



What makes a progressive regime?

Experiences of Progression Regimes and opportunities for improvement

A report by the HMP Warren Hill Building Futures Working Group and Dr Ailie Rennie

About the Building Futures Programme

Building Futures is the Prison Reform Trust's five-year programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, exploring the experiences of people serving long prison sentences. The programme aims to give a voice to people serving sentences of over 10 years in custody, providing them with the space to advocate for themselves, bringing about change from within the system and shedding light on the human cost of long-term imprisonment. Through consultation, advocacy and research, Building Futures works alongside those with direct experience of long-term imprisonment to demonstrate the true impact of ever-increasing sentence lengths.

prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/building-futures

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the staff and prisoners who participated in the survey and focus groups. To protect identities, we have not named individuals, but their contribution was invaluable. We would like to thank the Governor and staff at HMP Warren Hill, particularly Jo Hopes for enabling these groups to take place and Marta Karatysz for her input. We would also like to thank the Building Futures team who supported the process, including David Maguire, Vicki Kerr and Marc Conway. We are also grateful to Ella Walsh and Ailie Rennie for their support and guidance in producing this report.

The HMP Warren Hill Building Futures Working Group (BFWG) is part of the Building Futures project. Made up of five prisoners serving more than 10 years in custody, the group meets on a fortnightly basis with members of PRT to discuss prevalent topics at HMP Warren Hill and relating to the wider prison system. Our role is primarily to feed information back to the PRT about long prison sentences, but we have also been given the latitude to carry out our own work and generate this report. It has been created by the BFWG members with the support of PRT and the senior management team at HMP Warren Hill.

Cover image: Andy Aitchison.

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Executive summary

This report explores what makes a prison regime ‘progressive’, how it is experienced, and how it can be improved. Drawing on surveys and focus groups with prisoners inside HMP Warren Hill who were serving sentences of 10 years or more, as well as surveys with staff working in the prison, this report highlights both the promise and limitations of a progression regime (PR) in practice. In doing so, the findings demonstrate a significant gap between how progression regimes should be run in theory and how they operate in practice.

Progression regimes were developed for those in the men’s prison estate – in particular, for those serving indeterminate sentences – who have been “excluded from open conditions, serving the recall period of their licence in custody, or having difficulty progressing through their sentence via the usual routes”.¹ An individual may also be considered eligible for a move to a progression regime if they are within four years of their tariff expiry (with priority given to indeterminate sentenced prisoners who are post-tariff and have had two or more negative parole hearings) or are within two years of their Parole Eligibility Date (if they are a parole-eligible determinate sentenced prisoner).²

The Progression regime was originally developed in the aftermath of policy changes introduced following high-profile media coverage of prisoners absconding from open conditions, most notably the case of Michael Wheatley in 2014. In response, the then Justice Secretary imposed a blanket ban preventing prisoners with any history of absconding from progressing to open prisons, a move intended to demonstrate a tougher approach to risk and public protection. This policy was later ruled unlawful by the High Court, which found it conflicted with long-standing parole guidance requiring a phased progression from closed to open conditions to test readiness for release. In seeking to reconcile public protection concerns with lawful progression requirements, the system moved towards more structured and tightly controlled pathways for progression which laid the foundations for what became the Progression Regime.^{3,4}

Progression regimes have since been introduced in a small number of closed prisons in England and Wales. The first was established at HMP Warren Hill in December 2014, following its successful implementation, three more were opened at HMPs Buckley Hall, Humber, and Erlestoke.⁵ According to the policy framework outlining progression regimes, their purpose is to “re-introduce the responsibilities, tasks and routines associated with daily life in the community, to test prisoners’ readiness to respond appropriately to the trust placed in them, and to actively pursue activities and relations which support rehabilitation”.⁶

This report was produced by the Building Futures Working Group (BFWG) at HMP Warren Hill as part of the Prison Reform Trust’s Building Futures project. Made up of five prisoners serving more than 10 years in prison, the group met on a fortnightly basis with members of the PRT to discuss prevalent topics at HMP Warren Hill and relating to the wider prison system. We chose to focus on progression regimes for this report to highlight how the regime is currently operating and identify the plethora of things that could be done to make it better. Both prisoners and staff at Warren Hill embraced the opportunity to contribute to this important report and were grateful that their voices were being heard.

1 Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Progression Regime Policy Framework*. London: The Stationery Office, page 4. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68528f35679778c74ec15e30/progression-regime-pf.pdf> (accessed 16 November 2025)

2 In practice, however, eligibility may be considered on a case by case basis as many over tariff IPP prisoners are now prioritised at Warren Hill.

3 Inside Time. (2019). *Progression regimes*. Inside Time. <https://insidetime.org/legal/progression-regimes/>

4 Travis, A. (2015). *Chris Grayling’s policy on absconders and open prisons is declared unlawful*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/apr/01/chris-grayling-justice-policy-absconders-open-prisons-unlawful>

5 UK Parliament. (2022). *Parole: written question HL7216; answered 4 April 2022*. UK Parliament. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-03-22/HL7216/>

6 Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Progression Regime Policy Framework*. London: The Stationery Office, page 4. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68528f35679778c74ec15e30/progression-regime-pf.pdf> (accessed 16 November 2025)

Findings

The consultation highlights a range of perspectives on what constitutes a progression regime and how this is experienced at HMP Warren Hill. Serving different sentence types, and having been in prison for different lengths of time, the participants provided a cross-section of experiences that revealed a unique picture of the progression regime at Warren Hill. Insights provided by staff added further texture to the findings, with many agreeing that more could be done to assist prisoners with their progression whilst still recognising the good work currently ongoing within the prison. Through their various experiences, participants described their understandings of progression regimes, their experience of the regime at Warren Hill, progression through the regime, and relationships between staff and prisoners. Below, we summarise four of the main findings identified by participants.

Disconnect between how progression regimes are understood and how they are experienced.

Both staff and prisoners articulated a clear disconnect between how progression regimes are understood in theory and how they are experienced in practice. Staff and prisoners alike generally described a progression regime as one that provides preparation for release, increased freedoms, and consistent support. However, many felt that these ideals were not realised at Warren Hill. While some valued the opportunities available, others described the regime as overly restrictive, inconsistent, or no different from other prisons, with high recall rates undermining confidence in the effectiveness of the progression regime.

Increased opportunities to evidence progression.

Participants highlighted the need for increased opportunities to evidence their progression and readiness for release. Limited access to vocational training, industry-standard qualifications, and Release on Temporary Licence meant that prisoners struggled to show the personal growth and risk reduction required for parole or transfer to open conditions. Without these opportunities, progression risked becoming a 'tick-box' exercise rather than a meaningful step towards resettlement. Both staff and prisoners argued that renewed investment in opportunities – particularly those with clear relevance to life beyond prison – would be vital in ensuring that progression regimes deliver on their intended purpose.

There is a need for improved staff training.

The role of staff was central to how the regime was experienced. Although positive examples were noted, particularly in specialist units like the therapeutic community (TC)⁷ or the Psychologically Informed Planned Environment (PIPE),⁸ many prisoners reported a lack of mutual respect and felt unsupported in the final stages of their sentence when encouragement, they argued, was most important. This points to the need for improved staff training, both to embed the values of progression regimes consistently across the prison and to equip staff with the skills to recognise and respond to diverse needs. Ongoing professional development and greater accountability were seen as key to ensuring staff practice aligns with the ethos of a progression regime.

The prison needs to adopt a more individualised, tailored approach towards assisting people to progress.

The final recurring theme was the need for a more tailored response to progression. The three-staged system⁹ was experienced by many as inflexible and poorly adapted to individual circumstances. Older prisoners, those without visits, and those with specific needs often found the system of little benefit, while others felt that their risk had already been addressed before entering the regime and that what was missing were opportunities to demonstrate this. Prisoners stressed that support should be more individualised, particularly for those with additional vulnerabilities or neurodiverse needs, rather than relying on uniform benchmarks.

7 Therapeutic Communities are residential units in prisons that operate as structured, democratic environments where staff and residents work together to support personal change through shared responsibility, group therapy, and pro-social community living.

8 Psychologically Informed Planned Environments are specialist prison units that use psychologically informed, relational approaches to create stable environments to consolidate core risk reduction work they have completed elsewhere; through application of new skills learned. PIPEs are not formal treatment programmes, but support engagement, progression, and consolidation within the Offender Personality Pathway.

9 Each stage of the Progressive Regime has distinct expectations and entitlements. A more detailed explanation is provided later in this report, or can be found in the *Progression Regime Policy Framework* (Ministry of Justice, 2025), available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68528f35679778c74ec15e30/progression-regime-pf.pdf>

Recommendations

Below we outline the recommendations arising from the consultation. These recommendations address staff training and culture within the progression regime, opportunities to evidence progression and adequately prepare for release and resettlement, relationships between staff and prisoners, and the function of progression regimes more generally.

HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) should tailor progression to individual needs. Staff should adopt a more flexible and personalised approach to progression, recognising that incentives and goals may differ for varying prisoners depending on their circumstances (eg older prisoners, those with health conditions, those without family support). Staff should also ensure progression plans are realistic, achievable, and grounded in preparing for the outside world, consistently working with prisoners to support them in reaching their targets.

HMPPS should increase opportunities for purposeful employment. To do so, the prison should provide more accredited, industry-standard qualifications with direct labour market value. It should also strengthen links with employers, organisations or companies to create real post-release opportunities. The prison should also look to expand the Employment Hub hours and offer more opportunities for one-to-one support to assist individuals in gaining employment.

HMPPS should better assist prisoners in their financial preparation for release. This may be achieved through increased wages for prison jobs, the provision of greater opportunities to save (eg by increasing the savings cap, or helping prisoners to open bank accounts earlier in their sentence), and courses or training on money management. Doing so will enable prisoners to build financial stability and confidence ahead of release.

HMPPS should expand opportunities for technology. HMP Warren Hill should provide access to a greater number of digital technologies within the prison, including in-cell digital access and self-service kiosks. It should also provide structured training on everyday digital skills (eg online banking, email, job applications) to prepare prisoners for life outside. Prisons should also ensure that video visits and communication tools that sustain family ties are reliable and can be regularly accessed. They could help achieve this by enabling prisoners to top up their phone credit from their cell and ensuring that prisoners can use phones in cells 24/7.

HMPPS should reintroduce and expand access to Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). The prison should reinstate ROTL opportunities for those at stage three of the regime, supporting a gradual and supervised reintroduction to the community. 'Internal' ROTL initiatives — such as access to Hollesley Bay café or movement within the prison — should also be considered where external temporary release is not possible. ROTLs should be used as a meaningful test of risk reduction, responsibility, and prisoners' readiness for release.

HMPPS should provide additional staff training which embeds a progressive culture. Prisons should deliver targeted training for all staff on progression regimes. This should seek to ensure consistency between all staff members in applying principles of respect, fairness, and transparency, embedding the values of the Enabling Environment standards.¹⁰ Such training should not only occur at the beginning of a staff member's appointment but should be ongoing, addressing changes in culture or biases that may have developed. Training should also generate and reinforce a culture that prioritises progression over punishment, working with prisoners to help them achieve the next step in their sentence. Examples of good practice might be taken from staff working on the PIPE or TC and implemented in the main regime.

HMPPS should deliver additional staff training on mental health, neurodiversity and cultural differences. Such training would encourage staff to develop their ability to recognise and understand individual differences, better equip them to provide ed support for prisoners, and address any personal biases.

¹⁰ An Enabling Environment is defined by a series of standards set out by the Royal College of Psychiatrists Centre for Quality Improvement (CCQI) that places emphasis on well-being, belonging, contribution to growth, learning, development, and respect (NOMS. (2013). Enabling features of Psychologically Informed Planned Environments. London: The Stationary Office). Warren Hill was awarded an Enabling Environment accreditation in 2019.

The governor and senior management team should encourage all staff to rebuild trust through improved communication. Staff should be encouraged to spend more time on the wings, developing relationships with prisoners through day-to-day interaction. The prison should also create regular and open forums for staff and prisoners to share concerns, ideas, and feedback, which will allow prisoners and staff to work collaboratively within the progression regime.

HMPPS should provide allocated time to support 'governor breakfasts' amongst staff and prisoners and reintroduce landing meals. These breakfasts/meals would help to build positive relationships between staff and prisoners and act as an opportunity or reward for those who have been recognised as demonstrating positive behaviour.

HMPPS should make changes to the process to move to a progression regime, making clear that their use is for consolidation rather than completing additional courses or programmes. To allow individuals to continue making progress and moving forward within their sentence, progression regimes should ultimately be used for consolidation of previous work rather than to complete further assessments or training. The present process feels contradictory and elicits frustration, which can instead inhibit or disrupt progress.

Staff working within progression regimes should clarify expectations and pathways for progression from the outset. Staff should provide clear and realistic information on arrival and induction about what progression means in practice, and specifically what it looks like at Warren Hill. They should seek to ensure that men understand how the various stages operate, what criteria are used to approve their progression to the next stage, and how their sentence plan links to progression. To do so, staff should improve transparency in their reporting and decision-making, which in turn would reduce the perception of bias or inconsistency.

Introduction

The Building Futures programme

Building Futures is the Prison Reform Trust's five-year, National Lottery Community Fund funded programme exploring the experiences of people serving long prison sentences. The programme aims to give a voice to people serving sentences of over 10 years in custody (eight years for women), providing them with the space to advocate for themselves, bring about change from within the system and shed light on the human cost of long-term imprisonment. Through consultation, advocacy and research, Building Futures works alongside those with direct experience of long-term imprisonment to demonstrate the true impact of ever-increasing sentence lengths.

The Warren Hill Building Futures Working Group (BFWG) was set up in January 2025. It consists of five long serving prisoners who meet twice a month with members of the PRT to discuss prevalent topics at HMP Warren Hill and the wider prison system. The aim of the Warren Hill BFWG is to implement change through a peer led initiative.

Purpose of the consultation

For many years, HMP Warren Hill has been regarded as one of the best performing prisons in the country by HM Inspectorate of Prisons and other experts and officials. Warren Hill's flagship progression regime has led to the introduction of similar regimes in other prisons in England. Despite this, the experience of being a prisoner in such a regime at Warren Hill, however, has left much to be desired. As a group, we chose to focus on the progression regime at Warren Hill to highlight how the regime is currently operating and identify what could be done to make it better. As individuals, we want to build the necessary skills to prepare us for release, to gain employment, and to be successful outside, such that we do not come back. Through surveys and focus groups with prisoners and with staff at Warren Hill, we wanted to initiate a constructive dialogue with the prison management to think differently about the regime and to identify areas of improvement. In doing so, we hope to leave a legacy that demonstrates not only that we are fully prepared for the next stage of our progression but to improve the regime for those who come after us.

Progression regimes

Progression regimes (PRs) are structured, risk-managed pathways designed to support long-sentenced prisoners in moving towards open conditions or eventual release. As outlined briefly in the executive summary, these regimes provide staged opportunities for prisoners to demonstrate responsibility, engagement, and readiness for reintegration, while managing risk within a closed prison setting.

In addition to meeting the eligibility criteria for a progression regime, individuals must also be assessed as suitable for participation. This includes having reached an appropriate point in their sentence, demonstrating willingness to engage with a structured approach that requires personal responsibility and engagement with offending-related behaviour, and posing no significant unmanageable risk to staff or other prisoners. To do so, individuals need to:

- Have reached the appropriate point in their sentence for assessment to take place.
- Display willingness to engage in an approach which requires high levels of personal responsibility, and where they are expected to actively confront offending-related behaviour, and take action which will assist in their rehabilitation.
- Be unlikely to pose any evident and significant security risk, either to staff or other prisoners that cannot be managed by staff on the PR.¹¹

Progression Regimes in prisons are designed to guide prisoners through various stages of rehabilitation, aiming to support progression and, ultimately, reintegration. There are aspects that are central to this such as Psychologically Informed Planned Environments (PIPE), therapeutic counselling, Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), and the allocation of roles within prison.

PIPE units represent an innovative approach to creating prison environments that are psychologically informed and supportive. Unlike traditional custodial settings, PIPEs focus on understanding and responding to prisoners' emotional and psychological needs by structuring the environment and routines

¹¹ Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Progression Regime Policy Framework*. London: The Stationery Office, page 5. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68528f35679778c74ec15e30/progression-regime-pf.pdf> (accessed 16 November 2025).

to reduce distress and encourage positive behaviour.¹² Therapeutic counselling complements the PIPE by providing prisoners with tools to manage emotions, trauma, and behavioural challenges. The cohesion between the PIPE and therapeutic counselling is vital for effective rehabilitation. PIPEs create the safety and psychological space needed for counselling to be impactful, while therapeutic support helps prisoners to engage constructively with progression programmes. Together, they foster emotional regulation, self-awareness, and key interpersonal competencies that underpin successful rehabilitation and progression.¹³

This development journey is formalised through a three-stage programme that sets behavioural and rehabilitative targets in alignment with a prisoner's risk level, using the Enhanced Behaviour Monitoring (EBM) process.¹⁴ Reviews of an individual's progress take place at a board linked to the EBM Policy Framework where it must be agreed that they can move to the next stage of the regime. To progress through these stages, each individual is assigned a Prison Offender Manager (POM), a Community Offender Manager (COM), and a Key Worker.

Stages 1, 2 and 3 of the progression framework provide clear, incremental steps that aim to motivate prisoners to work towards their rehabilitation. This allows for personal development and gives prisoners tangible goals tied to privileges and entitlements within the prison. This can include assigning roles to prisoners (eg peer mentor) which fosters responsibility, skill development, and a sense of self-worth. Roles can also provide structure, build transferable employment skills, and signal trust to staff through positive engagement, aiding a person's progression through the stages. They also prepare prisoners for the responsibilities awaiting them post-release.

When effectively implemented, staged progression facilitates gradual re-socialisation and skill acquisition. However, challenges persist. Overly rigid systems may not accommodate individual complexities, such as mental health issues or learning difficulties. In addition, resource constraints, staff shortages, and limited access to programmes can all stall progress, undermining motivation. Furthermore, prisoners deemed 'high-risk' may face barriers to progression despite engagement efforts, highlighting tension between risk management and rehabilitative ideals.

Ultimately, progression regimes are designed to manage and mitigate risk. The outcome of a risk assessment can determine access to programmes and privileges, ensuring that progression is safe for both the prisoner and the public.¹⁵ However, when risk is overestimated, progression can be unnecessarily hindered, potentially exacerbating frustrations and reducing rehabilitation opportunities. Conversely, underestimating risk may lead to premature progression and issues regarding safety.

Effective prison progression regimes are multifaceted systems that rely on the integration of psychological informed environments like PIPEs, therapeutic counselling, risk management, practical opportunities, and active prisoner participation through roles. While challenges such as resource limitations and balancing risk with rehabilitation exist, these regimes offer a structured path towards reducing reoffending and supporting reintegration.

HMP Warren Hill

Originally opened in 1982 as part of the Hollesley Bay Colony, Warren Hill separated from its open prison counterpart in 2002 and began operating as a category C (training and resettlement) adult men's prison in 2014. It delivers a progression regime for prisoners serving a life sentence, imprisonment for public protection (IPP) or an extended determinate sentence (including those who are excluded from open conditions and those who have been recalled).¹⁶ The prison has a particular focus for men nearing the end of their sentence, progressing towards open conditions or even being released back into the community. A recent HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) report noted that 93% of prisoners at Warren Hill were serving life sentences, 43% were aged 50 or over, and a total of 42 individuals had been released in the 12 months prior to the report's publication.¹⁷ The report also noted that half of those released from Warren Hill were recalled and that insufficient work was being done to understand, and subsequently address, the reasons why. At the time of this research, 98% of prisoners at Warren Hill had served or would serve a sentence of over 10 years.¹⁸

12 Turley, C., Payne, C. & Webster, S. (2013). *Enabling features of Psychologically Informed Planned Environments*. London: National Offender Management Service.

13 Webster, N., Bolger, L. & Lewis, C. (2014). Applying evidence-based practice in custody PIPEs and using early evidence to inform the development of Theory of Change. *Prison Service Journal*, 271, pp.34-42

14 For more information and an example of the staged process, see Annex A, Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Progression Regime Policy Framework*. London: The Stationary Office.

15 Ibid.

16 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. (2025). *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Warren Hill*. London: HM Inspectorate of Prisons. More recently, HMP Warren Hill has accepted individuals who are serving determinate prison sentences.

17 Ibid.

18 Personal communication with HMP Warren Hill's Custodial Manager.

The prison has an operational capacity of 269 places across six residential units, catering for three cohorts of prisoners: the progression regime, the Therapeutic Community (TC), and the Psychologically Informed Planned Environment (PIPE).¹⁹

The progression regime at Warren Hill was introduced in 2014 to “enable prisoners who had failed in open conditions, or who were otherwise categorised as unsuitable for placement in open conditions, to demonstrate to the parole board that their risk to the public had reduced sufficiently, thereby enabling them to move to open conditions or be released on licence”.²⁰ Individuals have to apply to be transferred to Warren Hill, and are selected due to their suitability to engage with the progression regime of the prison.²¹

Those on the progression regime are housed in three residential units (Oak, Alder, and Sycamore), one of which is for older men and those who require additional support due to health conditions. In 2022, a new four-bed unit (Willow) was also opened, acting as an on-site approved premises for those who are awaiting their release (and a move to an external approved premises), a transfer to a category D (open) prison, or waiting to be released on temporary licence.

The Elm unit accommodates those participating in Warren Hill’s therapeutic community. It houses up to 40 individuals and provides intensive group-based therapy for those who have been assessed as able to benefit from such a regime. The TC operates under the guidance of psychologists, as well as trained officers, and is conducted democratically (where those within the community have a significant say about what happens in the unit and make decisions collectively).

The final residential unit, Maple, offers a Psychologically Informed Planned Environment (PIPE), which accommodates up to 20 individuals. This unit primarily offers transitional support for those who have completed therapy (either at Warren Hill or at another prison).

Consultation structure

Submissions to this report

The findings of this report are based on 84 survey responses received by our team. Of those who completed the survey, 14 were members of staff at HMP Warren Hill whilst the remaining 70 were prisoners. This represented approximately 10% and 30% of the population of staff and prisoners at Warren Hill respectively.

Surveys were placed on each of the wings with boxes for them to be returned once completed. Our team also went round to talk to individuals and offered their support if needed (ie if prisoners had learning difficulties or neurodivergent needs). Some prisoners utilised this support and with the help of group members, completed the surveys.

All 70 prisoners who participated in the survey were serving a minimum of 10 years in custody. This represented 29% of all prisoners at Warren Hill who were serving a sentence of this length. These survey respondents were serving a range of sentence types, including standard determinate, extended determinate, Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP), mandatory life and discretionary life.

The length of time these individuals had spent in prison varied significantly, with four participants having spent between one and five years imprisoned, 10 participants having spent between six and 10 years imprisoned, 20 participants having spent 11 to 15 imprisoned, and 36 participants who had spent more than 16 years inside.

17 participants had been at Warren Hill for less than one year, 43 participants had spent between one and five years there, eight participants had spent between six and 10 years there, and two did not answer how long they had been held in the prison. Before arriving at HMP Warren Hill, participants had collectively spent time in 86 other establishments, ranging from category A to category D.²²

Of the 14 staff who participated in this project, 10 were officers, and four were specialist officers. Two participants had worked in the prison system for two years or less, five participants had worked for between three and six years, two participants had worked for between seven and 10 years, and five participants had worked for 11 years or more. None of the staff had worked in a progression regime prior to working at HMP Warren Hill.

Of those surveyed, 72 of the 84 participants identified as male (67 of these were prisoners and five members

19 IMB. (2024). *Annual report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Warren Hill*. London: The National Independent Monitoring Board Secretariat.

20 Ibid, page 4.

21 For more information on ‘eligibility’ and ‘suitability’ for a progressive regime see Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Progression Regime Policy Framework*. London: The Stationary Office.

22 See <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/adviceguide/categorisation-mens-prisons/> for further information about prison security categories.

of staff), seven as female (all staff), and five preferred not to say. The vast majority of men imprisoned at Warren Hill who completed the survey were white (47), four identified as black, four as mixed ethnic background, three as Asian, six identified as another ethnic group, and six preferred not to say. Of the staff who completed the survey, 10 identified as white, one identified as mixed ethnic background, and three preferred not to disclose their ethnicity.

Survey questions

For the survey, both staff and prisoners at Warren Hill were asked the same series of questions about progressive regimes. This included how the progressive regime functions at HMP Warren Hill, potential barriers to its implementation, staff-prisoner relationships, and suggested improvements.

The full list of questions asked were:

1. Do you know what a progressive regime is?
2. What does a progressive regime mean to you?
3. Do you think Warren Hill runs a progressive regime? Why/why not?
4. What were successful aspects of the previous regime? And what should be reintroduced?
5. How was the progressive regime before COVID? And how does it compare now? Is it better or worse?
6. What do you think could be implemented to make Warren Hill a more progressive regime?
7. What criteria do you think should be met for someone to move to a progressive regime?
8. What do you think are the biggest barriers to prisoners progressing to open conditions or being released from a progressive prison?
9. How could relationships between staff and prisoners be strengthened to support a progressive regime?
10. How could communication between staff and prisoners be improved?
11. Do you think the Enabling Environment standards (belonging, boundaries, communication, empowerment, involvement, leadership, structure, development, safety, openness) are met at HMP Warren Hill?

These questions generated a wide range of responses, both from the staff and prisoners at Warren Hill, which have been collated thematically and are presented below.

Focus groups

To complement the surveys above, the team also conducted three focus groups with 18 prisoners at HMP Warren Hill. These groups were run by the members of the Building Futures Working Group (BFWG), along with the assistance of the team from the Prison Reform Trust. Posters were put up around the prison advertising the focus group a week beforehand inviting people to participate. Group members also reminded people on the wings, informing them where the event would be held. There was no pre-registration, and prisoners attended if they wanted to and were available. At least one person from each wing was present. The focus groups took place on the evening of Monday 30 June 2025.

The focus groups centred around eight key questions, which are listed below and had been decided by the working group earlier that week:

1. Is there cohesion between the PIPE, TC, and progressive regime?
2. What skills do you think you learn here that can help you on the outside?
3. Do you think you are prepared here for the outside?
4. Do you think stage 1, 2, and 3 work in the progressive regime?
5. Do you think a progressive regime lowers your risk?
6. Is this establishment's technology up to date in terms of keeping up with the outside?
7. What do you think could be done to make this a progressive regime?

These questions gained a variety of responses around what works within the progression regime, what they

felt they had learnt through the progression regime, whether it lowers risk, and whether they felt prepared for returning outside. These questions were used as a starting point for further conversations about the progression regime and people's experiences of it at Warren Hill.

The focus groups were conducted in an informal and conversational manner. Notes were taken by members of the BFWG (one notetaker was sitting with each of the groups). These notes were then typed up after the session.

The group received feedback from some prisoners who felt it was refreshing that they could come and say what they wanted to say in a non-judgemental space and feel like their voices were being heard.

The group had hoped to also conduct a focus group with staff, but this was not possible. Instead, these seven questions were written up and given to five staff members who completed and returned them. These staff members were different to those who completed the survey.

Findings

The findings below are grouped thematically, incorporating the data from the surveys with staff and prisoners, as well as the focus group discussions. Analysing the data in this way highlighted four key themes from the research which will be examined in turn: 1) participants' understanding of a progressive regime; 2) experiences of the progression regime at Warren Hill; 3) reaching, and moving beyond, a progressive regime; and 4) the role of staff in implementing a progression regime.

Understanding of a progressive regime

When asked if they knew what a progressive regime was, the vast majority of participants responded that they did. Only four participants (all of whom were prisoners rather than staff) said they did not. More specifically, both staff and the prisoners at Warren Hill described their understanding of a progressive regime as being related to preparation for release, freedom and opportunities, and additional support. Whilst these factors are described separately below, they often overlapped within participants' responses, highlighting how interconnected they appeared to be within understandings of the regime.

Firstly, "preparation for release" was the most common response when participants were asked what a progressive regime meant to them. Typically, responses described how the regime was an important stepping stone in their sentence towards achieving release. This could be either directly from Warren Hill or indirectly through a transfer to open conditions — where they would have the opportunity for release. Here, participants described how a more relaxed regime was intended to prepare them to move forward and progress towards release, reducing some of the more traditional measures of imprisonment through increased freedom and opportunities. Staff also recognised that beyond preparing for release, a progressive regime should also assist individuals to "refrain from returning" to prison (or "get out and stay out").

Participants spoke of progressive regimes as a space where people could consolidate their learning, test their behaviour and learn from mistakes. Through a combination of increased freedoms and reduced restrictions, participants described how such regimes were intended to provide the opportunity for them to grow to become more self-sufficient, reducing feelings of dependency on the prison. For example, one participant said that progressive regimes allowed him to "consolidate and evidence [his] learning" whilst another said they "challenge you to think and do things for yourself".

By accessing such opportunities, participants also described how such regimes should support them to show accountability for their actions, take responsibility for their risk management, and to develop better self-understanding. Participants characterised progressive regimes as being supportive. The staged process of the regime, in conjunction with assistance from their Prison Offender Manager (POM), Community Offender Manager (COM), and Key Worker encouraged prisoners to live in a way that evidenced to the Parole Board that they were rehabilitated and were safe to be released. Staff referred to this as "working together for success". A few prisoners also described progressive regimes as being supportive because they provided another chance for them to still work towards release, despite having previously failed in open conditions or been recalled. This signalled a system willing to provide them with an opportunity to demonstrate personal growth and risk reduction.

A fourth category – which was only identified by the prisoners and not by staff – was development. Here, prisoners described how a progressive regime was intended to assist them with the development of skills and behaviours that were more pro-social. They linked the development of such behaviours to the 10 Enabling Environment principles which allowed them to manage their own behaviour whilst also actively helping

others.²³ They suggested that these skills could encourage them to be more forward focused, imagining a life beyond the prison, and enable them to take ownership in lowering their risk by adhering to the rules and regulations of the regime.

Whilst most participants understood what a progressive regime was and how it should operate in theory, several suggested that this was not what happened in practice at Warren Hill, which we turn to next.

The progressive regime at HMP Warren Hill

Do you think Warren Hill runs a progressive regime?

When asked if Warren Hill runs a progressive regime, only 37 out of 70 participants surveyed said yes.²⁴ Of the staff surveyed, 11 said yes, one said no, and two said they were unsure. Despite most staff answering yes, they stated that there was room for improvement within the regime. They suggested that better opportunities were needed – including the improvement of available technology within the prison. One staff member also suggested that individuals needed to be given more chances – recognising that with increased responsibility might also occasionally come mistakes – and that individuals should be supported rather than reprimanded. Another individual member of staff noted that there was an “anti-TC bias” within the prison, which prevented the smooth operation of the progressive regime and cohesion between different units.

However, responses to the same question were significantly more divided for the prisoners. 26 prisoners said yes, 22 said no, 16 felt it was mixed, and the remainder did not respond. Those who thought Warren Hill *did* operate a progressive regime attributed this to the range of opportunities and activities that the prison offered – most of which had not been available in their previous establishments (for example, the prison shop or barista) – and how these had provided them with responsibility and autonomy. Here, they also noted a wide range of skills or trainings they had been able to participate in which they believed could assist them on the outside. These included vocational or practical training (eg NVQ Level 2,²⁵ forklift qualification, gym courses, attaining a CSCS card,²⁶ welding, cooking), educational and offender behaviour courses (eg Sycamore Tree,²⁷ drug intervention courses, ReSeT,²⁸ mentoring), and personal development (eg mental health awareness, risk management, developing tolerance). Utilising these opportunities helped to encourage individuals to work through the stages of the regime, showing what they had learnt and the person they had become.

Others reported how the prison regime more generally had assisted and promoted their own self-understanding, boosting their awareness of certain behaviours and building their self-esteem to overcome barriers effectively. For example, one participant said that they felt “mentally better” and more prepared by being in Warren Hill. Having witnessed other people progress onto open conditions or seeing them be released from Warren Hill was also a big factor in why some participants said yes: “I’ve seen so many lads move on” or “people progress quicker [by being here]”.

Those who said the regime was *not* progressive likened Warren Hill to any other prison they had previously been in: “same as my previous prison, no progression”. Another said that they felt “no more prepared than any other jail” to progress. In some cases, Warren Hill was classified as being worse and more restrictive than other prisons: “regime is more restrictive than prison I came from”. One participant said that it was “still too restrictive here, ie facilities list, how much you can spend, where you can order from”, advocating that people needed more opportunities to show their progression and that they could be trusted instead. These individuals identified significant room for improvement, with more opportunities for increased freedom of movement, access to temporary release and home leave. Without these, participants considered the regime to simply be a tick box exercise that failed to offer solid foundations to prepare people for their release. As such, they felt that the reality of the prison did not match the goals of the progressive regime, suggesting that “it’s all smoke and mirrors”. Particular criticisms were raised about the “rude and scornful” behaviour and attitude of staff members (which is detailed more below) who “weaponised” the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) behaviour management scheme, rather than supporting progression. One participant further remarked that Warren Hill was ‘just like any other cat C’ but with the addition of the Enhanced Behaviour Monitoring (EBM) process which they felt was trying to ‘psychoanalyse’ them and the risk they posed, rather

23 The 10 Enabling Environment principles include belonging, boundaries, communication, development, involvement, safety, structure, empowerment, leadership, and openness. (Royal College of Psychiatrists’ Centre for Quality Improvement. (2013). *The Enabling Environments Award*. London: Royal College of Psychiatrists’ Centre for Quality Improvement).

24 The responses generated from this question indicate that participants answered subjectively on whether they thought Warren Hill was fulfilling its promise of a progressive regime or not, rather than objectively (ie whether it was technically classed as a progressive regime).

25 An NVQ (National Level Qualification) is a practical, work-based qualification relating to a specific job or industry, which is assessed through work-related tasks.

26 A CSCS (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) card verifies that a construction worker has appropriate training, qualifications, and skills for their role.

27 The Sycamore Tree is a victim awareness programme centred around the principles of restorative justice.

28 The ReSeT course refers to the Relationship Skills Training programme focused on building family ties.

than support them to progress, which they regarded as damaging.

The participants in this study were evidently aware that recall and reoffending rates were high following release from Warren Hill. This, they felt, was in contradiction to the principle of a progressive regime — which was meant to be setting them up for success. They believed that the prison was ultimately not fulfilling its duty and needed to change internally for it to be seen as an effective regime. They regarded the regime as being “oppressive”, “depressive”, and regressive (in the long run) rather than progressive.

Participants who described feeling mixed about whether the regime at Warren Hill was progressive identified good work and education opportunities, but suggested there was significant room for improvement. One participant said: “yes and no, there’s a chance to display skills, but the prison does not prepare you for release”. Here, participants identified inconsistencies between what the prison offered and what individuals needed at this vital pre-release stage. Participants, suggested that what is offered by the prison may look good on paper, but represents no real tangible offer of help or support towards release and resettlement.

Do you think the three stages work in the progressive regime? And do you think it lowers risk?

In the focus groups, participants were asked if they thought the three stages of the progressive regime work and the responses were often mixed or unsure. Some people argued that the stages were “pointless” and “worthless” — particularly for those who could not access the benefits that accompanied a change in stage. They argued that benefits should be more tailored to an individual’s specific circumstances. For example, “Stage 3 is worthless unless you get visits” or “older prisoners are left out of work prospects”. In these instances, the incentives that could be gained were less impactful and felt disconnected from their individual journeys towards release. This led some to argue that the stages should be removed altogether.

A small number did recognise the benefits that the staged approach offered, allowing them to move through the regime, rewarding individuals’ hard work and compliance with the rules with additional benefits (eg being able to visit the shop more). Here, they argued that progressing to latter stages allowed them to gain better jobs, consolidate skills and learn new tools to assist with life outside. One individual suggested that not everyone viewed the stages as working because they saw progression as “what more they could get versus what more they could do”, without recognising the positives that came from moving stage and learning or evidencing new skills.

Staff were largely positive that the stages did work as they provided a “clear distinction” and “encouraged people to progress” to achieve additional benefits. They did, however, suggest that more could be available at stage three, providing a further incentive to progress and greater opportunities to prepare for release. Staff also noted that changing stages was a long and arduous administrative process which could cause long delays and slow an individual’s progress.

When asked more specifically if they considered the progressive regime to lower their risk, prisoners who attended the focus groups largely stated no. Whilst some individuals highlighted the importance of going through the stages or working with staff as evidencing risk reduction, most felt that the progressive regime itself did not offer anything distinctive – in comparison to other prisons or regimes – that contributed to their ability to lower their risk. Other participants even said that they had already done the work to lower their risk prior to moving to Warren Hill and felt that the regime should be offering opportunities to evidence this, rather than forcing them to lower it further. Some men described this as the goalposts moving further away whenever they got close to them. Staff, by contrast, consistently argued that the progression regime suitably lowered prisoners’ risk – “if they engaged properly and chose to work on themselves”. Here, they argued that the regime “empowers/enables men to take responsibility for themselves” which could be seen as lowering risk.

What was the progressive regime like before COVID? And how does it compare to now?

The majority of those surveyed (both staff and those in prison) had not been at Warren Hill prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently did not answer this question. The overwhelming tone of those who did respond was that the prison was now a less progressive place than it had been previously.

Those who arrived at Warren Hill before 2020 described the regime as having receded “to the point where so many freedoms have been removed”. For example, people reported how previously – if a prisoner had reached stage three of the regime – the prison had offered opportunities for free movement around the prison (including to the business hub or library), cooking, and most importantly, ROTL (see below). Instead, people consistently reported how “movement had tightened” in the prison. This was not only viewed as a lack of freedom or access, but as the prison communicating of a distinct lack of trust. One individual stated that “since COVID, [the prison] went from a permissive environment to a restrictive one” whilst another said,

“we used to be trusted but now we’re dictated to”. Going “backwards rather than forwards” felt paradoxical in a progression prison where prisoners were “told [they] were being prepared for cat D or release” yet felt further from it.

The sense that things had tightened in the prison was consistent between prisoners and staff working there. One staff member attributed this to a change in the function of the progression regime whereby “trust and evidencing risk management has been lost since COVID”. Other staff described how the regime “feels more punitive” now, with a focus on “model behaviour rather than the reality of difficulties and recovering from making mistakes”. Prisoners also felt there had been a shift in staffing priorities as well as the type of staff they saw in the prison. Prisoners were conscious that there appeared to be a greater emphasis placed on risk management now and suggested this was to the detriment of the regime. They argued that staff were more distant, offered less support, and failed to meet the 10 Enabling Environment standards (see more below): “we’re viewed as a risk that needs to be managed rather than an individual doing their best to progress”. Prisoners also noted that old staff left and new inexperienced staff or those without experience of progressive regimes, were the norm.

Staff and prisoners also noted that since COVID there appeared to be less cohesion between the different aspects of the regime, with the PIPE and TC units separated from the rest of the prison. This was echoed in the focus groups with units viewed as distinct from one another — “doing their own thing”. Several people said they were not aware of the links between the three, with one participant stating, “it feels like different prisons”. Staff were keen to highlight that there were strong working links between the PIPE and TC, but that these did remain “very separate” to the progressive regime. One staff member said, “before COVID, the prison realised TC trained people for the progressive regime, but now they are seen as a threat”.

In contrast to most responses, one staff member suggested that the prison was in a better position, noting that there were “more opportunities available to prisoners to progress with better staff understanding of prisoners’ needs”. This was in direct opposition to what prisoners reported.

Do you think the Enabling Environment standards are met at Warren Hill?

The 10 Enabling Environment (EE) standards (belonging, boundaries, communication, empowerment, involvement, leadership, structure, development, safety, and openness) are central to the ethos of Warren Hill. However, when participants were asked whether these standards were met at Warren Hill, almost half (39) of prisoners said no – 33 said yes and 12 did not answer. People said that “the EE standards have dropped” in the current regime and that they were met “only on a superficial level, not in any meaningful way”. For example, despite having regular conversations with staff and the senior leadership team, some participants felt that their concerns went unheard or were actively dismissed, which they perceived as going against healthy communication and openness. Another participant stated that they considered the standards to be “irrelevant and childish in their current format”. Participants identified a distinct lack of communication, leadership, empowerment, and development. Many felt that they were “being punished or receiving a negative IEP” or described how staff were perceived as writing “false or half-truths” on records, which were detrimental to their progress and contradictory to the aims of the Enabling Environment standards.

Conversely, others said that, in general, Warren Hill did meet the standards. Most commonly, they reported feeling like the prison was a safe place to be and one which empowered them to “implement the standards in their own life”, providing purpose and “the opportunity to become the person I want to be”. Those who were on the PIPE or TC units (or who had been) identified that the standards were more frequently met there than in the rest of the regime — particularly with the consistency of the standards’ implementation and communication by staff.

Two-thirds of the staff surveyed who answered this question believed that Warren Hill *did* meet the Enabling Environment standards “on the whole” or to the best of its ability. Yet many of them accepted that there were areas that needed strengthening or improving. One staff member felt that it was unfair that there was “no recognition for prisoners doing what is required of them”, failing to meet the empowerment standard. Other staff insisted that more needed to be done to integrate these standards into the day-to-day operation of the prison, rather than “just on the surface”, and that their implementation needed to be more consistent. One individual stated that this could be at least partially achieved through an “improved induction explanation of expectations”.

Of the staff members who answered ‘no’ to this question, several suggested that some of the standards were met but not all of them, whilst others felt that an inconsistent structure coupled with a lack of boundaries and communication prevented many standards from being achieved. Here, staff identified that they were operating within “grey areas” that were not transparent – either to themselves or to prisoners – and said that it would “be better to be honest/clear and not fob prisoners off”.

What do you think could be implemented to make Warren Hill a more progressive regime?

When asked about potential improvements to the regime, both staff and prisoners made suggestions which fall into three categories: 1) improved technology; 2) access to Release on Temporary Licence; and 3) more opportunities to evidence progression.

Prisoners described having very limited access to technology at Warren Hill. Here, they noted the absence of kiosks and in-cell technology²⁹ at Warren Hill, which had been present at other prisons. The technology that was available was described as unreliable and systems were "not up to date", "always down", and "video visits [that] break or cut out". This latter point was felt acutely by those in prison as it led to them "losing quality family time". Prisoners compared this unfavourably with other parts of the prison estate and with life outside. They felt that Warren Hill lagged behind what was available elsewhere in the estate and outside in the community, remarking that "even Victorian locals have better tech". Looking ahead, prisoners suggested that access to better technology – including a basic or introductory technology course – would help them prepare for life after release. In advocating for technological advancements in the prison, prisoners spoke of recognising the need to develop their understanding of, and ability to use, technology which they hoped would ultimately assist them on the outside. Some also reflected on how better utilising technology within the prison could free up staff administrative time which could be used to assist them in their progression instead.

Staff and prisoners also advocated for the reinstatement of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL).³⁰ Staff unanimously believed that ROTLs would benefit prisoners, assisting with their progression and ultimately preparing them for release. Whilst they accepted that access to ROTLs required individual case assessment and potentially additional support from officers, staff recognised how temporary releases were an invaluable tool in preparing prisoners by allowing them to "see how much the world has changed". Prisoners also saw the potential of ROTL and many yearned for the opportunity to demonstrate what they had learned throughout their sentence, that they could be trusted, and that they had lowered their risk. Simultaneously, they recognised the value ROTLs could have in allowing them to adapt to and prepare for their release to the outside world after having spent many years imprisoned.³¹ Prisoners suggested that there should be some option to have internal ROTLs that allowed them to move more freely around the prison grounds (eg to the gardens) or to visit/work in the café at the nearby open prison, Hollesley Bay. This was particularly important for those who were housed on the TC unit as "men are giving up [being held in less secure conditions] to fulfil time on TC", yet were being disadvantaged without access to temporary leave.

Finally, all participants recognised the need for the prison to introduce a greater range of opportunities for prisoners to work towards and evidence their progression. This included, but was not limited to:

- Education and training (eg earning industry level qualifications that had direct application to the outside world, CV writing, interview practice).
- Developing links with companies and organisations who could offer tangible, purposeful employment opportunities post-release.
- Expanded Employment Hub hours.
- Improved pay for those working within the prison (in line with other establishments).
- An increase to the savings cap to allow individuals to save more money in preparation for their release.
- Open outside bank accounts.³²
- The development of forums to improve communication between staff and those in prison.
- Improve support for independent living.
- Greater opportunities to communicate with and maintain family ties.³³

The focus groups also noted that more specialised support was required to assist those who were struggling

29 In some prisons, prisoners can access self-service kiosks allowing them to manage daily tasks or activities that would normally be undertaken by prison staff, for example to book visits, order food, or submit applications. In other prisons, prisoners have access to in-cell technology through the Launchpad programme which provides individuals with secure tablets or laptops that enable them to participate in digital education, book appointments or order food, and access mental health support.

30 Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) allows prisoners to participate in activities outside of the prison that seek to aid their resettlement into the community, such as working in the community, visiting family, or staying in an approved premise (National Offender Management Service. (2015). Release on Temporary Licence. Prison Service Instructions; see also Ministry of Justice (2019/2022) *Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) Policy Framework*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/release-on-temporary-licence>).

31 Prison Reform Trust. (2025). *Release from long-term imprisonment*. London: The Prison Reform Trust.

32 Ibid.

33 Here, prisoners criticised the current regulations on in-cell phone time (which prevent calls from being made or received between 10pm and 6am) which disrupted communication with family members who were vital sources of support.

with their progression, and for older people.³⁴ Prisoners suggested that if Warren Hill wanted to continue to be seen as a flagship prison, it needed to evolve as a leader of good practice: “stop trying to look good, and be good”.

Prisoners – especially those who had reached stage three – asked for more trust to be shown towards them, allowing greater movement around the prison without suspicion. One man said “I’m a stage three and I’m allowed to move around, but when I do staff are constantly asking me ‘where are you going?’ or ‘what are you doing?’ which makes me feel like I’m not trusted despite having earned it”. Being questioned by staff in such a way meant that, for some prisoners, reaching stage three felt less like an incentive and more of a burden. Staff also suggested that prisoners needed the opportunity to demonstrate responsibility and autonomy, independently of the staged measures.

Neurodiversity at Warren Hill

In addition to the areas mentioned above, some prisoners identified that there needed to be greater awareness of the specific needs of neurodiverse prisoners and an understanding of how this impacted their progression. Approximately two in five prisoners at Warren Hill present neurodivergent traits most commonly linked to ADHD, dyslexia, and autism spectrum disorder – some of whom have formal diagnoses. This has significant implications for understanding individuals’ needs and supporting them in their progression across the regime.³⁵ In response, Warren Hill has created a Neurodiversity Department which plays a central role in screening, assessment, and ongoing support. Each referred individual has a neurodiversity profile and passport that highlights their needs and strengths, informing staff across departments and guiding reasonable adjustments. This is intended to shape daily interactions, teaching, and progression planning, while also helping the Parole Board to communicate more effectively.

A key strand of the department’s work has been the introduction of sensory rooms, which provide safe, calming spaces tailored to prisoners’ sensory needs. The first, opened in 2024 in the education building, has been used as a space for relaxation and reflection for those with sensory needs. It has also been used to host Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) reviews and psychological assessments, with feedback suggesting it supports cognitive processes and improves concentration. A second space opened later last year on the Alder Unit, which accommodates many neurodiverse prisoners. A third sensory space is planned in the PIPE garden, further embedding these resources within therapeutic provision. The Neurodiversity Department, in collaboration with Ormiston Families, has also extended its work into the visiting environment and is developing a sensory-friendly space for families, recognising that relatives often share similar needs.

The ‘*Thrive With...*’ psychoeducational programme, which is designed to help prisoners to understand their conditions, identify strengths, and develop strategies to manage difficulties, has been equally important. Warren Hill also provides training for mental health nurses to enhance their understanding of neurodiversity and how to support prisoners during and after release. Assisting prisoners to identify and manage neurodivergent traits will likely result in an enhanced self-understanding and improved behaviour, which could also positively impact their progression and potential parole. For staff, such an understanding may help to lower rates of violence and self-harm within the prison.

Prisoners suggested that there needed to be a shift in the culture to better integrate neurodiversity within the regime (rather than treating it like ‘an add-on or tick box’) through greater awareness amongst staff and better training in how to communicate effectively with people who have neurodivergent needs. This could also include the wider use of psycho-educational groups for those who are neurodivergent as well as greater availability and flexibility of resources to assist those with specific needs to complete their sentence plan. One individual suggested there could be a neurodiversity buddy scheme, offering support to newly arrived individuals and providing new roles of responsibility for prisoners to demonstrate their progress.

Together, these efforts represent an important step in addressing the systemic barriers neurodiverse prisoners face, particularly at a late stage in their sentence when support is most crucial. The work of the Neurodiversity Department has contributed to reducing the number of recalls within the first three months of release. However, embedding this approach across the whole regime – through consistent training, cross-departmental collaboration, and peer-led initiatives – remains essential to meet the needs of these prisoners and support them in their progression.

Prisoners were critical of the length of time it took to schedule an assessment or receive a diagnosis, and that in some cases this was negatively impacting their ability to progress. In response, some sought to obtain an assessment via a private healthcare provider, but found that this was blocked by the prison.

³⁴ Prison Reform Trust. (2024). Growing old and dying inside. London: The Prison Reform Trust.

³⁵ Overview provided by Neurodiversity lead at HMP Warren Hill in September 2025

Reaching, and moving beyond, a progressive regime

What criteria do you think should be met for someone to move to a progressive regime?

We also asked participants what criteria they thought was important, or should be considered, in assessing an individual's suitability for a progressive regime. Prisoners felt that the stage an individual is at in their sentence should be one of the criteria, with spaces prioritised for those on indeterminate sentences, rather than extended determinate sentences. They suggested that a progression regime would be best suited for people before their tariff expiry date, rather than used as a backup measure for those who are struggling to demonstrate their readiness for release and remain in prison beyond their tariff. Despite this, the opportunity to transfer to a progression regime should still be available for people who are post-tariff, especially if they have experienced repeated parole delays and/or are struggling to demonstrate that they can be safely released.

Both staff and prisoners suggested criteria that centred around the completion of programmes and an individual's attitude and behaviour. The consensus was that an individual must have completed all core risk reduction and readiness assessments prior to a move to a progression regime. This was consistent with responses to other survey questions and focus group discussions. These highlighted that the purpose of a progression regime should be to consolidate what they had already learnt, rather than the completion of further courses. Prisoners suggested that if an HCR-20 (Historical, Clinical, and Risk Management-20) assessment³⁶ cannot be completed before a move to a progression regime, it should be done as soon as possible after arrival. This would ensure that any additional work can be identified and noted on an individual's sentence plan, and allow them to complete it in a timely manner before prioritising consolidation.

Survey respondents reported that a person looking to move to a progressive regime should be generally well behaved (eg through a proven record of compliance with rules and was non-violent), demonstrated a "positive and proactive" mindset (eg "take responsibility for themselves", and be "willing to rehabilitate") and had a desire to "progress and consolidate".

One member of staff recommended that individuals are interviewed before being accepted as a way of assessing whether their behaviour is consistent with those listed above and that of the wider regime. Both staff and prisoners suggested that adjudications could be used to consider an individual's suitability for the regime. Some staff recommended that there should be no history of adjudications whilst others argued that no adjudications for over a year was a suitable timeline. Prisoners added that an individual should also be drug or substance free prior to entering the regime.

What do you think are the biggest barriers to prisoners progressing to open conditions or release from a progressive prison?

Once individuals have made it to a progression regime, their next target is to move beyond it – either to an open prison or release into the community. We asked people what the main barriers were to achieving this. Consistently, staff and prisoners identified four areas: 1) attitudes and beliefs; 2) a lack of opportunities; 3) changes in the level of support, and 4) systemic and institutional barriers.

The main barriers reported by participants were "unrealistic attitudes" and "poor behaviour" from the individual themselves. Staff reported poor behaviour not being challenged or ignored by the individual, rule breaking, and taking advantage of the flexibility within the regime. Prisoners also shared this view, suggesting that an individual's own mindset could impede their progression if they continued to demonstrate behaviour that was not in line with Warren Hill's rules, or failed to display knowledge of a risk factor. Exhibiting such behaviours, one participant suggested, related to an individual's "inability to evidence enough of a reduction in risk that they can be safely and effectively managed in the destination environment".

Both staff and prisoners emphasised that there was not enough focus on preparation for release. They highlighted the lack of jobs, vocational and industry-level training, and the absence of ROTL as the most significant gaps. Without these opportunities, they argued, it was hard to actively work towards – and imagine – a life beyond prison or to demonstrate the self-improvement they had undertaken. Both of which were necessary to achieve a move to open conditions or be released: "we're asked to consolidate without opportunities to actually do so". Another said that the opportunities and services which were available "can't just be incentives but need to have actual application beyond the prison, otherwise they feel redundant and as if they are no different to IEPs earlier in the sentence". Here, there was a clear disconnect between what the prison was offering and the real-world benefit, which could generate false hope for prisoners. Staff also felt that more needed to be done "to support the men and guide them onto coping with open conditions and release" more effectively.

³⁶ HCR-20 is a structured professional judgement tool used in prisons and forensic settings to assess and manage the risk of future violence by examining 20 factors across historical, clinical, and risk management domains.

Another important barrier identified by prisoners was “not getting the support and safeguarding” required to prepare them for release. Prisoners identified the Offender Management Unit (OMU) – as well as poor individual key workers, Prison Offender Managers and Community Offender Managers – who had the power to ‘abuse’ their position, writing “negative reports [that] you may be unaware of” and which had direct and detrimental consequences for progression. Further, they suggested that some staff had personal biases which “conflicted with the community ethos” of the prison. Staff identified that this occasionally occurred, noting that some lacked progressive attitudes. Staff also identified inconsistencies in the level of support offered to individuals. For example, one member of staff said that “Warren Hill isn’t black and white with implementing rules” which in turn made it difficult to manage expectations for people in their care.

Prisoners also identified systemic and institutional barriers which they felt impeded their ability to move beyond the progression regime, these included delays in parole hearings, “falsified information”, and psychologists not recommending move or release. Prisoners were critical of HMPPS’ assumption that a progression regime “is an alternative to cat D”, yet felt they faced stricter criteria for release: “it should be easier [here] but it feels like you have to start again to prove yourself”. Feeling like they were forced to start over coupled with the lack of opportunities to show reduced risk and adequate preparation for release, prisoners argued, could lead to difficulties in convincing the Parole Board of their readiness to be released or moved on.

The role of staff in implementing a progression regime

How could relationships between staff and prisoners be strengthened to support a progressive regime?

When asked about relationships between staff and prisoners within the regime, a very small number of respondents said that there was nothing more that could be done to improve it. Here, both staff and prisoners were complimentary of the good work that exists within Warren Hill and the positive relationships that existed. Some of the prisoners stated that “staff are all available” and that they were treated with respect and decency. Staff members who worked on the TC suggested that the relationships within their unit were especially good, but accepted that they could not speak more broadly about relationships across the wider prison. Those held on the TC confirmed this sentiment saying “it’s excellent on this unit”. Some staff also heralded the work they did and the relationships they fostered as being the “best in the prison service” – this was however, contested by the majority of prisoner participants.

Most participants recognised that significant changes needed to be made to improve relationships between those in authority and those in their care. Staff and prisoners suggested that there needed to be greater alignment between the theoretical values of the regime and how they were evidenced in practice. Here, attention was drawn to how the attitudes and beliefs of both parties needed to better demonstrate respect, trust, and transparency towards one another. Such traits were central, they said, to engaging fully with the regime. Prisoners noted the “double standards”, arguing that even when they did their best to evidence such behaviours, it was not reciprocated by staff: “some staff are patronising, condescending and sarcastic. If I acted that way, I would be sanctioned”. Another said, “respect is supposed to be mutual but it’s not”. Staff accepted the “need to be firm but fair” with all individuals, operating with consistency and without bias.

Staff need to strike the right balance between encouraging prisoners to take responsibility for themselves – helping to reduce dependency and overcome institutionalisation – and providing the essential support required for them to progress through the regime and successfully move on to open conditions or release. Prisoners argued that it was at this stage of their sentence that support should be at its greatest, yet felt most absent. They argued that support from staff felt selective under the guise of promoting autonomy and responsibility, which could lead to a failure of institutional care, emotional harm, and self-destructive behaviours. Concerns were raised about the lack of support for those with additional mental health conditions, learning difficulties, or neurodiverse needs. As a result, prisoners felt that what they had imagined as the most hopeful part of their sentence was almost entirely devoid of hope.

Instead, prisoners felt that staff – and the prison as a whole – needed to adopt a more tailored, individualised approach. This includes POMs and Key Workers doing more to understand what each individual requires to achieve progression and how they can offer this support. For example, one prisoner might need checking in on regularly, whilst another will come to ask for help if they need it. Understanding this about an individual helps to recognise where support might be most appropriate or beneficial, championing a prisoner in their own journey, rather than hindering them by being absent or overbearing. As best as it can, this support should be consistent from an individual’s arrival at Warren Hill and continue throughout their time there.

Participants also recommended more comprehensive staff training, particularly for new or less experienced staff. All participants recognised that the success of the regime could be attributed to those who existed within it – including staff. Participants suggested that staff should meet certain criteria to facilitate the

successful delivery of the regime, mirroring the approach that prisoners must meet criteria for a transfer to a progression regime. One participant said that to improve relationships you “have to have the right staff here”. This typically meant those who were experienced, supported the progressive goals of the regime, evidenced getting to know residents, and “treated people as people, not just prisoners”. One individual said that staff need to be “for prisoners instead of against them”, working in alignment with one another, rather than in opposition.

Participants recommended that this could build on the successful relationships that exist elsewhere in the prison, using “TC and PIPE staff to train staff on the progressive regime” to provide greater consistency and cohesion between the various units. It was also suggested that training should be a constant and routine process to address new or recurring issues (eg “cultural training for bias”) and to “ensure progressive attitudes exist within the senior leadership team”. Doing so, participants argued, would help to assist in generating a progressive climate from the top-down. Prisoners also suggested that staff should be ‘monitored’ and held accountable to prevent any disruption to what “could easily be a harmonious and productive environment”. A few prisoners also identified that more staff should receive additional training with respect to neurodiversity and awareness as part of their initial deployment to assist the population at Warren Hill (as mentioned earlier).

We also asked respondents to identify if and how communication between staff and prisoners could be improved. Repeatedly, participants emphasised the importance of staff being open and honest, transparent, and consistent with structure and rules. This included providing a clearer explanation of the regime at the outset to better manage expectations. Staff agreed and believed that acting in this way was not only fairer and more decent, but also offered clarity and reliability to their decision-making. However, whilst prisoners wanted staff to be clear and realistic in their communication with them about progressing and the outside world, they did not want staff to feed them negativity about life in the community and, in particular, their likely inability to handle it. Several prisoners reported being told by staff that “if you can’t handle this in here, you’ll never be able to handle it out there” which they considered to have skewed their perceptions of the outside world and which had the potential to cause them to regress, rather than progress.

Participants suggested that in order to improve communication staff needed to be more present and available: “get out of the office and mingle with prisoners more” or “talk rather than use the keyboard logging silly stuff”. Beyond key work sessions, people in prison described wanting to have more opportunities to build a rapport with staff. Here, they suggested that the only real way to facilitate trust is through developing a better understanding of one another, “actually communicate by talking and listening to each other” in day-to-day settings within the prison. Staff agreed, insisting that if their time was less consumed by administrative duties, they could spend more time face-to-face with people, be more approachable, and be more consistent in the support they offered.

Several staff members and prisoners also suggested that communication could be improved by greater opportunities for open dialogue through regular forums or discussion groups. This could allow people to share their thoughts and concerns, and receive feedback or direction, in a manner that aligned with the Enabling Environment standards and offered accountability on both sides. In addition to formal groups, individuals suggested that there would be some benefit to engaging with staff in more informal ways, including playing sports and training sessions together. Others asked for more funding to be invested into governor breakfasts³⁷ where staff could recognise positive achievements or behaviour by prisoners, improving relationships through feelings of validation and recognition. One individual suggested that other members of the senior leadership team could host these breakfasts too.

37 Every weekend, the governor on duty invites a small number of individuals to breakfast.

Conclusion and recommendations

Summary of findings

This consultation of HMP Warren Hill highlights both the promise and the limitations of a progression regime in practice. Prisoners and staff alike recognised the potential of such regimes to provide preparation for release, opportunities to develop, and a framework for additional support. At the same time, however, the findings demonstrate a significant gap between progression regimes in theory and in practice.

Despite most participants knowing and articulating what they thought a progression regime meant, less than half believed that Warren Hill was operating as one. Many felt that the regime was the same as, or even less progressive than, other prisons they had been in. While Warren Hill succeeded in offering some valued opportunities, too often these were seen by prisoners as superficial or disconnected from the real demands of release. A lack of access to technology, the absence of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), and the inconsistency in staff-prisoner relationships was seen as undermining the very principles that the regime sought to uphold. Prisoners described a sense of “going backwards rather than forwards”, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, with greater restrictions, fewer opportunities, and a sense that trust had declined. As a result, many of the prisoners believed that Warren Hill was underdelivering on its progression regime and the Enabling Environment standards.

Instead, both prisoners and staff identified how improvements could be made by increasing access to ROTL; tailoring progression plans; enhancing communication and transparency; strengthening staff training to embed a progressive culture; and developing a series of programmes, courses, and training which have real world application. For Warren Hill to truly embody progression, participants argued that it must place trust, preparation for release, and meaningful opportunities at the centre of its culture. This requires investment not only in programmes and resources, but also in the relationships and values that underpin a genuinely enabling environment. Both staff and prisoners agreed that the focus should shift from simply managing risk and moving through stages to actively preparing people for a life after prison, working alongside them to build the skills and confidence needed to reduce the likelihood of them returning to prison. Both staff and prisoners strongly believed that a progression regime that aligned environmental, psychological, behavioural, and practical elements held the greatest promise for transforming lives within and beyond prison walls.

Whilst this report is rooted in the lived experience of staff and prisoners at HMP Warren Hill, the findings have wider relevance. Other progression regimes face similar challenges, and we hope that the findings presented here – as well as the recommendations below – have application across the estate. By addressing these issues directly, Warren Hill has the chance to reaffirm its position as a flagship prison for good practice and to demonstrate what progression can look like when it is authentic, person-centred, and geared towards the future.

Recommendations

To improve the functioning and effectiveness of the progression regime, we present the following recommendations:

HMPPS should tailor progression to individual needs. Staff should adopt a more flexible and personalised approach to progression, recognising that incentives and goals may differ for varying prisoners depending on their circumstances (eg older prisoners, those with health conditions, those without family support). Staff should also ensure progression plans are realistic, achievable, and grounded in preparing for the outside world, consistently working with prisoners to support them in reaching their targets.

HMPPS should increase opportunities for purposeful employment. To do so, the prison should provide more accredited, industry-standard qualifications with direct labour market value. It should also strengthen links with employers, organisations or companies to create real post-release opportunities. The prison should also look to expand the Employment Hub hours and offer more opportunities for one-to-one support to assist individuals in gaining employment.

HMPPS should better assist prisoners in their financial preparation for release. This may be achieved through increased wages for prison jobs, the provision of greater opportunities to save (eg by increasing the savings cap, helping prisoners open bank accounts), and courses or training on money management. Doing so will enable prisoners to build financial stability and confidence ahead of release.

HMPPS should expand opportunities for technology. HMP Warren Hill should provide access to a greater number of digital technologies within the prison, including in-cell digital access and self-service kiosks. It should also provide structured training on everyday digital skills (eg online banking, email, job applications)

to prepare prisoners for life outside. Prisons should also ensure that video visits and communication tools that sustain family ties are reliable and can be regularly accessed.

HMPPS should reintroduce and expand access to Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). The prison should reinstate ROTL opportunities for those at stage three of the regime, supporting a gradual and supervised reintroduction to the community. 'Internal' ROTL initiatives (such as access to Hollesley Bay café or movement within the prison) should also be considered where external release is not possible. ROTLs should be used as a meaningful test of risk reduction, responsibility, and prisoners' readiness for release.

HMPPS should provide additional staff training which embeds a progressive culture. Prisons should deliver targeted training for all staff on progression regimes. This should seek to ensure consistency between all staff members in applying principles of respect, fairness, and transparency, embedding the values of the Enabling Environment standards. Such training should not only occur at the beginning of a staff member's appointment but should be ongoing, addressing changes in culture or biases that may have developed. Training should also generate and reinforce a culture that prioritises progression over punishment, working with prisoners to help them achieve the next step in their sentence. Examples of 'good practice' might be taken from staff working on the PIPE or TC and implemented in the main regime.

HMPPS should deliver additional staff training on mental health, neurodiversity and cultural differences. Such training would encourage staff to develop their ability to recognise and understand individual differences, better equip them to provide tailored support for prisoners, and address any personal biases.

The Governor and senior management team should encourage all staff to rebuild trust through improved communication. Staff should be encouraged to spend more time on the wings, developing relationships with prisoners through day-to-day interaction. The prison should also create regular and open forums for staff and prisoners to share concerns, ideas, and feedback which will allow prisoners and staff to work collaboratively within the progression regime.

HMPPS should provide allocated time to support 'governor breakfasts' amongst staff and prisoners and reintroduce landing meals. These breakfasts/meals would help to build positive relationships between staff and prisoners and act as an opportunity or reward for those who have been recognised as demonstrating positive behaviour.

HMPPS should make changes to the process to move to a progression regime, making clear that their use is for consolidation rather than completing additional courses or programmes. To allow individuals to continue making progress and moving forward within their sentence, progression regimes should ultimately be used for consolidation of previous work rather than to complete further assessments or training. The present process feels contradictory and elicits frustration which can instead inhibit or disrupt progress.

Staff working within progression regimes should clarify expectations and pathways for progression from the outset. Staff should provide clear and realistic information on arrival and induction about what progression means in practice, and specifically what it looks like at Warren Hill. They should seek to ensure that men understand how the various stages operate, what criteria are used to approve their progression to the next stage, and how their sentence plan links to progression. To do so, staff should improve transparency in their reporting and decision-making, which in turn would reduce the perception of bias or inconsistency.

This report presents the findings of a consultation carried out by the HMP Warren Hill Building Futures Working Group as part of the Prison Reform Trust's Building Futures programme. Drawing on surveys and focus groups with prisoners serving long sentences and staff working at HMP Warren Hill, it explores what makes a prison regime 'progressive' in theory and how progression regimes are experienced in practice.

The report highlights the gap between policy intentions and lived experience, examining preparation for release, opportunities to evidence progression, staff-prisoner relationships, and the role of trust, fairness, and support in enabling progression. It also identifies key barriers to moving on from closed conditions, including limited access to opportunities, inconsistent support, and the impact of risk-focused cultures. Grounded in lived experience, the report sets out practical recommendations for strengthening progression regimes so they better support rehabilitation, reduce recall, and prepare people for life beyond prison.