer points would help manage expectations and maintain hope.

C cat should feel more free, in this jail there are people who would rather be in a B.

Prisoners suggested that bigger prison sites should incorporate multiple mini units by category to save on unnecessary transfers out of area.

Why do you have to leave Berwyn to do your D cat? Break up the blocks into different category units, create a sense of movement/progression within the establishment.

A link to opportunities of more trust and increased access to ROTL in the future could be helpful in incentivising the new regime. The potential to earn days back off your sentence for exemplary behaviour was also mentioned.

No one cares about being enhanced because it is no different. If it meant you could get ROTL or more time out people would care more.

There should be more ROTL to motivate me to do better. If someone is doing good it encourages others to do better.

New regimes were seen as the opportunity to create more coherent and consistent planning processes about release:

Everything is last minute in here. I'm being released in 28 days and I'm still waiting on OMU to contact me. I don't know what I'm doing for accommodation when I get out, I've been phoning them every day and they just don't know what they're doing.

Greater access to prison chaplaincies was seen as important in building hope within any future regime design. Prisoners were clear that the new regime must be more equitably accessed by the breadth and diversity of groups in the prison; ensuring inclusion of those with disabilities, learning and physical, and those who are older, vulnerable or neurodiverse in a range of suitable opportunities.

Older residents should not be confined in their cells and forced into "retirement", they should be given opportunities to engage in meaningful activity or exercise.

There were also many suggestions for enjoyable, wing-based activities to 'pass the time'. Prisoners told us that they provide a critical outlet for tension, frustration or sadness, and again, an opportunity to feel normal. Many of the suggestions involved mixing with prison staff, which presented potential to build better relationships:

Sitting down to a 'hot' meal - where one notes the steam rising off the plate - ugh - beautiful dream. Also, where staff eat too (same place, same food etc).

It would be good to have a sit down meal on the wing with the govs, it would help bring us together and we could just chat and feel human.

Movie night in the main hall.

TED talks and guest speakers who are inspirational.

At Pentonville there were focus groups talking about particular issues. At first I just went to get out of my cell for a bit but in the end I learnt a lot and really enjoyed it. We spoke about Black Lives Matter and staff would go away and come back with responses to any questions we had.

Bingo.

I would like to see association quizzes, games teams for sporting activities, all good for mental health and engaging.

Even something like cooking together would help. Cooking with your mates on the wing could help build morale.

Playing a game of FIFA with a gov would help, just something that is more normal.

Wing workshops for art, information classes from probation offering work that could be done in cell with prepaid envelopes.

A trolley brought to each wing with books from the library.

Several people did suggest 'off-wing' activities, which included the use of green space in each prison,

As we've been locked up for over a year it would be nice if staff would arrange some events in the outdoor spaces (11 a side football pitch) like family day visits on the grass, BBQ day on the grass, association out there as well. Some sort of fun days. Bring animals out there. This might be wishful thinking?!

There should be more outdoor activities. Football, boxing, ping pong tables.

As well as cooking for themselves, a few people mentioned doing their washing on the wing, which had been an option for some people, but had been taken away in the wake of the pandemic. People told us that it gave people a little personal agency and a sense of self-respect at being able to wash their own clothes.

Whatever the activity chosen, there was a keenness for this to be well organised (or indeed prisoner-led) and to be consistent. Prisoners doubted that activities would take place, but instead be postponed or cancelled at the last minute with no reason given.

If you're going to have structured activities then make sure the activity is actually going to be on.

Music, sports, whatever, has to be consistent and reliable.

This could start well intentioned, but sooner or later, the posters will be sun bleached and peeling off the noticeboards, with no activities on because of resource issues or because of security. Back to the box then.

Finally , prisoners above all consistently found hope in increased opportunities to get involved in decision making, activity planning, and sentence journeys as part of belonging to a community.

Community spirit is vital.

Creating opportunities to influence how a prison is run, what is on the menu, what activities are put on, charity events to raise money for causes people care about, being spoken to in a respectful way. All of these things help create a sense of community and it should be a major priority of prison management and staff to actively encourage and cultivate this connection between prisoners and the establishment they are living in!

If you feel part of a community, you will protect it.

4. Conclusion

Our aim in these reports is always to let the words of prisoners speak for themselves. That means there will always be different opinions, and it will always be a mistake to say “this is what all prisoners think”. But we hope that the thematic presentation of the huge amount of insight that prisoners have been willing to provide both informs the design of new prison regimes and, perhaps above all, demonstrates why prisoners need to be equal partners in the process of designing them.

Life in most prisons is still a very long way from what anyone would consider “normal”, but the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS are actively considering what life in prison should be like in the future. There is little consensus in this debate which, as yet, has not been opened up for the formal consultation that is certainly required. We hope this report will help set the context for that wider consultation – it is not a substitute for it.

With this in mind, Prison Reform Trust (PRT) consulted with members of its Prisoner Policy Network (PPN) to explore what a future regime might look like.

We hope that the thematic presentation of the huge amount of insight that prisoners have been willing to provide both informs the design of new prison regimes and, perhaps above all, demonstrates why prisoners need to be equal partners in the process of designing them.

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