

PRISON  
REFORM  
TRUST



# Next Generation Leaders

The case for reform through prison leadership

Sophie Ellis and Felicity Kersting

## Prison Reform Trust

Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. It was founded in 1981 to inform and influence public debate on prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners, amidst concerns about a projected prison population of 48,000 by 1984. With the prison population in England and Wales approaching 88,000 and projected to rise to at least 95,700 by 2029. PRT remains as important to civic society today as it was over 40 years ago.

We are one of the few organisations willing and equipped to hold the state to account for its treatment of people in prison. Our reputation, built over four decades of knowledgeable, reliable analysis and presentation of the facts, gives us influence behind the scenes that few organisations can match. PRT's main objectives are:

- Reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime.
- Improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families.
- Promoting equality and human rights in the justice system.

We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system, informing prisoners, staff and the wider public, and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. Whilst often working alongside the prison service and maintaining close links with government departments including the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), His Majesty's Treasury (HMT), and the Home Office, to retain its independence, PRT does not seek or accept government funding. The structure and rigour of our programmes are agreed with the trusts and foundations that fund our work.

## Acknowledgements

Our biggest thanks go to our truly inspiring first group of Next Gen Leaders, for their continual dedication and effort to improve prisoners' lives. We have been very privileged to work with them and we look forward to being their critical friends for many years to come as they rise further in the Prison Service.

Next Gen was founded by PRT CEO Pia Sinha and co-facilitated by Erika Clegg, values-based leadership consultant. The Next Gen Leaders were very clear that their energy, passion, inspiration, support, and belief in the next generation is what made all the difference.

The in-house process evaluation was led by Sophie Ellis but delivered by a trained team of PRT colleagues who were not involved in Next Gen's frontline delivery: Zoe Burton; Emily Evison; Alex Guthrie; Ella Humphreys; and Alice Stevens. It could not have been delivered without their commitment, enthusiasm and integrity in good measurement and data collection.

The project reviews were led by Sophie Ellis with assistance from Felicity Kersting in sifting, compiling, summarising and early drafting of key themes and evidence.

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## Executive summary

Next Generation Leaders is a programme—and network—that aims to put aspiring prison leaders at the heart of reform. PRT wants to create an effective alliance of reformers on the inside and the outside, to more effectively drive forward changes that benefit prisoners. Next Gen’s core purpose is to:

*Grow and connect the next generation of prison leaders, who are empowered to reform from the inside*

If prison reform is to be meaningful and lasting, it must happen not only through national policy and external scrutiny, but through the daily decisions, values and relationships shaped by leaders inside prisons. For 45 years, the Prison Reform Trust has used multiple levers to pursue change: evidence, advocacy, challenge, coalition-building and critical friendship. Next Gen represents a further step in that work. It reflects a conviction that prison practitioners—especially aspiring governors—are not only subjects of reform, but can also be catalysts of it. They are often best placed to improve daily life in prison now, while wider legal and policy change takes time.

Such efforts are not straightforward. Reformist leaders face operational pressures, isolation, bureaucracy, limited autonomy, and the difficulty of trying to change an institution while remaining accountable to it. But those constraints make investment in reform-minded leaders more important, not less. Too often, humane prison practice depends on exceptional individuals rather than supportive systems, which makes progress fragile rather than embedded.

Next Gen was designed to help change that. It focuses on experienced senior leaders—primarily Deputy Governors—whose next likely step is governing their own prison. Its purpose is not to teach the mechanics of leadership, but to equip them with the confidence, values, relationships and practical support needed to translate their reformist principles into action. At the heart of Next Gen is the principle:

*“Bring the outside in and take the inside out”*

Prisons can be highly insular institutions. Next Gen therefore set out to build aspiring leaders’ connections: between themselves, with PRT as an independent and trusted NGO, and with the wider world of criminal justice reform and civil society. It consisted of a structured phase of four sessions, followed by a project phase, with Teams calls and a coaching offer from Spark Inside running throughout both phases. The strongest lesson from the first cohort of 19 leaders was that independence and connection matter deeply. The first Next Gen Leaders consistently valued the programme not only for its content, but for the opportunity to step outside the prison environment, reflect honestly, build trusted relationships, and reconnect with the values that brought them into the role.

The clearest expression of Next Gen’s potential is found in the 15 project case studies showcased in this report: something PRT required the Next Gen Leaders to do as part of the programme. These projects are not perfect solutions, nor substitutes for the deeper structural changes prisons urgently need. However, they are powerful examples of what can be achieved when leaders are given space, trust and encouragement to act on reformist instincts. Some introduced genuinely new approaches, others applied well-established humane principles that remain too rarely enacted. What unites them is a consistent effort to make prison less “prison-like”. Most focused on creating more humane, relational and constructive environments, often by strengthening community connections and opening prisons to the outside world.

Many of the projects show how difficult even modest humanising change can be. The barriers leaders faced—whether around bureaucracy, resources or institutional culture—make the wider case for greater governor autonomy. These case studies therefore do more than showcase good practice. They demonstrate why reformist leadership on the ground must sit alongside national efforts, and why the Prison Service should do more to enable, rather than stifle, such work.

Alongside delivery, PRT conducted a modest internal process evaluation of the first delivery cycle. While not independent, nor measuring impact, it helped to understand what worked, what did not, and how the programme could evolve. Completion rates were high (all 19 leaders completed the structured phase and 15 completed the project phase), and the programme attracted exactly the kind of leaders we set out to

reach: experienced, highly motivated, values-driven and ambitious to do more. The most important finding was that connection and relationships are the core mechanisms of change that the programme should be fostering. The second cohort of 16 Next Gen Leaders is already underway, with changes informed by the first: a smaller group, more sessions, stronger support during project delivery, and more structured networking opportunities.

Together, the programme review and the projects in this report make the case that, while tough to achieve, let alone sustain, reforms do not have to remain abstract ideals. The Next Gen Leaders were the first to tell us that their projects were far from ideal and they wanted to do even better—but the point is the projects were done. If reform is to mean anything for prisoners today not tomorrow or in many years' time, we need to invest in the people inside prisons who are willing to make it real.

## The case for reformist leadership in prisons

Prison has long been a site of tension in the broader debate about pursuing incremental reforms to institutions versus deep transformational changes to systems. Prison reform in many instances accepts the basic legitimacy of the justice system, but strives to improve its workings through protecting and upholding rights, improving law and policy, and increasing accountability, though manifest injustices are also robustly challenged. More radical approaches seek to transform the roots of society that shape approaches to punishment, and perpetuate the pain, unfairness and oppression so evident in prisons.

In the criminal justice sector, the Prison Reform Trust and others can choose our position, our values, and our approach to change. We can elect to challenge the roots of unjust or inhumane practices, or we can pursue incremental change to the complex daily operations of prisons. We can do this in public, in private, by evidence, by experience, through advocacy, through dialogue or through robust challenge. We can do this through leading, through supporting, or through forming effective alliances.

PRT prides itself on a 45-year track record of deploying all of these levers. We are reformist in approach, while recognising the radical changes required to truly achieve our goals. Nevertheless, we strive to extend the scope and effectiveness of reforms to prison as widely as possible, pursuing both substantive legal changes that increase diversion from custody, and policy changes that protect the rights, dignity and daily lives of people in prison. We pursue the best, but on all too many occasions we exist to hold back the worst of populist penal politics that undermine prisoners' rights, public safety and any notion of proportionate punishment.

PRT has long believed that often an effective lever of reform is being a critical friend to those who can enact it. Strong relationships get things done, even when what needs to be done is difficult to hear. We do not shy away from difficult conversations with those in power, but in doing so, it is often impossible not to notice the shared values that emerge.

There are many prison leaders who share our belief in the value of reform, who are driven by a desire to uphold the rights and dignity of prisoners, and who want to create a fairer system. While we exist to challenge the decisions of leaders that result in bad outcomes for prisoners, sometimes we are an excuse to permit the good decisions.

An excuse is sometimes needed, not because prison leaders lack drive, courage or commitment—indeed many embody these qualities—but because they lack many of the advantages afforded to the criminal justice sector. While they can more readily create policy, they are also more highly bound by it. The code and conventions of public service can stifle independent, principled voices in a way that ours are not. And we will be the first to admit that the changes we call for may not always reflect realities on the ground, despite their rightness in principle. Prison leaders have no option but to deal with those realities.

In spite of these restrictions, the Next Generation Leaders programme marks a broader step by PRT to acknowledge prison practitioners as catalysts of reform. We believe that they are an important additional lever, which can, and should, be deployed alongside existing forms of influence. Over the past eight years, we have invested heavily in prisoners as meaningful reformist voices in the policies that affect them, through our Prisoner Policy Network and Building Futures programme. There were always practitioners who wanted to get involved too.

We believe that involving practitioners in reform is the next step forward because, despite the challenges discussed, practitioners often sit at a place where they can enact reforms here, now, and directly. Leaders in particular can change local policy (sometimes national), can change culture, can empower their people, and can listen to prisoners.

Practitioners can also act in powerful symbiosis with us, and the wider sector. The reforms we pursue frequently take many months, sometimes years, to achieve. This helps prisoners of the future, but not those of the present. Lives can be ruined, and lost, in the meantime. Practitioners' detailed operational knowledge is also crucial in responsibly addressing these high stakes. A rightful recommendation is a meaningless waste if it fundamentally misunderstands how the system works, just as much as if it overlooks what the system is really like for prisoners—the focus of our other programmes of work.

So we all have roles to play in getting reforms right. Next Gen Leaders marks a step in that direction. The case for reformist leadership is not straightforward. Evidently, reforming an organisation that one is also a member of (and often partially in charge of) contains a conflict of interest. However, if prisoners can be taken seriously, and not dismissed for the partiality of their views about matters that fundamentally affect them, so too can practitioners.

The biggest obstacle to reformist leadership is empowerment. Reform inherently means change, and change may mean challenge, resistance, or a lack of compliance, as well as conventional methods of dialogue, building consensus, and incremental movement. Each of these methods requires empowerment to improve things. Prison leaders face considerable challenges to enacting a reformist agenda which restrict their empowerment, including:

**Personal development.** This requires learning skills in relating, decision-making, and developing courage, confidence and character. These are the basic mechanics of prison leadership that enable a reformist approach.

**Clarity of values, identity and loyalty.** Reforming the very institution that one is part of will inevitably involve internal reckonings that can be complex to navigate, or even articulate, without space for honest reflection.

**The day-job demands.** Too often reform feels like something additional, not integrated with the daily management of operations and regular crises that occur.

**Isolation.** The wider world of criminal justice reform is often not routinely taught to practitioners, leaving them cut off from a network of shared values, connection and resources. That includes different prisons not being well connected to each other. This can make it hard to know where to start, and to find the support needed to stick to the convictions that lie behind a reformist approach. Deputy Governors are particularly isolated in their singular role within each prison.

**Hierarchy and institutional inflexibility.** Prisons are highly rule-driven places and bureaucracy is recognised as a key contributor to poorer outcomes for prisoners, even though it also protects against abuses of power. The need for “top cover” easily creates paralysis and aversion to change. Reformist leadership inevitably involves a “creative” approach which may not be entirely compliant but remains entirely integral. This can be very difficult to navigate.

**Lack of investment.** Often it is simply the case that reform requires money.

The body of this report sets out how we created the Next Generation Leaders programme. It reflects on our learning from the first cohort about how to foster reformist leadership. More importantly, it showcases that cohort’s work, as an early indication of what can be achieved despite the barriers set out above.

Prisons do not change when they remain highly self-contained places. They constrain not only prisoners, but talent, ambition and values at every level. What our first Next Gen cohort valued most was connecting. That included with PRT, as an independent ‘home’ for reflection, development, support, and connections to the wider world. It also included connecting with each other: talking through problems, breaking silences, sharing ideas, and creating a resilient network of reformers of the future.

Between them, our two Next Gen cohorts have worked in 66% of all operational prisons and currently work in 26%. Seven are or will shortly be governing their own prison and they are talking to each other, and us, about how to drive prison reform forward in the tough climate ahead. We believe this is to the benefit of both, and most importantly, to prisoners.

## Putting aspiring prison leaders in context

*“To work as a governor, you had to understand prisoners and be able to manipulate prison life to push it forward. This was not so much about management – or to further managerial ends – but to fashion and re-shape an essentially punitive structure into one that was positive and optimistic.”<sup>1</sup>*

The management of prisons, and those who manage it, has been subject to extensive criminological study which sets out its trajectory over the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st. However, it's very recent (post-pandemic) history is less well studied, and it is not clear where it is going.

Broadly speaking, over a period of around four decades, prison leaders have transitioned from a period of liberal freedoms, but a lack of means to enact change, to increased availability of management tools, but with such a bureaucratic stranglehold that arguably their power means little.

In the 1990s, political forces such as the expansion of new public management (or managerialism), handed prison leaders the means to drive up standards in prisons and to shape a culture that fostered a fair, humane and professional approach to the care of prisoners. This was by no means ever a finished job, but it did result in substantial changes to accountability mechanisms, staff recruitment, performance management, and rehabilitatively-oriented approaches.<sup>2</sup>

However, the principles of managerialism, when untethered from a clear set of values about imprisonment, have also proved highly constraining and often damaging to prisons. Economic rationalism, rigid adherence to policy and defensible decision-making become ends in themselves, rather than a means of reaching a higher ideal. In fact they are often the precise barriers that prevent those ideals being reached.<sup>3</sup> Histories of prison management have called this turn towards this “no frills” form of managerialisms in the early 2000s “managerialism-minus” – with liberal humane values being the missing element.<sup>4</sup>

Another consequence of managerialism can be a loss of discretionary decision-making power. Discretion can be a dangerous or a helpful tool in the hands of prison staff, and it has been argued that placing it there is risky.<sup>5</sup> We ourselves often advocate for reforms that would add additional safeguards through statutory duties or policy change, constraining discretionary power being used to harmful ends. However, recent inquiries into the prison system have concluded that the root of many issues is a lack of opportunity for leaders to be “good”, as much as actively being “bad”.

In the wake of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been some resurgence of interest in the role of the governor and in leaders more broadly. Upon appointment in 2021, the new Chief Inspector of Prisons added a section on leadership to inspection reports and has subsequently described leaders as “the single most important factor in improving a jail.”<sup>6</sup> Crucially, it is not scored (though there is a framework)<sup>7</sup>

but provides a narrative of how leaders are shaping outcomes for the establishment. This process has begun to make the contribution of aspiring leaders, like deputy governors, more visible.

In 2023, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) introduced the Free Flex Fixed (FFF) framework for governors, which was intended to clarify exactly where and how they could use their discretion in operational matters, including recruitment (but not of Prison Officers), regime variations, and allocations of staff time.<sup>8</sup> In principle, this is an encouraging step towards restoring the positives of discretion in a way that still protects delivery standards. However, it is not yet at all clear how FFF is working in practice.

In 2025, the Justice and Home Affairs Committee published the findings from their inquiry into prison culture, governance, leadership and staffing.<sup>9</sup> In their report they recognised that the governor's “vision

1 Wilson, D. (2000). Whatever happened to “the governor”? *Criminal Justice Matters* 40, 11-12.

2 Liebling, A. & Crewe, B. (2013). Prisons beyond the new penology: the shifting moral foundations of prison management. In J. Simon & R. Sparks (Eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Punishment* (pp. 283-307). Sage.

3 Bennett, J. (2020). Against prison management. *The Prison Service Journal*, 247, 4-13.

4 Liebling, A. & Crewe, B. (2013). Prisons beyond the new penology: the shifting moral foundations of prison management. In J. Simon & R. Sparks (Eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Punishment* (pp.283-307). Sage.

5 Gelsthorpe, L. & Padfield, N. (Eds.) (2003). *Exercising discretion: decision-making in the criminal justice system and beyond*. Routledge.

6 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2023, 18 March). *The critical role of leadership in prisons*. <https://hmiprison.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/news/speech-given-by-hm-chief-inspector-of-prisons-to-the-governing-governors-forum/>

7 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (n.d). *Expectations*. Accessed on 16 March 2026. <https://hmiprison.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/expectations/>

8 Justice and Home Affairs Committee (2025). *Better prisons: less crime*. HL Paper 153. HM Stationery Office.

9 House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee (2025). *Better prisons: less crime*. HL Paper 153. HM Stationery Office.

and values permeate every aspect of prison life”, with witnesses emphasising governors’ role in shaping culture and standards, and the importance of visible leadership. Connections were made between governors’ personal values and their visibility, particularly to the local community. The system is not well set up to naturally facilitate these links, and doing so was often down to individual governors’ efforts.

However, the burdens of managerialism were criticised for pulling governors away from visible leadership. The Committee also criticised governors’ limited autonomy, particularly over their budgets, resulting in a role with high accountability but low control. This was recognised as constraining governors in delivering a clear and consistent vision for their prisons. Also in 2025, the Justice Committee published the first of two reports from their inquiry into ending the cycle of reoffending, which highlighted almost identical themes on the subject of governor autonomy.<sup>10</sup>

While the government accepted both Committees’ recommendations for enhanced governor autonomy in principle, few concrete commitments were made. There was a cautious promise to consider further autonomy in procurement, but the FFF policy was largely considered sufficient. There was also a belief that use of technology to fulfil managerial requirements would free up governors for more person-centred work.<sup>11, 12</sup> This has yet to be proven the case.

While there were commitments to providing more training, there was an emphasis on newly appointed Governors, rather than aspiring leaders waiting in the wings. During the inquiry both the prisons minister and the prisons inspector drew attention to the need for better succession planning and lack of talent management, but there was relatively little interrogation of aspiring leaders’ experiences, particularly deputy governors.

We drew attention to the important relationship between institutional culture and perceptions of training offered.<sup>13</sup> Sadly, a consequence of managerialism is often cynicism and mistrust from staff about opportunities offered, and a belief that they are more about messaging and securing compliance rather than innovation. This leads to low levels of engagement. Leaders want to feel authentically recognised and supported, not tickboxed, and it is clear that the Prison Service cannot wait to foster its talent when much of it is departing every day.

<sup>10</sup> House of Commons Justice Committee (2025). *Ending the cycle of reoffending – part one: rehabilitation in prisons*. HC 469. HM Stationery Office.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Justice (2025). *Government response to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee’s report ‘Better prisons: less crime’*.

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Justice (2026). *Ending the cycle of reoffending – part one: rehabilitation in prisons: government response*. HC 1639. HM Stationery Office.

<sup>13</sup> Prison Reform Trust (2025). *Written evidence PRI0035*. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/136208/pdf/>

# The Next Generation Leaders programme

## Key aims, principles and targets

Next Gen Leaders' primary aim is to:

*Grow and connect the next generation of prison leaders, who are empowered to reform from the inside*

Its central premise is that reform can—and arguably must—be enacted locally through leaders who earn the trust of both staff and prisoners. While significant reforms can be achieved on paper, the gap between policy and practice too frequently remains. Leaders sit at that gap. All too often, we see prisoners' rights and welfare championed by talented individual leaders or sidelined by others. This reliance on individuals means that reformist gains are inevitably fragile and prone to setbacks when someone moves on.

However, the credit or fault does not lie solely with individual leaders. Prison (and headquarters) culture is enormously influential. It can facilitate or stifle leaders of all kinds, creating vicious or virtuous cycles. The very essence of reform is going against the grain, which means reformist leaders need to develop the courage, strength and political acumen to swim against cultural tides—and then actively create a culture that embeds reforms downstream.

Prisons are also highly moral places: not always morally *good* places, but places where morals are highly salient in everyday life. Leaders must therefore constantly engage in values-led decision-making, while often finding their values pulled and pushed by the institution.

Yet for all the challenges, there are prison leaders who *do* exemplify the best efforts to reform their institutions. They share the fundamental goals and values of reformers on the outside, and their “insider” position creates opportunities as well as challenges.

PRT recognise that while our role means that we often highlight poor practice in prisons, their leaders are often allies against these practices, as much as arbiters of them. They are also the key to changing them.

For that reason, PRT believes that nurturing reformist leaders is simply too important to leave to chance. Next Gen Leaders aims to create a network of reformers and a culture of reform-mindedness in the next generation of the Prison Service.

## Why aspiring leaders?

There are prison leaders at many levels. We wanted to target leaders whose next likely career step was governing their own prison. Next Gen is not training in the mechanics of leadership; that is HMPPS's responsibility. Our intention was to nurture leaders who already knew how to lead, but who were yet to take full responsibility for a prison. In most instances, people in that position are Deputy Governors.

Deputy Governors are in a particularly advantageous position to enact local change, having responsibility for daily operations that affect all prisoners. However, bold leadership in this role can be a particularly Herculean effort owing to its isolated position in the leadership hierarchy. Deputy Governors have to manage up or down, and often lack opportunities to connect across.

The jump to Governing Governor represents a completely fresh opportunity to implement ambitions, and we wanted our next generation of prison leaders to arrive there equipped with a reformist mindset and the strength, supportive networks and resources to implement them. This window of opportunity can close quickly, which is why we did not target leaders already at the very top of the Service. We wanted to take the next generation with us in what needs to be done.

Next Gen's core delivery principle is:

*Bringing the outside in and taking the inside out*

Walls do not only isolate prisoners. Prisons can culturally become very insular places which results in a wealth of expertise that sits outside, untapped, but could meaningfully contribute to reformist efforts. Equally, a lack of connection means leaders become isolated from people who share their values (including each other) and could provide a meaningful support network to help them maintain their courage and resilience.

We therefore primarily made Next Gen about building relationships and widening horizons. We created a safe space for leaders to build connections with each other outside of the pressures of HMPPS and the prison environment. They also built connections with us, learned about wider sector organisations, and we organised speakers who were experts on leadership, but not from the world of criminal justice. We put great emphasis on psychological safety and a nurturing environment, providing a rare opportunity for prison leaders to feel acknowledged, supported, and cared for; but we also set great emphasis on the need for courage and innovation in order to truly reform from within.

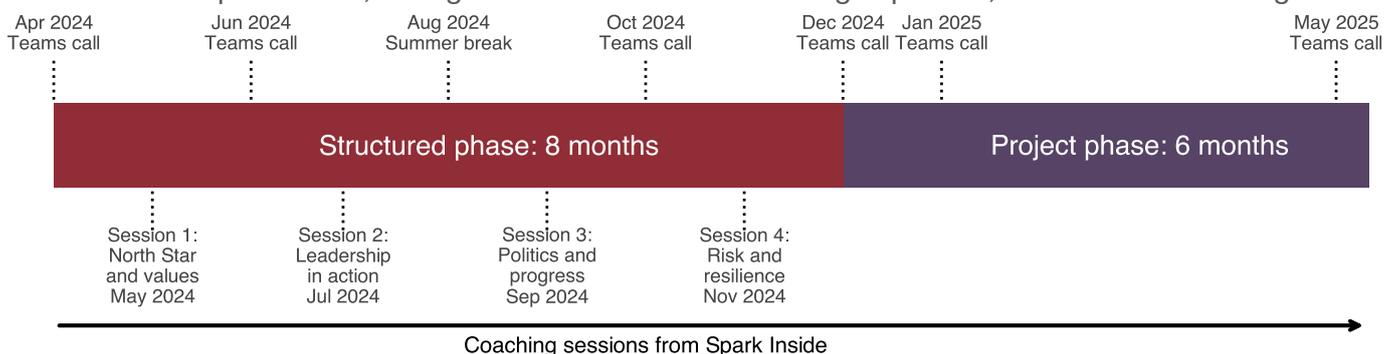
Next Gen was designed to build key strengths and capacities that prison leaders need to enact a reformist agenda. We identified these as:

- Motivation and drive
- Personal resilience
- Autonomy and agency
- Perceived leadership competence
- Values clarity
- Political astuteness
- Strategic thinking
- Creativity and innovation
- Use of networks and resources

Next Gen was designed to target these strengths and capacities and the report now turns to implementation.

### Programme delivery and monitoring

The first cycle of Next Gen Leaders had two phases: a structured phase and a project phase. The structured phase consisted of four mandatory day-long sessions over eight months, interspersed with monthly Teams calls which were voluntary to attend. The project phase then lasted a further six months, with further Teams calls in that time. Throughout both phases, leaders were able to access coaching sessions from Spark Inside, an organisation that offers coaching in prisons, and has been offering this to



staff since 2020.

The core delivery team was Pia Sinha, PRT CEO, former head of the Women’s Estate and governor of HMP Liverpool, and Erika Clegg, a values-based leadership speaker and consultant. The combination of a former governor with lived experience of the role and an external expert in leadership was deliberate. The choice of inspirational speakers was heavily influenced by Erika’s focus on core values that sustain leaders irrespective of their field. Pia’s experience brought the authenticity needed to foster trust, and guidance in operationalising session content.

Each session consisted of an inspirational speaker in the morning, who covered topics related to courageous values-based leadership. The afternoon was a mix of interactive exercises and reflective discussions led by Pia and Erika, on how to apply the material to a prison context. The sessions took place in a range of locations across England, including PRT's office.

Teams calls were less structured. Led by Pia, attendees were invited to share how things were going and bring any issues they wanted to talk through from their lives in prison. These calls were primarily intended to help build a support network, and leaders were also encouraged to create their own channels of communication.

During the structured phase, leaders developed a proposal for an innovative project to deliver in their prisons. We were not prescriptive in our brief, as we wanted to allow leaders free rein to decide what best represented a reformist effort in their prison. We made only two stipulations:

- The project must be developed in consultation with prisoners and must directly benefit them
- The project must in some way “bring the outside in”

Bringing the outside in is a core principle of Next Gen, and involving prisoners in decisions that matter to them has long been a core priority of PRT, which we were keen to see reflected in reformist leadership.

Leaders spent the last six months of the programme—and many considerably beyond—delivering their projects. We then spent a further six months visiting some sites personally to see projects in action. For others we reviewed secondary evidence and, in some instances, talked remotely to staff. During this time, many leaders strengthened their connections with us, and with each other, and that constructive dialogue continues. Case studies of the projects completed by Next Gen are showcased later in the report.

We also conducted an in-house process evaluation in tandem with the first delivery cycle, to learn lessons and improve Next Gen's future delivery. Three rounds of interviews and measures were conducted: at the start of the programme; at the end of the structured phase; and at the end of the project phase. We recognise the biases inherent in the in-house method and while we embedded mitigations, such as separate evaluation and delivery teams, we do not claim independence of the findings. However, we were primarily concerned with understanding how the programme was unfolding and using those insights to make practical changes to delivery. We also wanted to make sufficient adjustments to the delivery model and embed monitoring processes that would lay the groundwork for an independent impact evaluation in the future.

A full report was produced for the delivery team and changes were made both during the first cycle of delivery and in preparation for the second. The following core questions were addressed:

1. Is the programme being delivered as intended?
2. What is working well/less well, and why?
3. What could be improved?
4. How do participant perceptions of their leadership evolve over the course of the programme?

All 19 leaders took part in the first round of evaluation, 18 took part in the second round, and 13 in the third. In this overarching report of the programme, selected evaluation findings are reported in the following section, which details the first Next Gen cohort, our journey with them, and what we learned. However, we have emphasised readability over presentation of full methodological and analytical detail.

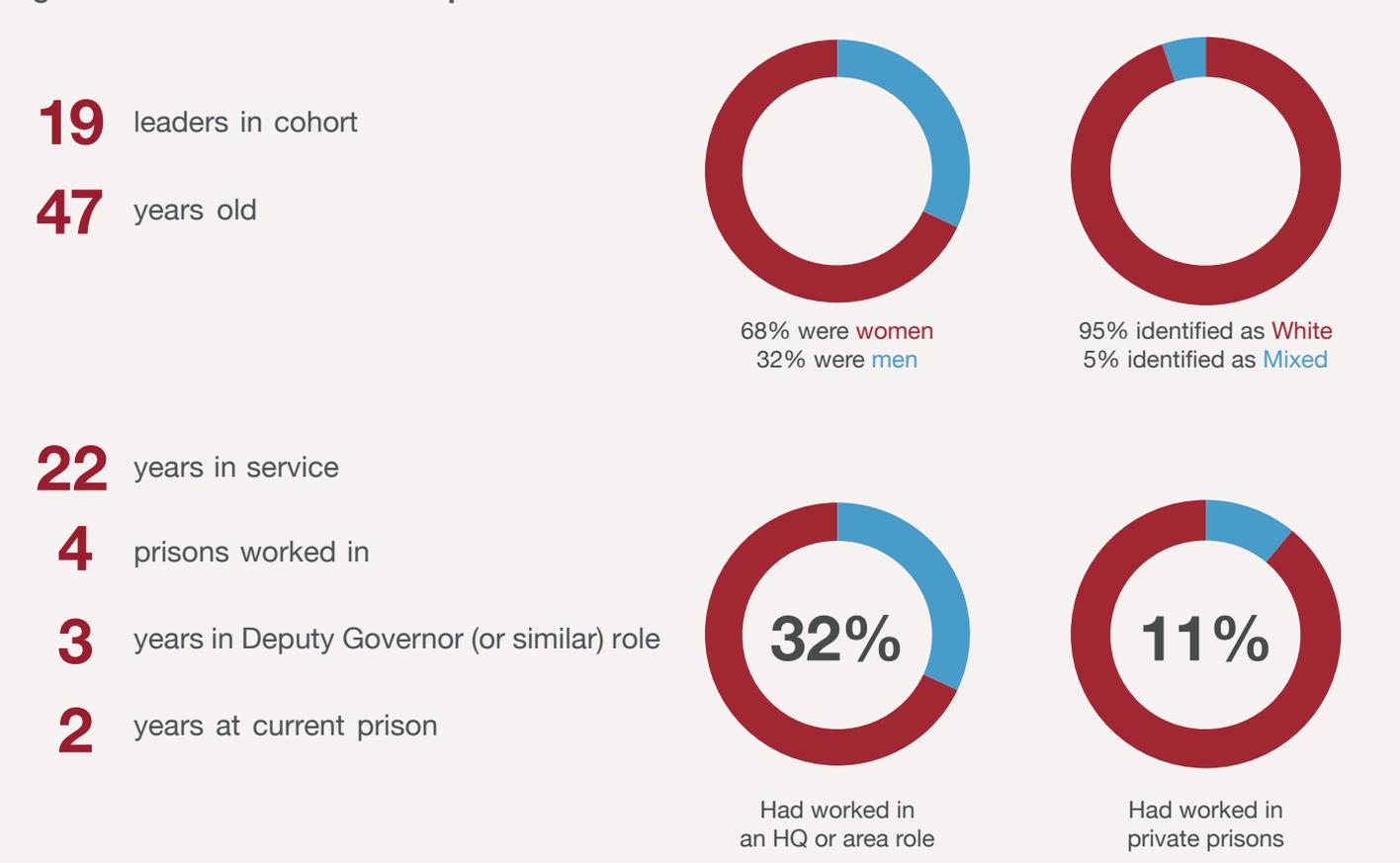
# The first Next Gen Leaders

## Overview of the cohort

### Key characteristics

Beyond our requirement that their next career step was likely to be governing their own prison, we had no formal selection criteria for our Next Gen Leaders. We based our decisions on their personal statements about why they wanted to undertake the programme and what they thought made them suitable to do so (with a supporting statement from their Prison Group Director). However, to improve future delivery we wanted to build a detailed picture of our first cohort and understand how they fared during the programme. Their key characteristics (with median averages where relevant) are presented below.

**Figure 1: Characteristics and experience of the Next Gen Leaders**



The gender balance of the cohort (68% women, 32% men) was in line with national representation at senior level in HMPPS (66% women, 33% men) but leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds (5%) were underrepresented in comparison to national level (14%).<sup>14</sup>

Generally, we were attracting leaders who were mid-career, had worked in several, but not many prisons, and had been Deputy Governors for only a few years. However, we noted two groups with differing career trajectories, who we have called ‘locals’ and ‘careerists’. ‘Locals’ had worked in fewer prisons and been at their current prison for longer than the group average. Careerists had worked in more prisons and a greater proportion had arrived at their prison at Deputy Governor level.

**Table 1: Career trajectories**

	Locals (n=9)	Careerists (n=10)
Mean number of prisons worked in	3.4 prisons	6.0 prisons
Mean years worked in current prison*	7.5 years	1.9 years
Proportion that arrived at current prison at Deputy Governor level*	63%	89%

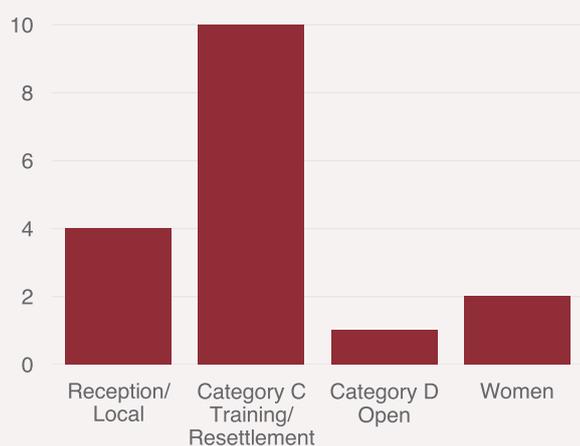
\*Excluding those who were currently in area-based roles

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Justice (2024). Table 5c; HMPPS workforce statistics bulletin: June 2024 tables. HMPPS workforce quarterly. 100% of Next Gen Leaders and 88% of HQ staff reported their ethnic minority background.

## Establishment representation

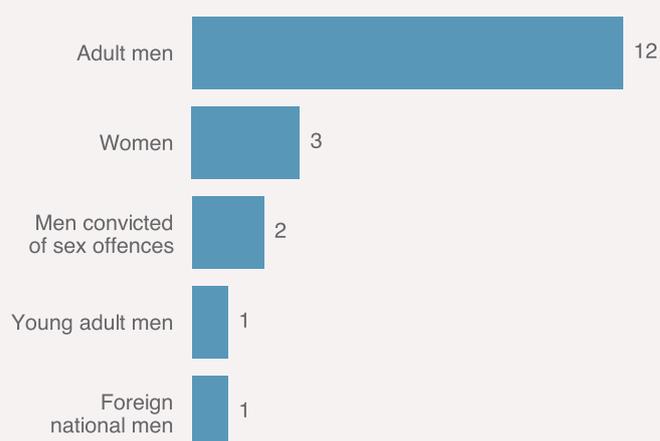
Collectively the Next Gen leaders were working in 15% of currently operational prisons and had experience working in almost half of them (49%); a wide breadth of experience and institutional memory. There was good representation of local and Category C prisons, and reasonably good representation of the women's estate that included two prisons and a member of the Women's Estate directorate. However there were evident gaps: a lack of representation from the long-term and high secure estate; few open prisons and only a few leaders from prisons specialising in particular populations. This was somewhat at odds with PRT's longstanding commitment to long-term prisoners, although plenty of leaders did work with this group.

**Figure 2: Predominant establishment function**



One leader is counted in the Category C group but worked across both a closed and open prison

**Figure 3: Predominant prison population**



## Measures of key programme targets

While we were very cautious about drawing any inferences given the small size of the cohort in statistical terms, we did use quantitative measures to explore dimensions related to some of Next Gen's key targets: motivation; resilience; and autonomous functioning. We also explored their perceived level of competence at prison leadership. The cohort was too small for sub-group comparisons to be reliable, but we hope to explore differences in how leaders fare on the programme after running several delivery cycles.

Motivations were explored using the Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale,<sup>15</sup> which conceptualises four types of motivation relevant to work: external (divided into social and material); introjected (being driven by the self-conscious emotions, for example fostering pride and avoiding shame); identification (feeling work is coherent with personal values and believing in its purpose); and intrinsic (enjoying work). Amotivation (thinking work is pointless) was also measured.

**Table 2: Motivations for work**

Motivation type	Group median score (possible max. score = 7)
Identification	6.3
Intrinsic	5.5
Introjected	5.1
External (social)	4.0
External (material)	2.5
Amotivation	1.0

<sup>15</sup> Gagné, M., et al. (2015). The Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale: validation evidence in seven languages and nine countries. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 24, 178-196.

Unsurprisingly, most leaders were highly driven by a personal belief in the value and purpose of their role (identification) and enjoying it (intrinsic). They were also fairly highly driven by self-conscious feelings (introjected). While treating with caution due to the low number of leaders, there was a significant positive relationship between introjected motivation and the number of years worked in current prison ( $r = .514$ ,  $p < .05$ ), cautiously suggesting that leaders more embedded in “their” prison may be more driven by how they are viewed within that community.

As a group, participants described themselves as highly resilient, with a median score of 4.1 out of a possible 5 points on the Brief Resilience Scale,<sup>16</sup> and 3.8 out of a possible 5 points on the Index of Autonomous Functioning (IAF).<sup>17</sup> This could have been social desirability bias, but equally well, leaders need high levels of these characteristics to function in their roles.

Leaders were asked to rate their perceived competence as prison leaders and scored an average of 6.2 out of a possible 7. Intrinsic motivation ( $r = .534$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the perceived self-congruence subscale of the IAF18 ( $r = .512$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were positively correlated with perceived competence, indicating that it is the most internally driven participants who feel most competent to undertake the programme.

This profile had some early implications for Next Gen Leaders. The high baseline scores suggested we were unlikely to see further gains over the course of the programme, at least in the statistical sense. We were attracting people who already perceived themselves as having the right qualities and were driven by a strong internal sense of purpose. This is exactly who we wanted to attract, but we will monitor whether these perceptions are borne out in both programme completion and longer-term career trajectories.

### Changes over the course of the programme

All 19 of the cohort completed the structured phase of the programme. 15 completed the project phase, with reasons for non-completion including retirement, periods of sickness, and promotion to further responsibilities.

We cautiously explored three aspects of change to inform our thinking for future delivery. However, any statistical findings should be interpreted with extreme caution given the small number of leaders (only 13 took part in all three evaluation rounds), the lack of an appropriate design for measuring impact, and the significant risks of bias.

Firstly, we explored any self-reported changes in motivations; resilience; autonomous functioning; and perceived leadership competence. In general there was very little shift in scores, which we expected given the high baselines. However, leaders did show a marginal *decline* in their reported levels of resilience<sup>19</sup> and a marginal *increase* in their feelings of susceptibility to control (a subscale of the IAF)<sup>20</sup> between the start of the structured phase and the end of the project phase, having shown no change between the start and end of the structured phase. The most likely explanation for this (aside from detecting a change where none was present due to statistical limitations associated with small samples) may be that leaders were feeling their limits while pushing through their ambitious projects and encountering barriers to doing so. Alternatively, it may have had little to do with Next Gen and more to do with the very turbulent period HMPPS was encountering due to the overcrowding crisis. However, it gave us pause for thought on how we might better support Next Gen after finishing their sessions with us.

*“We’ve just gone through a two-year capacity crisis where I feel like all I’ve done is play human Tetris forever, and to actually just go and do something meaningful and aligned with the reasons I joined was really important.”*

*(Next Gen Leader)*

The second way we explored change was to simply ask Next Gen how much they thought the programme had helped them develop in the programme targets. This revealed clear patterns of impact from their perspective.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, B. et al. (2008). The brief resilience scale: assessing the ability to bounce back. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 15(3), 194-200.

<sup>17</sup> Weinstein, N., Przybylski, A. K., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). The index of autonomous functioning: Development of a scale of human autonomy. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 46, 397-413.

<sup>18</sup> This scale measures the extent to which one's behaviour and decisions feel congruent with one's internal values.

<sup>19</sup> The mean self-reported resilience score at the start of the programme was 4.1, and 3.9 at the end ( $t = 2.521$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

<sup>20</sup> The mean self-reported susceptibility to control score at the start of the programme was 3.5, and 3.1 at the end ( $t = 3.434$ ,  $p < .05$ ). A higher score represents lower perceived susceptibility to control.

**Table 3: Leaders' ratings of their development during Next Gen**

Target	% who rated their development as fairly or really good during the structured phase	% who rated their development as fairly or really good during the project phase
Motivation and drive	80%	30%
Personal resilience	60%	39%
Autonomy and agency	20%	30%
Perceived leadership competence	70%	77%
Values clarity	70%	62%
Political astuteness	10%	39%
Strategic thinking	50%	46%
Creativity and innovation	60%	62%
Use of networks and resources	90%	75%

It appears that leaders felt the greatest benefits to motivation, values clarity and networking in the structured phase, with fewer benefits elsewhere, particularly in autonomy/agency and political astuteness. However, perception of benefit in these areas picked up during the project phase, which is entirely consistent with the kinds of challenges leaders were faced with when leaving the relative safety of the Next Gen group. Sadly, that shift also meant the perceived benefits in areas that were strongest in the structured phase waned, though by no means disappeared.

The third way we explored change was by tracking key career milestones in our cohort from where they were at the start of the programme to the present.

**Table 4: Leaders' career progression**

Progression as of March 2026	n	%
Passed Governor Assessment Centre (GAC) or similar*	11	68%
Promoted to Governing Governor or another senior role**	8	42%

\*Including one person who was not yet at Deputy Governor level and passed their Deputy Governor Assessment Centre

\*\*Six progressed to either permanent or acting Governor; one progressed from functional head to Deputy Governor; one progressed to a more senior area-based role

Evidently their progression cannot be attributed solely to participation in Next Gen, but it is promising that so many of the cohort are well on the way to being the next generation of Prison Service leaders.

### Themes in leaders' experiences of the programme

The first Next Gen cohort was exceptionally generous, insightful and constructive in sharing their experiences with us as the programme progressed. Their feedback helped to adapt the programme in real time, better understand our delivery model and its consequences, and improve the second delivery cycle. This section briefly describes the key themes from those interviews.

#### Motivations for applying

Eight leaders described being generally motivated to learn and Next Gen merely happened to be a **fresh development opportunity** that they could apply for. Five leaders described the value of the programme in terms of its **networking opportunities**. This went beyond simply being able to meet other Deputy Governors—although that was valued—it was the context of meeting them in a safe space to honestly share experiences. They felt that this was a major benefit, which would extend beyond the end of the programme. Seven leaders stated that their decision to apply was primarily driven by **PRT's reputation as**

a **respected advocate for reform**, and/or by **Pia Sinha's personal reputation as a leader** in the Service. This was not limited to those who knew her personally. Pia's current position at PRT also symbolised something principled and hopeful:

*"She would not have a clue who I was at all, but just the fact that her legacy is, I know who she is. And everyone knows who she is. And you know, what she did at Liverpool, and the courage then to say, 'I no longer want to be a leader for the service, but I still want to carry on inspiring change.' I think that in itself is phenomenal."*

The **perceived independence of PRT** was important. It signified something safe, different, and authentic. One leader compared HMPPS's 'corporate' communication with the more 'real' language used by PRT. Most participants had absorbed the message that **PRT wanted to invest in them as people**, which they experienced as motivating.

*"It wasn't one of those ones that said, "oh, you'll be this and you'll be there." It was a, "we want to invest in people because people matter and your organisation isn't perfect." It felt real. Normally, we get something that says you're going to be flying a rocket to the moon in six months, and then I just switch off instantly."*

### **Positive environment for reflection/growth**

The positive environment was a strong element of the programme which most leaders foregrounded as the most valuable part of their experience. They highlighted **making connections** as the main feature that promoted reflection/growth. It provided a very valued opportunity to simply spend time with their peers, which was often **emotionally validating**, with many saying how helpful it was to hear that others shared their experiences. It also acted as a way for them to **compare their approaches with others**. Leaders also quickly formed **practical alliances**, comparing notes on problems faced and ways to solve them, and making arrangements for mutual accountability in getting difficult things done.

*"It was nice to be taken out of that pressure pot and put somewhere with other like-minded people."*

*"We were looked after. That was nice, because as deputy governors we're the ones always looking after everybody else."*

Organically many began to build relationships with us and recognised they could reach out. However, most said that structured **opportunities to get to know the PRT team beyond Pia could be strengthened**. They also urged us to create **more structured opportunities that would push them to form connections**. This need was particularly apparent after the structured phase of the programme ended. We learned that the ongoing **Teams calls, while appreciated, could prove too loose in theme**, particularly further on into the project phase.

There were three elements of the environment which seemed to particularly help. Firstly, leaders experienced psychological benefits of **being away from their prisons**. It gave them additional space to listen and engage with other people and to adopt a more reflective stance to their work. While being *physically* outside of the prison mattered, many described the importance of being *culturally* away as well. They appreciated being in an environment that "felt" institutionally different.

The second helpful element of the environment was **feeling valued**. Leaders appreciated the fact that PRT had recognised deputy governors as a distinct group and put effort into providing a positive experience for them. They appreciated the pleasant surroundings, and the facilitators' delivery style, which left them feeling cared for and that their development mattered.

The final environmental element was a sense of **psychological safety**. Many participants felt that they bonded quickly, sometimes having begun with a wary stance, and that they could safely share their vulnerabilities. They recognised a shared motivation to develop, which was crucial for building the trust that supported connection. Pia and Erika's facilitation style helped achieve this, through establishing shared goals of the group, encouraging disclosure, acceptance, genuineness, warmth and scaffolding.

## Mentoring and coaching

*“I think just exposure to everything. It wasn't the type of training where you get a pamphlet at the end and then you shove it in your bottom drawer and never go back to it. It was all really, really valuable, and they were all amazing characters who delivered it as well.”*

Most leaders agreed that the guest speakers were one of the most valued parts of the programme. They embodied the programme's philosophy of **“letting the outside in”**, giving people concrete examples of leadership in diverse settings. However, they suggested including a senior speaker from within the Ministry of Justice (either a politician or senior civil servant) to complement the outside speakers. Speaker characteristics that leaders gained the most from were:

**Interactive style:** speakers who engaged in discussion and had warmer personalities were most appreciated.

**Different contexts, shared values:** speakers who worked in other environments but in whom leaders sense an underlying set of common values were most appreciated.

**Translatable stories:** speaker content worked best when it was accompanied by a particular tool or key message that leaders could potentially adopt for themselves.

**Breadth and diversity:** leaders generally highlighted one or two speakers that they had taken the most from and these selections were highly individualised.

Gender mattered to some degree in how participants responded to the guest speakers. Many women appreciated having inspirational female speakers, softening barriers caused by, as one person put it, *“having a lot of white middle-aged men tell me what to do”* in the Prison Service. Some women leaders reflected that the programme had helped them unpick male-centric views of leadership in HMPPS. The programme therefore seemed to be a **particular source of inspiration and support for women**.

Words used to describe Pia and Erika's role included **“hosts” and “conduits”**. Hosting should not be underestimated. Feeling welcomed, understood, and simply having someone be kind to them was really valued by leaders. “Conduit” encapsulated how Pia and Erika forged links between the guest speakers and the group. Both Pia's detailed prison knowledge and Erika's prison naivety<sup>21</sup> allowed them to pose questions and comments about leadership which stimulated the group.

Leaders indicated that **Spark Inside provided a vital bridge** for transferring their learning from inspirational leaders outside prison, to specific problems they were encountering inside prison. Spark Inside's familiarity with the system aided this transfer, and regular sessions with coaches helped the momentum of Next Gen to carry on into the project phase. Spark Inside also offered additional content, tools and space for self-reflection that those who took up the coaching appreciated.

## Lessons learned and plans for the future

The Next Gen Leaders were very constructive in informing our understanding and development of the programme delivery model. The programme's present theory of change is presented in Figure 4.

We are currently revising this model based on our learning from the first delivery cycle. However we have already implemented several changes in the second cycle which is currently underway. For the second cohort, we are pleased to have attracted a leader group with greater ethnic diversity, and improved representation from the long-term and high secure estate. The delivery changes are:

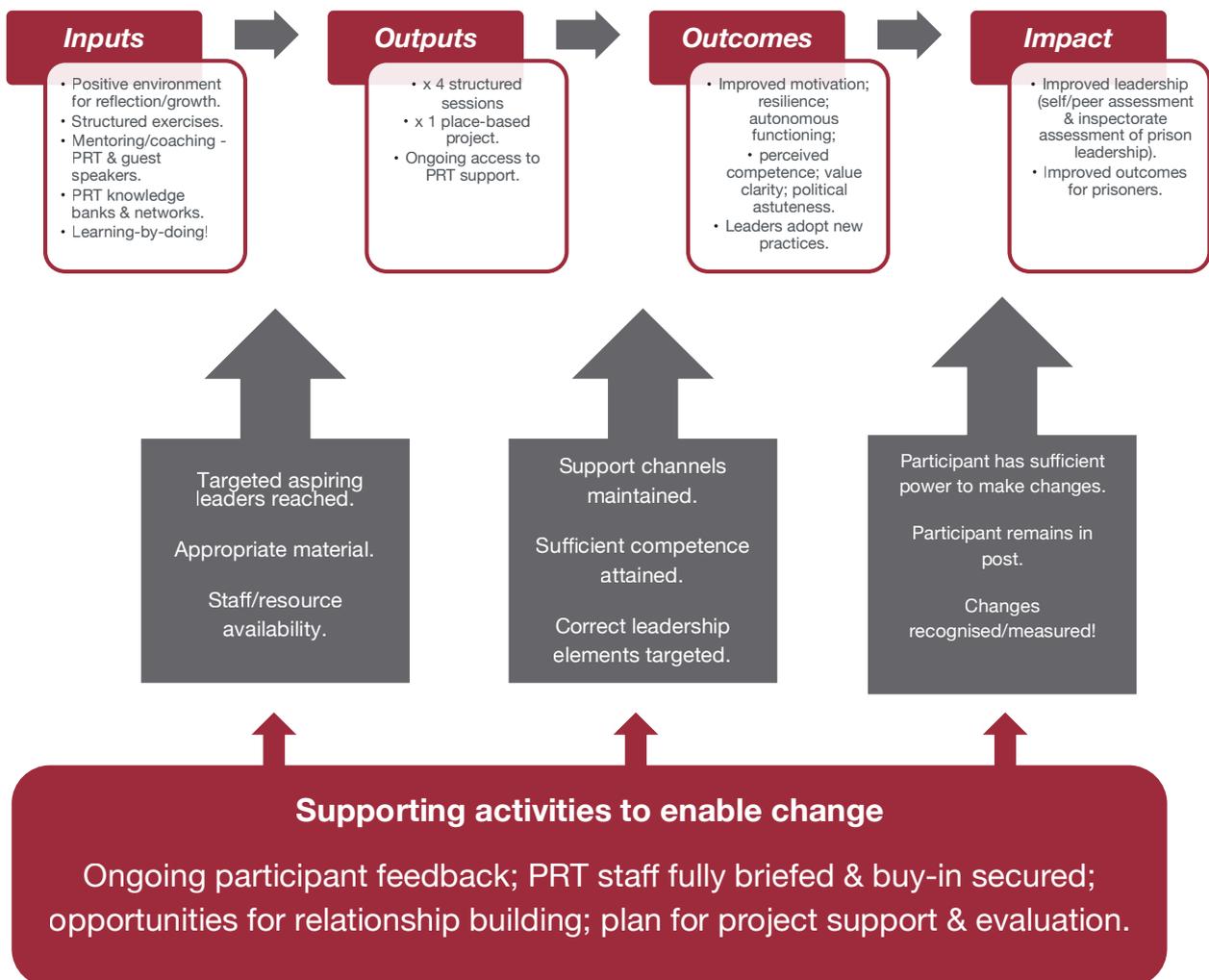
- A slightly smaller group size (16 leaders) to improve group cohesion
- Extending eligibility to private prisons
- Maintaining greater grade/role equivalence (fewer outside of Deputy Governor level selected)
- Extended the number of sessions delivered from four to six

<sup>21</sup> The word naivety is being used here in its most positive sense: when curiosity combined with a lack of familiarity produces a fresh perspective, creative thinking, innovation, optimism, and an ability to name aspects of a situation that are invisible to those closer to it.

- The project will now be delivered alongside the sessions over a shorter total programme length of 12 months. This allows for additional project support to be provided and supportive networking maintained throughout its delivery
- A panel of expert speakers in criminal justice politics and policymaking at senior level has been added
- Further opportunities have been added to network with both PRT staff and the wider criminal justice sector
- More structure and theming of Teams calls has been added

We are also progressing plans for a continued engagement network of leaders that extends beyond the end of the programme. Leaders were keen for us to get creative in maintaining a meaningful “alumni” network with opportunities for further networking in person. We hope to do so, in support of their ambitions:

**Figure 4: Next Gen Leaders draft theory of change**



*“Hopefully we’ve got a group of 20 deps that are going to be 20 governors, and you already know them all, which is lovely.”*

## Case studies of reform on the ground

This section of the report presents case studies of 15 Next Gen projects. They showcase the cohort's work, reflect on barriers, and make the case for why reformist leadership at local level is needed in tandem with national efforts made by organisations like us.

The projects are by no means perfect examples of reform—neither ourselves nor Next Gen claim that they are. Much more work needs to be done, but the projects are an impressive effort to show what can be—indeed what has been—done *now*, not later. Some attempt a genuinely new approach; others operate along very familiar principles. But there are many good principles for making prisons more humane places that are insufficiently enacted. We need leaders like Next Gen to champion them.

The most consistent theme uniting this varied set of projects is their consistent efforts to make prison less “prison like”. Most are focused on creating community connections, as a framework for meaningful human relationships. The Prison Service needs to do better at empowering these efforts instead of stifling them. Where relevant, we have pointed to the bigger reforms needed that were simply beyond our leaders' control without increased trust and investment from the centre.

### The project brief

- The project must in some way “bring the outside in”
- The project must be developed in consultation with prisoners and must directly benefit them

### How we reviewed

Despite our desire to do so, we were not sufficiently resourced to comprehensively review every project, or to evaluate their impact ourselves. We posed five broad questions:

- How did the Next Gen leader facilitate delivery of their project?
- What barriers did they face and how did they overcome them?
- What did they do that was particularly innovative?
- What do prisoners, staff and partners say about the project's impact?
- How does the project fit into to PRT's wider objectives in prison reform?

To answer these questions, we collated evidence from the following sources:

- A reflective report completed by the Next Gen Leader
- Feedback from up to two members of project delivery staff (via email or Teams)
- Secondary evidence submitted by the Next Gen Leader (or their team). This included a rich variety of ephemera, including anonymised prisoner feedback summaries; delivery plans; meeting minutes; local evaluations; project documentation; and photos
- For six of the most promising projects,<sup>22</sup> we visited the site to see the project “in action or reflection” through key events such as graduations, sessions or meetings held

We acknowledge that our methods of review were limited, and that we are of course invested in the success of our Next Gen Leaders' efforts (though we would certainly have flagged extremely poor or harmful practice had we seen it). This means that our view of the projects is inevitably partial, particularly those where we did not visit personally. However, the emphasis of Next Gen is on creating a virtuous cycle of good practice, and we therefore report in good faith where good appeared to be occurring, even though our Next Gen Leaders were often the first to tell us that it could be better. These case studies showcase their best efforts, include appraisals of what went wrong and how they tackled it, and why greater investment in governor autonomy could push those best efforts still further. Doing so would benefit many more prisoners.

<sup>22</sup> HMP Guys Marsh; HMYOI Brinsford; HMP Wayland; HMP Bristol; HMP Drake Hall (as part of the wider Women's Estate project) and HMP Bure.

## HMP and YOI Brinsford

### Supporting care leavers in a young men's prison



*“The level of engagement and support offered at HMPYOI Brinsford means there is no stigma in declaring that you have been supported through the care system.”*

*(Craig, Next Gen Leader)*

**At HMP and YOI Brinsford, Craig, our Next Gen Leader, embedded support for care leavers across the prison. The model comprehensively orients the prison's approach towards care leavers, from early identification through to post-release support. Crucially the support offered primarily understands young men through the lens of care experience, rather than offending.**

Brinsford is a Category C reception & resettlement prison. It is dual designated and specialises in holding young adults aged 18-28. It holds around 550 young men, of whom around 60% are aged under 21 (and a further 25% aged between 21 and 24).

On average, a third of the prison population has been in care. At Brinsford, the average is 40%. Care leavers face personal and social challenges that are not always well recognised by prisons. These include a history of frequent changes in carers and living circumstances, neglect, abuse, no family support, and a lack of life skills, which they are often assumed or expected to know by systems around them.

Together these experiences can result in poor mental health, high levels of mistrust, and struggles to cope with independent living. Prison regimes and routines can also end up creating the stability that care leavers crave, which makes release seem especially daunting.

#### **The model**

Brinsford's care leaver model is centred on supported preparation for adulthood; something which local authorities (LAs) have a duty to do but in practice care leavers often feel very unprepared, with their needs and experiences going unrecognised.

The prison identifies care leavers on induction, while recognising that misunderstanding, mistrust, fear of judgement and arriving in custody all impact on whether someone discloses care leaver status.

Staff were trained to be aware of the possibility that prisoners may be care leavers, and signposting to support at any point that their experiences become apparent.

*“Where I try to start now is asking the guys, do you actually identify as a care leaver? Is that a label you feel like applies to you? Do you even know what that means?”*

*(Support session facilitator)*

The prison's Safety & Care Leaver Lead had developed a strategy ensuring that disclosure led to meaningful support, which was tightly linked to LAs. They were informed that care leavers had arrived in custody and contact was established with their Personal Advisor (PA). The PA then had involvement in what was occurring for the young person in prison, including ACCT reviews, healthcare and similar.

The prison also facilitated involvement in local authorities' Lifelong Links scheme, with a council employee working in the prison to deliver this effectively. The scheme works to reconnect care leavers with people who have supported them at points in their life, including former teachers or care home staff, as well as forming connections with wider family members.

Tentatively forming or rekindling these relationships was greatly aided by a unique area of the prison: the care leavers' flat. Drawing inspiration from support offered to care leavers in the community, a successful bid was made to have a flat installed in the prison.

*“We put the bid in because in the community, they've got training flats where they can go and do all that stuff. I'm like, why do we have to wait for them to be released when they're here with us for a couple of years? You might as well do it here.”*

*(Project staff member)*

The flat looks, feels and functions like a basic studio flat, not a prison, and was a valuable space for relationship building. On occasion the prison used it for other purposes where a humane environment was needed, such as family visits for fathers parting from their own children going into care.

*“Enabling our care leavers to engage in a liberal and open environment where they could be their authentic selves for that period of time without fear of a negative response to their openness and vulnerabilities has been incredible.”*

*(Craig, Next Gen Leader)*

The flat was also used to deliver the programme of support sessions that care leavers could attend. These were focused on their known needs as a group, particularly legal rights and independent living skills. Amongst others, the prison drew on the Rees Foundation, a charity dedicated to supporting care leavers, and housing specialists to deliver “Renting Ready” workshops. The flat allowed life skills to be practiced in a realistic setting.

*“Skills I need is talking to people more and understanding about bills, yeah, so like practical stuff about how to just sort all that out.”*

*(Care leaver)*

*“I’ve been care since I was seven. I’ve made a lot of mistakes, but mostly I just didn’t understand.”*

*(Care leaver)*

As well as practicalities, the support offered to care leavers had an emphasis on relating, connection, and better understanding by prison staff. Care leavers were encouraged to share their experiences, and sessions or forums were preceded by sharing breakfast together in the flat—prisoners, staff and partners.

*“It’s a requirement to live isn’t it, food. So come along, have some food. A lot of them said is that they feel like, worthy. You know, someone’s actually going in to visit them, to bring them food. That might only be the person they’ve talked to the whole month. They might not have any other sort of connection.”*

*(Session facilitator)*

The prison also recognised the challenges facing care leavers in the community, particularly accessing accommodation options, for which care leavers must be signed off by their Personal Advisor (PA) as having developed sufficient independent living skills. A “Move-On Matrix” document was developed as a means of demonstrating what care leavers had learned.

## Barriers and solutions

Craig was frank about the barriers to implementing this model. As with many Next Gen projects, there were issues with staff-buy in, and therefore with practical issues such as ensuring people could attend sessions in the care leaver flat. Craig eventually adopted a strategy of identifying “people who thrive” in supporting care leavers, and utilising their skills/motivation.

*“It was evident where some stakeholders wished to quote their engagement rather than align themselves authentically and I made the decision to remove them from delivery.”*

*(Craig, Next Gen Leader)*

Craig reviewed evidence of staff interest and excellence, such as attendance at care leaver forums and Prison Officer of the Year Awards, utilising those staff as culture carriers for the project and to provide support for the logistics required to get various elements off the ground. A core taskforce from across the prison then drove the project forward and reviewed effectiveness of delivery.

One early issue was that care leavers fed back that the format of some sessions was inappropriate (theory-driven, too short/basic and insufficiently interactive). The original 10-session format of support sessions also did not work well in a reception/resettlement prison, where people often did not stay long enough to complete all elements.

As a result, a more flexible structure was implemented, providers of particular sessions were changed, and more interactivity was incorporated. It was noted that care leavers had far more of an interest in learning about tangible support available to them (as opposed to more generic sessions on, for example, mental health).

*“In, the first session I did in the prisons, I tried to teach too much about mental health, which is my sort of specialism. The minute I started to say there might be help to access your care records, get you a fridge, and actually help you get a flat, you saw heads pick up, because that’s what’s important, you know?”*

*(Session facilitator)*

Hearing from people with lived experience who understood the specific pains (and potential) of being care experienced also mattered. For example, accessing official records of their care is often the only way that care leavers can put the pieces together of how their life has gone. The Rees Foundation were well-versed in these matters,

recognising care leavers' difficulties without disempowering them.

*"We understand that it's different for you, or it might be different, or is it different? And if it is, tell me what that's like. And that's where I try to start from."*

*(Session facilitator)*

*"I spent my whole life with either getting beaten or getting things taken off me, so it's something you grow used to, and you don't get used to getting things or achieving things."*

*(Care leaver)*

Craig and the wider team had to chip away at adopting a humane and normalised approach to care leavers, which included practical issues like enabling the cooking/sharing of food (buying it; being security cleared to cook it); ensuring the flat was kept clean; balancing attendance at sessions with other elements of the regime; and ringfencing a Prison Officer to support sessions, which required engagement with the Prison Officers' Association. This constellation of challenges underscores how difficult it is to get new initiatives to "fit" into the highly rigid and regulated daily life of a prison.

In addition, young adults are recognised as a cohort that requires high levels of effort, reward, boundary-setting, interactivity and relationship-building to keep engaged, which resulted in attendance/behaviour issues. The prison adapted delivery over time to suit this profile, including staff available to support engagement by young adults with additional neurodivergent needs.

Each local authority is required to make an offer for care leavers, and Craig had observed that they significantly varied in quality. Prisoners arrive at Brinsford from different areas, and regime challenges made it difficult to deliver separate sessions to care leavers grouped by local authority, but the prison was making efforts to ensure people received the right information.

### **Leadership and impact**

Staff were clear that, given the ambitious scope of the project and practical delivery challenges, Craig's drive and commitment was crucial, as was his vision of embedding a care leaver oriented approach across the prison. We visited Brinsford and agreed that we could not see the project getting off the ground without his relentless energy and optimism, as well as his willingness to facilitate, in his words "a liberal approach to engagement".

*"Craig is the one that holds us all together. He keeps people accountable."*

*(Project staff member)*

*"Whatever I need or am struggling with, I'll just go to Craig and he would sort it for me. He always would. There ain't no barriers with Craig. Usually you have to wait ages, but if I needed authority to do something or to approve somebody to come in, Craig was able to do that straight away."*

*(Project staff member)*

Thoughtful but decisive use of authority is a critical feature of reformist leadership, and we saw and heard evidence of Craig adopting the kind of bold approach needed to shift the dial, while still listening and bringing others along.

The "whole prison" approach to embedding care leaver support was also starting to bear fruit. External partners told us they had noticed this at Brinsford amongst the staff:

*"So the gentleman [officer] I was with today, both times I've been he struck me as different. He wants to hear what the guys have to say. And he actually was asking questions about their care experience. He was saying, "What do I need to know as an officer about you as a care leaver, or what would be helpful for us as staff to do?"*

*(Session facilitator)*

*"The feedback [about Brinsford] is always that they're just really understanding, and they've got time for understanding their [care leavers] history."*

*(Rees Foundation)*

Project staff also noted the (unusual) consistency and longevity of care leaver orientation by Brinsford, and the benefits they were beginning to see from this effort:

*"Our council relationships are really good. Now the national care leaver lead comes to me about how to do that, we have other prisons come over to see us. It's taken a long while to do it, but it's embedded now, so we just are rolling, and now we can just build on it."*

*(Project staff member)*

*"Craig's a massive driver across the prison for it being trauma informed, and not just saying "Oh, this person's violent." It's like what has happened before that? And that just helps us manage our prisoners better."*

*(Project staff member)*

Overall, Brinsford’s approach was a rare and impressive example of bringing the outside in, networking extremely well with relevant partners and local authorities, as well as nearby Swinfen Hall, another prison holding young adults. Care leaver support was well on the way to being business-as-usual. Though HMPPS has done more in recent years to recognise care leavers and their needs, reforms to support have largely taken place outside prison. We need reformist leaders like Craig to pay attention to the wider world and not wait for it to be prisonised. His efforts demonstrate that breaking down these walls is possible.

### Reformist leaders can...

-  Put processes in place to identify care leavers—at induction and subsequently
-  Build relationships with local authority staff that support care leavers
-  Inform a local authority when a care leaver arrives in custody and establish contact with Personal Advisors
-  Involve Personal Advisors in key events for the young person
-  Facilitate the Lifelong Links scheme if a local authority runs it
-  Create a “training flat” in the style of those used to support care leavers in the community
-  Work with external partners to create a tailored support programme for care leavers. Focus on practical skills and support.
-  Encourage learning and listening by staff, to better understand care leavers’ needs and experiences
-  Review and identify staff who can act as culture carriers in embedding a care leaver-oriented approach
-  Create opportunities for relating as well as teaching—like sharing breakfast before sessions
-  Use a “Move-On Matrix” to capture what skills care leavers have learned and share it with their PA

## HMP Bristol

### Cooking together in a local prison



*It's simple, cheap and effective: everyone has a nice time, we all feel human, and we enjoy good food. Food is a leveller; everyone enjoys it and likes to discuss it."*

*(Nat, Next Gen Leader)*

**At HMP Bristol, Nat, our Next Gen Leader, ran monthly cooking sessions for staff and prisoners. Led by chefs from the community, the group cooked and ate together, whilst talking about their experiences, culture, memories and background through the shared human experience of food. The sessions have helped both staff and prisoners in Bristol to develop authentic professional relationships and bridge traditional divides.**

HMP Bristol is an inner-city local prison that receives prisoners directly from the courts. It holds around 570 men across five wings, including detox and vulnerable prisoner wings. It is a Victorian prison, with one wing still operating on night sanitation. Around two in five prisoners are held on remand and there are around 100 releases per month. This makes for a busy and often volatile environment with high levels of crisis as people enter custody. Bristol received an Urgent Notification from inspectors in 2023, though progress by leaders and staff was commended in a 2024 follow-up. Nat's efforts stand out in Next Gen as an example of how reforms can be achieved even in the most challenging of prisons.

At the time of writing, five sessions had been run, of which we visited the fifth. For the first session, prisoners nominated staff they had a good relationship with to attend. Meals were chosen based on favourite dishes and/or what people ate growing up.

For the second session, the performance chef for a local rugby club led a fitness-oriented session for the prison's Physical Education Instructors, gym orderlies and frequent gym goers.

In the third session, young adult prisoners undertaking their Duke of Edinburgh awards prepared Turkish-inspired dishes. For some it

was their first experience of preparing a meal. For the fourth session, prisoners on the Incentivised Substance Free Living Unit and its staff cooked gut-healthy and budget-friendly recipes resulting in "good mood food".

*"I will cook more when I am home after today"*

*(Feedback form)*

We had the privilege of attending the session held for Black History Month, led by a chef from Food Behind Bars, a charity that works to improve healthy and nutritious food provision in prisons.

Each session culminates in prisoners, staff and the chef eating the meal together and reflecting on what they have learned, what bonds them, and what they will do differently moving forward. This is intended to further strengthen relationships and appreciation of each other as individuals, with different experiences and outlooks on life.

The project was developed in consultation with prisoner wing representatives, and feedback collected at the end of each session. It developed a clear objective to not only achieve the inherent benefits of cooking good food, but to use food as a means of improving relationships across the prison.

*"It is an opportunity for staff and prisoners to come together to have some fun and just be people together. It strengthens relationships, which in turn will make for a more stable and respectful environment to work and live in."*

*(Nat, Next Gen Leader)*

### **Barriers and solutions**

The logistics of supplying good food to prisons was challenging not only for Nat but for several other Next Gen Leaders as well. The prison's procurement system and supplier was not sufficiently flexible to order small quantities of good ingredients. In response the community chefs—already volunteering their time for free—often provided ingredients as well. Rightly or wrongly, this removed the cost barrier.

*“As there was no cost implication for the prison, this was not a difficult sell.”*

*(Nat, Next Gen Leader)*

The flexibility allowed chefs to innovate in designing their menus, and their willingness is a testament to the role that local communities may wish to play in prisons if given the option. Several continued to work with the prison kitchen. However, there were still consequences to relying on volunteers to run a project rather than proper investment.

*“As the project relies on chefs volunteering their time, we have had to cancel a session at short notice as a chef was offered paid work he couldn’t decline.”*

*(Nat, Next Gen Leader)*

The logistics of attendance were another challenge. Attendees were selected by Nat and the Diversity/Healthy Culture Lead. There was no formal selection criteria, which risked some people missing out. However, it was a responsive approach to the complex nature of the prison that allowed sensitive relationship management.

*“For the first session Nat did something quite different, which I thought was really cool. She had selected the prisoners that were in the session, and then she asked the prisoners to nominate a staff member who had helped them in their prison journey at Bristol. That was really nice, because then the staff members who were there felt like really proud and were really happy, you know.”*

*(Community chef)*

*“The way I work is like, quite organically, having those conversations with as many people as you can, and kind of teasing out those people that are quite passionate about cultural change, whether that be staff or prisoners. And then, if I’m honest, sometimes I throw in a bit of a wild card, as in somebody that maybe might not think completely that way, and hope by the end, they’re kind of on board, and we’ve had some change in thinking as well.”*

*(Diversity & Healthy Culture Lead)*

Fundamental barriers remained, such as the exclusion of people who were remanded for/convicted of knife crime, underscoring how difficult it can be to normalise a prison environment without the time and space for proper risk assessment. Staff appreciated Nat’s “can-do” approach in an environment that typically defaults to restriction.

*“If Nat wants something done, Nat will get it done. She will send the email. She will make the phone call. She will be on her radio making sure that things happen. She will say yes, when things need a yes, no, if they need a no.”*

*(Community chef)*

*“If the dep’s running something, it’s going to happen.”*

*(Project staff member)*

## **The project’s impact and effects**

Of all the Next Gen projects, this one most directly addressed basic wellbeing of people in prison. Local prisons tend to have lower levels of purposeful activity and higher levels of time in cell. Getting out to cook and eat food was simple but enormously restorative.

*“The best morning I’ve had since I’ve been in prison!”*

*(Feedback form)*

*“It don’t really feel like you’re in prison because you get to cook home food or things you would usually eat on the outside, so it might make you feel a lot better, and it’s not like you’re just wasting away.”*

*(Session attendee)*

*“It’s a bit of a good distraction. Not everyone wants to feel like they’re in prison all the time. It’s very detrimental to the brain.”*

*(Session attendee)*

*“It makes me forget that I’m in here. It’s something different, something nice and fun to do, where, if this wasn’t gonna happen, realistically, probably just watching TV or sleeping.”*

*(Session attendee)*

Prisoners and staff reflected that the sessions could act as a huge incentive for good behaviour if they were clearly linked in that way, but their main objective of improving relationships was already being achieved. Both groups reflected on how cooking acted as, in Nat’s words, “a leveller”, with ongoing effects after sessions too.

*“It’s a lot better if, like you give people the opportunity to show you that they are also human. It’s just a good way of saying everyone’s really the same regardless of the situation.”*

*(Session attendee)*

*“We get to interact with the officers more. So then we get to see a different side to them.”*

*(Session attendee)*

*“There’s always going to be a gov [officer] that don’t know you. That first interaction, they might be the worst or actually be alright, but it’s best to like this—a space where a prisoner can feel comfortable to speak to you, and the gov can also feel safe and comfortable as well. It’s kind of creating a bond and a friendship between the two, and that’s very rare. That rarely happens in prison.”*

*(Session attendee)*

*“Today, I’ve bonded with him. If I see him again, I’ll be like, I don’t know, I could probably pull him to the side and say I’m having a bad day today man, could you help me? Yeah, because I spoke to him and I could see there’s other side to him.”*

*(Session attendee)*

*“The staff member that was [in the session] she was like, oh my God, I didn’t realise, did you know this prisoner has been through XYZ, and actually, we had a really humbling conversation about how life’s beginnings can kind change your direction. So, I think that is the powerful aspect for me. One inspirational story from a prisoner then sparks that kind of hunger to get to know individuals.”*

*(Project staff member)*

Another ongoing benefit for the prison was the continued role of Food Behind Bars, who staff and prisoners agreed had greatly improved the quality of food in the prison.

*“I walk onto wings and there’s fresh coronation chicken, and it’s got, like salad garnish with it, and homemade coleslaw and jacket potatoes for lunch. Like I’d go and pay £7.50 in a cafe for that. So I think that has absolutely been transformational, whereas we used to have those kind of school pizzas that looked a bit sorry for themselves.”*

*(Project staff member)*

Nat was a strong personal presence at the sessions, and in the project’s development. Her willingness to listen to a broad range of people and ability to connect with them was appreciated.

*“She’s hand picked, like, people from a lot of people from different wings and different cultures, different ages also, which I find, like, very beneficial, because she’s not just gonna get a one-sided opinion.”*

*(Prisoner forum rep)*

*“She’s got everyone from different ages and different cultures and whatnot, it’s like we’re trying to find a middle grounding for everyone. And I feel like that she’s very beneficial to the prison.”*

*(Session attendee)*

*“She was chatting to one of the guys, and they worked out that they were both from [place], yeah, and I think it was a really cool for her to be able to have that conversation, but then also really nice for him to be like, oh, wow this person in this position of leadership is actually really similar to me in a lot of ways.”*

*(Community chef)*

Food is a basic human need for survival, but so are social connections. Nat’s project was the most direct example of simply striving to undo prison’s debilitating effects. Without deliberate efforts, many people in prison will not get the opportunity to eat well, let alone cook in a “normal” atmosphere. Nor will they get to socialise over a meal.<sup>23</sup>

At the time of writing, the new HMPPS Food Policy was about to go live. It is too early to say whether this will have an effect, but while broader efforts to secure prisoners’ basic nutrition continue, we need reformist leaders like Nat to create good food in their prisons, and all the social and community benefits that flow from it.

*“I believe we are all people who have shared experiences we can bond over, and at times we can forget our roles or why we are together, to learn from each other, and experience spending time together as human beings”*

*(Nat, Next Gen Leader)*

<sup>23</sup> See Sam’s project at HMP Onley on communal dining.

## Reformist leaders can...

- ✔ Work with local chefs to offer cooking sessions with good quality ingredients
- ✔ Utilise the relational power of food—build sessions that break down walls between staff and prisoners
- ✔ Encourage prisoners and staff to nominate each other to cook with
- ✔ Use cooking as a means to build life skills, confidence, recovery and cultural expression
- ✔ Make time for eating together and sharing life stories—use food as a conversation starter



## Women's Estate

### Supporting women who have experienced domestic abuse



*Linkworker: Were there any red flags that you didn't notice at the time?*

*Whole group together: YES!*

**At least 60% of women in prison have been victims of domestic abuse and the actual number is likely to be far higher. Andrea, our Next Gen Leader, launched a pioneering linkworker scheme to address the urgent need for domestic abuse support in women's prisons.**

Despite commitments on paper, provision for women in prison who have experienced abuse has been inconsistent and underfunded. Andrea's initiative introduced dedicated linkworkers alongside trained prisoners called Women's Champions—creating communities of connection and mutual empowerment between women. The scheme now operates in over half of women's prisons and has engaged both women and men through a national radio campaign.

*"I got a fractured jaw and my arm was out of its socket. He got a £45 fine. And that was justice."*

*(Woman using the linkworker service)*

Policy and practice often treat women as an afterthought to the male prison estate, ignoring their distinct needs and experiences. But domestic abuse drives women's offending in particularly devastating ways, from coerced criminal activity, to acts of desperation and survival against violent partners. This can lead to imprisonment owing to deeply traumatic circumstances. While the Female Offender Strategy acknowledged this reality and promised reforms, support remains patch and fragile. The staggering level of need is not reflected in provision, nor in the culture of many prisons, which can reflect societal myths about domestic abuse.

*"They said I was a bad mum for letting my kids be in the house where domestic violence was happening. As if I had a choice."*

*(Woman using the linkworker service)*

*"Services are very guilty of, like, if you've got four problems, you'll have to see four different people, and they'll only pay attention to that one aspect of you. Whereas actually, reality is much messier than that, and people are whole people, yeah? And you need this integrated service."*

*(Woman using the linkworker service)*

Andrea, working in the women's prison estate, knew that for many women, there was a man behind their offending. In her leadership role across all 12 women's prisons, she fought to secure and expand funding for domestic violence linkworkers.

Linkworker roles—sometimes filled by external specialists, sometimes by prison staff—provide vital support and signposting towards services. Women's Champions then amplify the impact by reaching more women, building trust, normalising conversations about abuse and fostering community connections. Andrea partnered with external women's services to build this model, breaking down the cultural and logistical walls of prison to secure expert support.

Linkworking operates on the central principle of a trusted and dedicated individual whom women can approach. Linkworkers spend considerable time building up enough trust with women to talk about their experiences; to provide basic education on abuse; reassure women that they are not alone, and that help is available. The linkworkers also build relationships with services (inside and outside prison), advocating for women when needed, as well as organising and signposting towards onward support.

*"There's a lady that I've recently been talking to, and she's adopted the mantra "it's okay to say no". She's hung on her wall, and, yeah she's really adopted that."*

*(Women's Champion)*

Women and staff told us what they had gained from the linkworker scheme, with effects extending beyond simply receiving help. The scheme had created a sense of connection and empowerment.

At Drake Hall, the women told us that speaking about domestic violence had become “normalised” in the prison, allowing other women to see that they were not alone, and gain confidence. A simple but effective measure that assisted this was the distinctive purple shirt worn by the linkworker (a Prison Officer), which made support for domestic abuse a visible, recognisable and routine part of the prison. A survey and focus groups across the other six prisons also confirmed the importance of having a single dedicated, trusted individual.

*“It might be nothing to do with domestic abuse, but they know they’ve got that person that they can trust, yeah? And I think that’s really important to build within women’s prisons.”*

*(Women’s Champion)*

The use of Women’s Champions challenged the framework of victims receiving expert help, which can simply reinforce disempowerment and helplessness. Instead, women found hope, meaning and purpose in championing a scheme that they themselves had benefitted from, and moved forward together as a community.

*“I think it brings a lot more women together within the prison. I’ve definitely connected with a lot more people. The women I work with don’t realise how much they actually help me, even though it’s meant to be me helping them. It helps my confidence as well as theirs.”*

*(Women’s Champion)*

However, the women and staff involved in the project told us of considerable problems with getting established in the prison. It was often difficult to acquire basic room space and facilities, secure buy-in from senior leaders, and challenge the poor understanding from the (often male) key work officers assigned to women.

The scheme was funded—but not nearly enough to meet demand. A survey of women across the seven prisons involved found that 92% of women there had experienced domestic abuse. One third women in the prison we visited were on the waiting list for the linkworker service. Women also told us about the formidable efforts of abusers to regain control on release, such as turning up at the gate when women were unable to hide their whereabouts or to escape. The scheme was not yet sufficiently funded to provide the complete through-the-gate service that women needed.

*There is not a chance I am giving up on the women that need this service.”*

*(Andrea, Next Gen Leader)*

We saw how Andrea tackled many delivery challenges, using considerable political astuteness to navigate the funding landscape and advocate for women in spaces that their voices otherwise would not reach. She picked some battles and conceded others, without deviating from her fundamental values about women’s right to support.

*“She came in, she made it clear to everybody, this is what we’re doing, and this is what we’re not doing. So that really helped, you know, because it was coming from her rather than us.”*

*(Linkworker)*

Andrea also brought the outside in by connecting well-established external women’s services to prisons, bringing in their approach as a fresh challenge to cultural attitudes towards criminalised women. Security measures in prison can also struggle to adapt to outside partners. Project staff told us how Andrea had facilitated their access, cleared roadblocks, and swiftly resolved issues in a way that allowed them to get on with the job.

*“She knows that domestic violence is a national conversation. She knows that that’s not something that’s going to go away.”*

*(Prison Radio Association)*

Andrea also showed innovation in promoting the scheme across prisons nationally, through collaboration with the Prison Radio Association. PRA interviewed 61 women in two prisons and ran 16 short features as well as six 40-second adverts which—crucially—were also run in men’s prisons. Andrea was steadfast in her view that for real change to happen, men must also be part of the conversation. In a later survey, 97% of men said they had found it useful.

*“Listening has made me more aware of the issues women face.”*

*(Male Prison Radio listener)*

Andrea’s project grasped the nettle on a problem that often feels like an insurmountable and entrenched issue of women’s imprisonment. While we wait for the political machine to slowly trundle on in tackling violence against women and girls, Andrea reached prisons that house almost two thirds of the approximately 3,500 imprisoned women.

However, we are very sad to report that HMPPS declined to fund the project further, despite the overwhelming need for services, as well as several pieces of evidence which indicated it was being received well by women and had strong potential. The project would have benefitted from operational support to embed its delivery in a consistent framework across prisons. But instead of grasping the nettle, funding was deprioritised in favour of other services, with tangible consequences for the women who were receiving support. This is stark evidence of the fragility of reformist efforts and the difficulties of innovating in a climate of risk aversion. HMPPS must do better to deliver on its commitments to end violence against women and girls.

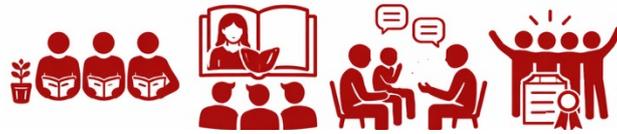
### Reformist leaders can...

-  Use impactful communication channels like Prison Radio
-  Support the best expertise to work inside prisons—remove the barriers
-  Support wider efforts to tackle violence against women and girls
-  Build supportive communities that empower—not just “victims” who need help
-  Resist normalisation of entrenched problems in prison
-  Challenge myths and stereotypes
-  Act as advocates in spaces where prisoners cannot speak for themselves
-  Show up, be present and be responsive to project staff and participants

Reflections from women involved in the service	Reflections from Andrea
<p><i>“She [linkworker] saw something in me, which was great.”</i></p>	<p><i>“This project gives women a safe space to talk about a subject that for some they have never spoken about. It encourages women to support other women and create a shared understanding that it is not a subject never to be spoken about, to be ashamed of. It’s okay to ask for help and support.”</i></p>
<p><i>“I really enjoy it, and I think it’s helped me. Helped me tremendously.”</i></p>	<p><i>“I was excited to have the opportunity to be asked to set up and lead a project regarding something I have a real passion for – making a difference to the women in our care who have experienced abuse, control and harmful relationships. At times this project has been really challenging – not because it was too difficult, but there have been so many competing priorities and relationships to manage in addition to my day job.”</i></p>
<p><i>“I think it’s certainly helped me, and I’d like to think that it helps other people.”</i></p>	<p><i>“I can definitely say my resilience has at times being tested but I have managed this because of how deeply I care that this project still continues to keep its funding, that the service to women in some way still operates to provide a network of support for women who have experienced domestic abuse and are also in custody.”</i></p>
<p><i>“It helped me empathise and speak with other people as well I think, which is a sort of a more indirect impact, but still really, really valuable.”</i></p>	<p><i>“As with all projects there are competing priorities, pressures on funding, lack of funding and often a more pressing need in other aspects of the business. I believe I have continued to give women a voice by speaking about how important this service is to them, how much they value it, and the difference women say that it made. There have been multiple challenges along the way, a busy day job which I love and the emotion that brings, and at times feeling ‘if I fought less I would have much less to do.’ But that lasts moments. There is not a chance I am giving up on the women that need this service.”</i></p>

## HMP Guys Marsh

### Reading for recovery: a community reading group in a men's prison



Reading together sounds like an easy thing to do, but it's one of many "normal" community activities that prisons are not designed for. At HMP Guys Marsh, Kat, our Next Gen Leader, created a reading group for prisoners with substance misuse issues. 12 men read "Finding Rat Park: A Handbook for Recovery" together over 12 weeks, facilitated by the book's author, ending in a reflection and celebration event attended by group members, their families, and prison staff.

*"The whole concept around having addictive rats, you know, or having addictive people, and then changing their environment, and what happens when you do that—it just blew my mind. You know, because we're sociable animals too."*

*(Reading group member)<sup>24</sup>*

Addiction is an overwhelmingly prevalent social and health problem faced by people in prison. Demand for services exceeds supply, and the prison environment itself can be deeply inappropriate for recovery. "Finding Rat Park: A Handbook for Recovery" is a holistic approach based on forming social connections, choosing these over substances, and creating a recovery-oriented community.

Although a book, several mediums were used to facilitate discussion around its themes, including film, poetry, theatre, and external speakers. The sessions also enacted the principle of normalcy in a prison, providing tea/coffee, snacks, and a relaxed environment conducive to reflection. The event continued these themes, with a range of creative performances, personal reflections, and a focus on connection with family/loved ones.

We attended the event and spoke with staff and prisoners. A recurring theme was Kat's personal presence—echoing the book's theme of connection. Despite holding an area-based role and temporarily governing another prison, Kat personally attended sessions and built strong relationships with those involved.

*"I felt quite privileged she'd come to us as a prison, personally, to be on the ground and directing the project from inside. But the nice thing about Kat as a leader is she's very approachable."*

*(Staff member on the project)*

*"As soon as Denise came in, it was a little bit of a different dynamic, because she's a female, and we're not used to that in men's jails. But the minute she started talking, we could all relate to her. And it was that relatability factor that really, really helped us in the early stages of building them bonds, yeah."*

*(Reading group member)*

This reinforces a very simple but important quality of reformist leadership: show up and be present for the initiatives you drive. Doing so can also be restorative:

*"I joined the service because I wanted to help people. This project gave me the precious opportunity to recentre on what drew me to join 18 years ago. It reignited my fire to keep trying, keep pushing and keep believing we can do better for the men in our care."*

*(Kat, Next Gen Leader)*

Kat's personal involvement also cleared the many practical roadblocks to creating a normal community activity. The coming together of prisoners, families, staff and partners felt very natural at Guys Marsh, but it was not achieved organically, only by a deliberate effort to foster community spirit: something that the very structure of prisons all too easily stifles.

*"They had some normality in their days during Rat Park. It was two hours once a week, where they could just be human."*

*(Denise Harrison, Finding Rat Park author)*

Staff told us in no uncertain terms that Kat's motivation to achieve normalcy and connection showed up in every forum.

<sup>24</sup> The central premise of the book is the set of social experiments conducted in the 1970s by Simon Fraser University. Two sets of rats were presented with sweetened morphine water or plain water. The first set of rats isolated in single cages showed a strong preference for the sweetened morphine. The second set of rats housed in "Rat Park", where they lived together in an environment designed for play, comfort and connection. These rats showed a preference for plain water, even when the sweetened morphine was available.

*“We knew that there would be obstacles that we needed to get around. But then Kat and I were brainstorming about how we’re going to get around [them].”*

*(Denise Harrison, Finding Rat Park author)*

*“I think we do need really strong, motivated people to get something moving like this. You can be bogged down, and people will put up barriers if you are not someone who is willing to stick your neck out.”*

*(Staff member on the project)*

There were battles to secure the basics, such as paying the group for attendance in line with other prison activities, and allowing snacks to be consumed. Struggles continued while the group was running. Staff interruptions, clashes to canteen delivery, and the digital wall all created barriers to simply “being” together and sharing reflections. Despite being common on the outside, a reading group simply did not “fit” with how prisons do things, and it required determination to create in a shape that was “normal” rather than prisonised.

*“We watch social impact films and TED Talks (one of which we had to watch sideways, which is par for the course when you don’t have any Wi-Fi).”*

*(Denise Harrison, Finding Rat Park author)*

A further barrier to normalcy was navigating the world of service delivery. Substance misuse services are generally delivered by contractors, and questions were raised about the legitimacy of an additional “service provider”. While clinical services are vital, Kat wanted to provide something more akin to social prescribing. The reading group was a form of social support done with, not to, prisoners. However, there were struggles to position the group in this way.

*“To avoid the mountains of paperwork jumping through hoops needed to get this book read in prison, we decided simply to call it a reading group.”*

*(Denise Harrison, Finding Rat Park author)*

*“[We didn’t want to] alienate existing substance misuse services.”*

*(Kat, Next Gen Leader)*

But staff observed how combining reading with other types of media, and people, created a genuinely engaging format which more traditional services sometimes struggle to provide:

*“Having delivered programmes myself, I think motivation can wane if it’s the same old people saying the same old stuff. So I think that was key to it, is bringing in these elements around exactly what was being talked about in the book.”*

*(Staff member on the project)*

The impacts of the project were diverse and not necessarily those measured in clinical treatment services. Kat observed how the power of community isn’t always recognised:

*“The performance culture of HMPPS does not always allow space for the transformative power of good conversation. Some of the most important and humbling moments of the workshops were men helping men, and the importance of enabling these exchanges cannot be underestimated.”*

*(Kat, Next Gen leader)*

*“The group discussions were really enlightening for me. Not just listening to other people’s experiences and not just being there to support them, but also understanding that they can actually support you no matter where you are in your recovery.”*

*(Reading group member)*

*“I’m a safer custody rep. So I’m speaking to people daily and I’ve been able to use what I’ve learned.”*

*(Reading group member)*

The impact of connection grew throughout the reading groups time together. The members and Denise went on to publish a book of poetry and stories about their experiences. They are also building their own “Rat Park” inside the prison, comprised of a quiet green area where people can sit and connect. Staff also reported that the climate on the Incentivised Substance Free Living (ISFL) wing where the group lived together, had greatly improved after connections were formed between them.

*“What environment do we want to create for ourselves? What are the Rat Parks of the future? And our Rat Park, mine, includes my family, my friends. It’s all about social, sociability and building connections with people.”*

*(Reading group member)*

Rat Park: A Handbook for Recovery author Denise Harrison had not previously worked with people in prison and was inspired to take this effort further: nearby HMP Portland has agreed to run their own reading group. But Kat observed how it can often be difficult for talented people to “break in” to prisons:

*“She is a fantastic woman with lots to offer – she was interested in prisons, but didn’t know how to go about getting into one. It’s hard to get an evidence base if you’re not given the opportunity to try.”*

*“Finance was a problem. Even if you are able to secure the services of a skilled individual at nil cost, it is still (almost) impossible to cover their accommodation, travel expenses or any sort of subsistence.”*

*(Kat, Next Gen Leader)*

Our brief to “bring the outside in” is not solely rooted in direct benefits to prisoners. Prisons are closed institutions in the way that others, like schools and hospitals, are not. Open institutions are part of communities and attract care and attention.

While broader political dialogue continues, reformist leaders bringing the outside in helps the outside to care: something desperately needed to advance the wider public conversation about prison reform.

*“It was really, really obvious just how passionate [Kat] is about what she does. About the guys in prison. Everybody that I came into contact with in Guys Marsh was incredible. You know, the dedication that they have to the job and the way that they clearly want the best for the guys in there is, is like, second to none. So it was absolutely a massive eye opener for me.”*

*(Denise Harrison, Finding Rat Park author)*

## Reformist leaders can...



Strive to create “normal” community activities



Find creative ways of keeping those activities in a normal shape— not prisonised



Create conversation, connection, community and creativity, not just services—let the community help itself.



Show up and relate no matter what level you are



Clear roadblocks for external partners, particularly ones not traditionally established in prisons



Educate staff about what you’re doing and why

## Kat's speech at the celebration event

My name is Kat, and I'm the Head of Office for South West prisons. Now that we are at an ending (of sorts), I'd like to talk about how Finding Rat Park at Guys Marsh began. I've been part of a project with the Prison Reform Trust, to build the next generation of senior leaders in the prison service.

In return for their input and materials and brilliant speakers to help build the governors of the future, they asked us to deliver a project. No parameters, no brief, but it had to be for the benefit of prisoners.

I knew I wanted my project to focus on recovery and whilst inspiration didn't strike, divinity did. My friend told me about a book that her friend had illustrated. And she told me I'd love it, and I did love it. I loved it so much I contacted the author and asked if she'd consider delivering her book as a series of workshops to a group of prisoners in Guys Marsh, and she said yes. She had in fact already been thinking about how to grow her brilliant book, and had fantastic ideas about how to apply it in meaningful real-life settings. A partnership was born, and we started setting up the project.

And then I was asked to take on acting governor of Dartmoor alongside my Head of Office job, to mothball and temporarily close it, and I thought "how hard could it be to run a prison with no prisoners in it - of course I'll be able to do my other job on the side and my project on the side of that". I had a steep learning curve because it turns out a governors time is regrettably often spent on anything other than the prisoners that we care for. I was really worried I wasn't going to be able to make this project work. I drafted an email to the Prison Reform Trust to explain that I simply didn't have the time or capacity or headspace to do it justice.<sup>25</sup>

But what I did have was a huge amount of support, a fantastic author and lots and lots of enthusiasm. So with [Guys Marsh governor] simply saying yes when this mad Head of Office presented him with a mad idea, the wonderful [Drug Strategy Lead] who said "I love a project", and Denise travelling across the county, other members of my team who made it work, Denise has bought her book to life.

But my biggest thanks has to go to you guys [the reading group members]. I am not overstating this. This has been a career highlight. I have felt privileged and honoured to sit and listen and sometimes participate in what has been something I hope will help shape your lives. It has been a blessing to be able to reconnect with the reasons and values that made me join the service (even if nobody did ever make me a cup of tea in the end).

I ask this of you all—do not underestimate the power of the brotherhood that has been built on the foundations of the vulnerability you have shared. The care and connection I have watched you build is something truly special and very important. I hope you are as proud of yourselves as I am of every one of you. It can be hard to achieve in prisons, there can be so much as against you, but week after week and chapter after chapter, you have shown up, you've shared and I'm so so proud that I get to see you celebrate this achievement with your family and friends today. We've got a great lineup of events today and I look forward to sharing in this celebration with you all. Thank you, and my request to you is that you don't let this be the end, take this and build on it, and I wish nothing but brilliant things for your futures.

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<sup>25</sup> We disagreed.

# HMP Wayland

## Community Matters: making a prison part of its local community



*“Why can’t we?”*

*(Andy, Next Gen Leader)*

**At HMP Wayland, Andy, our Next Gen Leader, runs a project called Community Matters. It builds links between Wayland and its local community. In doing so, it improves public perceptions of the prison and offers prisoners the chance to contribute.**

HMP Wayland is a Category C prison holding just over 850 prisoners, located in the heart of rural Norfolk. The surrounding area (also called Wayland) comprises local town Watton and 13 surrounding villages. It has a rich agricultural history and many areas of natural beauty. The area retains a strong sense of military heritage, owing in part to the large number of air bases built in East Anglia during the Second World War. Wayland is built on the former site of RAF Watton.

Modern prison narratives often highlight the importance of community—something many were never designed to foster. But prisons also sit within local communities. Their presence can create fear and hostility, driven by negative perceptions of prisoners. There can also be resentment at any disruption caused to homes, jobs, traffic, rights of way or to the landscape.

Despite these challenges, individual prisons can be part of communities too, for example through working farms and prison-community sports matches. However, the past few decades have seen a gradual hardening of the divide. There are far fewer open prisons, and Release on Temporary Licence rates have greatly declined, especially from closed prisons like Wayland. Over time the flows in and out of prisons have atrophied, leaving more of them isolated and mistrusted.

HMP Wayland opened in 1985, and while there is some lingering community memory of prisoners working locally on day release, such activity has long ceased. Andy wanted to restore Wayland as a “good neighbour” in the community, giving prisoners the chance to contribute and the community a chance to see what they could do.

<sup>26</sup> An annual prison gardens competition run by the Royal Horticultural Society.

However, the project started from very poor local perceptions of the prison.

*“I was expecting anxiety and sceptical attitudes from the local community, but I was not ready for how badly we were thought of.”*

*(Andy, Next Gen Leader)*

### Community Matters

To date, Community Matters has comprised small discrete projects with an overarching theme of community. They have included:

- Veteran prisoners working alongside a local heritage museum on a restoration project
- Veterans from the community attended a VE Day event in the prison, with afternoon tea and music played by the prison band
- The prison gardens team competing in the Windlesham Award<sup>26</sup> with invitations for gardeners in the community to help
- Prisoners contributed noticeboards, artwork and baked goods to a community Allotment Open Day
- Prisoners and the carpentry workshop staff made a bench, signage and birdboxes for the local area

Further plans were underway for other contributions to the local community, as well as fostering a greater sense of community within the prison through peer-led sessions in art and music.

### Barriers and solutions

Worries about community perceptions featured heavily at the start of the project, and not without reason. But Wayland undertook impressive efforts to engage locally and build the relationships necessary to facilitate its agenda.

Andy and the Head of Education, Skills and Work personally attended Parish Council meetings and, crucially, representatives from the local council were invited to attend project meetings at the prison. They then became champions for making Wayland

visible to the local community, running articles in local newsletters and highlighting the prison's contributions as projects got underway.

*"The morning we spent at HMP Wayland was extremely informative and enlightening and we came away feeling we had a very positive experience which could certainly lead to benefits for the communities involved."*

*(Local newsletter article)*

These efforts created a rolling effect, with key community members such as the Parish Council chair endorsing efforts to "continue breaking down the barriers" and more local representatives wanting to visit the prison. People who had visited reflected that they "felt daunted, nervous initially" and did not know what to expect, but that seeing the prison "at work" had calmed these anxieties.

*"We didn't know what to expect at all, but to see what can be done, perhaps, and what is happening at Wayland. Yeah, it was certainly an eye opener."*

*(Local council staff member)*

*"In my mind, it was almost a little village, that's how I would describe it. Yeah, and before I went, I would have never in a million years thought you could do that much education, training, anything within those walls."*

*(Local council staff member)*

*"[The staff], they're all for the inmates. That's the feeling I get. They're very passionate. They want them to learn. They want, when they're released, that they've got a life when they come out."*

*(Local council staff member)*

Despite these successful efforts to bring the community into the prison, getting prisoners into the community was much harder. Restrictive policies on temporary release make it difficult for closed prisons to facilitate this. However, both Wayland and its community retained some cultural memory of when this did occur, and there were signs that some increased presence of prisoners would be welcomed.

*"It'd be nice if the guys, some of them, could come out, actually, yeah, I think we certainly could keep them busy."*

*(Local council staff member)*

*"When I went to the allotment day and I spoke to those that lived in the local community, they were asking me when can they [prisoners] come out? They used to come out before, and they done some work. Is there a chance they can come out again?"*

*(Prison staff member)*

*"I would love to go and help old people or dogs or gardens or anything like that. I personally would be open to doing anything."*

*(Community Matters working group member)*

As well as forming relationships outside of the prison, Andy faced some challenges with relationships inside. Staff described Wayland as (previously) rather traditional and hierarchical. It is not a prison with a long history of progressive or liberal approaches. However, it was particularly evident how much staff appreciated Andy's leadership style, both in the project and across the prison, with several longstanding members of staff pointing to the prison's improvement, and increased staff investment and trust.

*"They [Andy and Governing Governor] kind of tried to empower us to be leaders ourselves. We're actually making our own decisions because they're allowing us to, because rightly so—we're doing the job."*

*(Staff member)*

*"His inclusive approach, alongside his desire that this is not forced upon us has meant that we have come together as a team with a shared focus."*

*(Staff member)*

Effecting a project at Wayland that required a more liberal approach was never going to be a quick job. Andy shared his reflections about whether he could have progressed faster, but showed considerable political astuteness about how power flows in prisons. He ran the working group along democratic lines, with a focus on empowering both staff and prisoners.

The result was that, while the number of staff and prisoners involved was still small,<sup>27</sup> and some thought the project did not have as high a profile in the prison as it could or involve enough people, those that were involved formed a strong team and were building trust by delivering results. Andy was realistic about how culture change takes time.

<sup>27</sup> Five or six on the working group and around 20 who had contributed to discrete projects so far.

*“Staff find it difficult to trust prisoners and get confused between empowerment and power. There is a core group of staff bought into the project and the benefits of it. There still is lots of staff not bought in and this will take a long time to change as it is an organisational culture, not just Wayland.”*

*(Andy, Next Gen Leader)*

Staff agreed that a particularly strong result was improved relationships with the security department and working together to facilitate opportunities that were unlikely to have happened previously. Andy drove this by adopting the question “Why can’t we?” instead of “Why should we?” This enabled working systematically through the barriers and identify what could or could not be addressed—with explanations either way. This was clearly having an impact.

*“It used to be a no, can’t do that, and it’s almost like if we say no, then we haven’t really got to talk about it, and we just revert to no, because that’s the safest thing to do.”*

*(Staff member)*

*“[Andy] said “[name], you tell me why we can’t do it?” And I said “to be honest Governor, I don’t know why we can’t do it.” And he said “well, there we are.”*

*(Staff member)*

*“He’s the one who can get things done. And it opens up so much because we know that they’re trying to help. We know that they’re trying to do their best to get things going, moving forward, rather than just shutting everything down as it seems it has been in the past.”*

*(Working group member)*

This approach helped to plan out ideas such as decorating the sterile area (a part of the prison that prisoners are not typically allowed into), so that new arrivals’ first impression of Wayland was more pleasant. Prisoners were also empowered to chair meetings and plan projects, but still with secure direction—a form of authority that can be difficult to achieve effectively.

*“[Andy] is just someone who knows what they’re doing, you know, and has some clout in what goes on. But I also think that prisoners should be able to be leaders of certain things. I think that’s such a positive view, because it just shows there are prisoners in here that can be trusted and that can be given roles that matter.”*

*(Working group member)*

Spearheading culture change can be a weighty task for reformist leaders, as it frequently involves going against the grain. Andy was honest about this challenge and the importance of leading with value clarity.

*“I knew that I was on the right path and needed to keep going but I was worried about reputational damage to the [leaders] and staff involved. Reputational damage is a fear with HMPPS that does often impact on thinking and decisions. It was this and this alone that made me doubt the project.”*

*“I then reviewed the projects aims and reflected on the people legacy that is important to me. That mattered. If I changed the project, I would be bending to a culture I think the organisation needs to challenge. If I did that, I would have lied to myself.”*

*(Andy, Next Gen Leader)*

A potential future barrier that concerned Andy, and the working group was the stability and the legacy of the project. They recognised that such efforts had been made before and atrophied and that the project as it stood was dependent on a motivated team of staff willing to fit the project round their day jobs. We frequently saw across Next Gen that any efforts at normalcy did not “fit” the shape of the prison, which made them hard to embed.

*“I guess the challenges would be is that having the time aside to do these things as well as your own day job. I always kind of put this at the top of my priority, because of what I could see, the potential that could achieve, and kind of I treated that as my day job. If you could have one person managing this type of thing all the time on a full- time basis, that would be brilliant”*

*(Staff member)*

Notions of legacy and making something that would both stand the test of time and be transferable to other prisons were very much on the mind of project staff.

*“Legacy—I think about this a lot, it matters to me both at work and in my personal life.”*

*(Andy, Next Gen Leader)*

*“Andy made it very clear this project was not about him, but what it could do for Wayland. He wants this to be a success and something that continues well after he has moved on.”*

*(Staff member)*

*“Within prisons, we all change jobs. Sometimes we go on or we might leave the prison. So the fundamental bit for me is putting it in place. So if I was managing the project, I could very much pass it over to the next person.”*

*(Staff member)*

*“I envisage this culminating in HMP Wayland becoming a ‘Community Prison’.”*

*(Staff member)*

A particularly stubborn problem was expanding communal activities within the prison into the evening, owing to the problems of staffing them. At the time of writing, the working group were exploring ways of allowing prisoners to take part in peer-led teaching sessions, as some of the working group were particularly talented at art and music and were very keen to teach others.

There was a general desire to expand this to other activities too, and to invite local community members to teach skills in the prison. Prisons are facing deep cuts to their education budgets, and while prisoner-led alternatives should be an addition rather than a substitute, in this instance it was another dimension of the project’s efforts to help people give back to their community.

### **Effects of the project**

Prisoners involved in Community Matters were tremendously praiseworthy of how it affected their self-worth, purpose, and sense of normalcy.

*“I was always active in the community on the outside, so I needed to be active in here. I’ve done six jobs in six prisons. This is the only one where I’ve been able to get involved.”*

*(Working group member)*

*“They treat you like a human, not like a prisoner.”*

*(Working group member)*

*“It’s changed my whole sense. I don’t feel like I’m in prison, which is massive. You can just get involved and your time just flies. My feet don’t touch the ground for one week to the next. I’ve actually foregone my D Cat because I’d rather stay here and finish my sentence.”*

*(Working group member)*

*“I feel like I’m part of something really big here, and you know, the fact that I’ve done that [for] the community, you know, it’s a legacy I’m leaving.”*

*(Prisoner who made signage)*

A subtler but no less important effect of Community Matters was how it softened the boundaries between traditional prison roles of “prisoner”, “staff” and “outsider”. Members of the working group talked in ways that foregrounded their commonality as community members, and some noticed how the project upended traditional divisions.

*“It makes you feel like a human, you know? It just makes us feel, you know, especially around the governors. You don’t feel like, how can I put it? They don’t make you feel like an outsider. They make you feel involved. And I think that’s such a positive thing. You know, you feel like you’re speaking to friends AND you’re speaking to the governor of the jail.”*

*(Working group member)*

*“I am enjoying being a part of the team and am liking the way that colleagues and prisoners are working together.”*

*(Staff member)*

*“It was apparent, I think, within the meetings, we didn’t know who prisoners were, necessarily, which was very odd in some ways, you know, but it doesn’t matter, does it? That’s when you then think this really doesn’t matter, and you’re all joining in together and hearing everybody’s opinion. So that’s brilliant actually.”*

*(Council staff member)*

Prisonised boundaries were being softened by the human concepts of community, learning and talent, which everyone liked and understood.

*“Maybe coming back to judge some of the art competitions... I want the lads all to work towards exhibiting their pieces. And it’d be nice to come back to judge that or just be involved. I’m out before the next garden project, but it’s based on art, yeah. I’d still like to be involved. It’s just fantastic here. I cannot fault this place.”*

*(Working group member)*

*“I think sometimes within our roles, we manage certain staff. But this is another opportunity where you get to network with other staff and prisoners, and get to see their talent, really, and the skills that they’re gaining whilst in custody.”*

*(Staff member)*

*“Like [name], he’s a fantastic guitar player. We had a symbiotic relationship. So he was teaching me guitar, I was showing him how to better his art skills. And you know, friendships are formed from that.”*

*(Working group member)*



## Parish Council

2 JULY 2025

### NEW MEMORIAL BENCH

The wooden bench at the junction of [redacted] Road and [redacted] Road has needed replacement for some time, and has now been replaced. It's a common stopping off point for walkers and dog walkers to sit and take in the farmland views. Its also handy for seeing the buses coming from Watton and Thetford.

We managed to choose the first rainy day for three months for the installation!

Our sincere thanks go to **Wates** and **HMP Wayland's Carpentry Workshop** for this generous addition to the village. This is a key step in the building of a renewed and robust relationship between the prison and [redacted].

Most fundamentally, prisoners' descriptions of what Community Matters was doing for them indicated that it was a rare example of reintegrative punishment. One of the biggest problems of the penal system is when punishment is so heavy, distorted and disconnected from the offence that it fails to offer any meaningful censure or pathway back from wrongful conduct. However, prisoners involved in Community Matters linked its efforts clearly to a moral purpose.

*"The thing that [Andy]'s championing is the potential for changing. This is an opportunity not a punishment. And people need to take accountability, right? We've all done something to end up here. You know, I broke the law. I deserve to be in prison. Fair enough. You can still live a purposeful life in here, doing something. I need to know that I've not only repaid my debt to society, but I've put the effort in."*

*(Working group member)*

*"It's just caring for people, you know? There's so much joy in helping and giving back to people rather than taking, as it previously has been."*

*(Working group member)*

*"We're not all monsters who just want to create evil. We don't. We want to do good things. We want to give back to people, especially people that are in need."*

*(Working group member)*

Community Matters is a title that could encompass the entire purpose of the Prison Service, but political point scoring and poor public perceptions conspire to create a stranglehold on a system that must be seen to be "tough", yet has a core purpose of reintegration. While organisations like PRT fight to improve the perception and treatment of prisoners on the national stage, we need reformist leaders like Andy who are bold enough to reach out to their local communities and become part of them now.

*"The last bench lasted for twenty years and we hope this one becomes equally appreciated by the village. We look forward to meeting many of you there for a chat."*

*(Local newsletter)*

## Reformist leaders can...

- ✔ Reach out to local authority representatives who can make the prison visible and champion its contributions
- ✔ Build strong relationships with local representatives through personal presence at meetings/ events, and inviting them to see the prison “at work” over time (not just one-off visits)
- ✔ Match prisoner talents to local needs/opportunities
- ✔ Take a “why can’t we” approach to assessing the feasibility of ideas
- ✔ Develop initiatives through a multidisciplinary staff/prisoner working group
- ✔ Build trust and change culture gradually—deliver on small promises first



## HMP Bure

### An incentivised regime for ‘Enhanced Plus’ prisoners—and young adults



**At HMP Bure, Stuart, our Next Gen Leader, created an incentivised regime to benefit both the prison’s highly stable population who were lacking in progression opportunities, and its more volatile population of young adults.**

HMP Bure is a Category C prison housing around 643 prisoners convicted of sexual offences. About 82% are at the top (Enhanced) level of the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme, but others more frequently spend periods on Basic, particularly its young adult population (aged 21-25), who are nationally overrepresented in violence and disorder. Prisoners were not housed according to age.

This profile created two problems in Bure: one population that was unstable and one for whom the IEP system is insufficiently stretching and fails to offer meaningful progression once Enhanced is reached. This can create a sense of hopelessness and stagnation amongst longer serving prisoners.

Stuart observed that greater incentives for good behaviour could benefit both groups and that housing them together may in itself improve behaviour in young adults, through providing a calmer environment with greater staff engagement and peer mentoring. Staff concurred with this vision:

*“A lot of our population, they’re quite old or been here a long time, so there’s not really that much happening. Whereas your younger generation, you’ve got to try and find new things to keep them occupied.”*

*(Staff member)*

A taskforce worked to implement an incentivised regime on a single unit, which included specially selected staff who wanted to work with young adults. The unit was rerolled to house 75% of its population on “Enhanced Plus”, with full access to the incentivised regime, and 25% young adults, who had access to some of the additional facilities, but had to work towards achieving Enhanced Plus if they wanted to access its full offer.

#### The regime

Prisoners led on a consultation about what kinds of incentives Enhanced Plus should offer and an initial list was developed. A working group comprised of prisoners and staff consulted with other departments about which incentives they could provide. This group continues to meet to review progress and to capture further ideas.

At present, eligible prisoners for Enhanced Plus have to be fully engaged (employed, in education or retired), been at Enhanced level for at least six months, had no warnings or adjudications in the same period, no involvement with illicit substances and a demonstrated commitment to self-improvement. To remain on Enhanced Plus they also must demonstrate “a higher standard of personal behaviour”.

In return, the Enhanced Plus tier offers additional cooking facilities (microwave, toaster, George Foreman grill, fridge), an outside eating and fitness space, raised beds for gardening, extra social activities (arts and crafts, guitar lessons, book club, movie/gaming nights, quiz nights), and some additional media facilities in the communal area (TV, DVD player, X-Box). People also receive an additional monthly visit, a “goody bag” for visitors (provisions, purchased by their social visitors, which can be taken back to the wing), an additional gym session, access to a wing-based shop, and an increased private cash allowance. All young adults may use the regular wing facilities irrespective of IEP level (but must be Enhanced to use the shop), but the other privileges are only available if they reach Enhanced Plus.

#### Barriers and solutions

We visited Bure and spoke with staff and prisoners to hear about how the regime was going. Of all the Next Gen projects, it was especially clear here how a lack of facilities can stifle ambition. Bure was constantly innovating to create a meaningful offer for the wing’s residents, but was fundamentally restricted in what it could do.

While the incentives list from HMP Ashfield (a private prison offering four tiered incentive levels

above Enhanced) helped to stimulate ideas, many would simply be unachievable due to facilities and development funding constraints, and it was a challenge to strike a balance between what was deliverable and what was meaningful. Even the creation of an additional incentives tier was outside the norm for public sector prisons:

*“It is completely at the risk of the establishment as it falls outside of the national policy framework.”*

*(Stuart, Next Gen Leader)*

The working group faced a tough challenge of fostering creativity and innovation, but having to manage disappointment when some ideas proved undeliverable. Investment in communal facilities (e.g. widescreen TV; Xbox console; larder fridge and fitness equipment) had an impact on other activities that required ongoing funding, and decisions were made through consultation with wing residents about where funding should be prioritised. Some expressed disappointment when individually valued activities weren't maintained.

*“There were things we could physically do that weren't going to have ongoing costs. But you know, we can't provide coloured paper for origami every week, and we can't provide colour printing. I mean we've things like, you look after it and it will last. But some of the stuff we can't carry on with it because we haven't got funding.”*

*(Enhanced Plus resident)*

As with many of the Next Gen projects, providing and normalising food was a key ambition. However, the investment required for proper kitchen facilities on the wing was lacking and the prison not set up for communal cooking.

*“The best we can do on the wing is the microwave and toaster, because we haven't even got a station for people to wash their hands. Or there's no way to wash your dishes afterwards, you know? So we try and do the best we can.”*

*(Enhanced Plus resident)*

Despite these challenges, it was striking how well the prison was working together to find a way forward. Departments worked to identify what they could provide as incentives to the unit.

*“I also worked with other departments to see what incentives they could offer at no extra cost.”*

*(Staff member)*

*“With limited funding, we had to get creative, lots of ideas came from combined staff and prisoner forums, which really helped shape the final plan.”*

*(Staff member)*

*“Involving residents in decision-making helped maintain constructive and mutually understanding relationships. Prisoners understood staff's position and appreciated the efforts being made.”*

*“We understand there is no money. Yeah, you can't run something for nothing.”*

*(Young adult resident)*

*“The prison done their best to provide what doesn't cost them really well.”*

*(Enhanced Plus resident)*

The very notion of incentives also lays bare matters of social inequality inside a prison. Some incentives, such as extra visits and private cash allowances, relied on prisoners having existing social connections, which meant some benefitted more than others.

*“IEP is the privilege, but the privilege isn't distributed equally, because people have different prior levels of privilege that they bring to jail, right? Maybe you've got support on the out. Maybe you get more money. There's a difference between that and what is universally available to everybody.”*

*(Enhanced Plus resident)*

Restrictions on wages in prisons compounded this issue:

*“Sadly, the wage structure in prisons is very, very low, and there is limited work. Unless people have one of the few jobs, the maximum earnings are sort of around the £10-11 mark for a week. So having a shop, it's like living next door to Harrods.”*

*(Enhanced Plus resident)*

Fairness and equity are notoriously sensitive issues in prison because of the restricted environment and lack of autonomy. Stuart dealt with this through continually sense-checking ideas and feeding back progress to the working group, in order to reach the best reasonable consensus. These efforts to communicate and cooperate were appreciated by wing residents we spoke to.

The young adult population was also recognised as having some of the most challenging behaviour at Bure, which meant working hard to maintain a safe and calm environment. However, a dedicated staff working with young adults were trained in “Choices and Changes”<sup>28</sup> and had extra time for engagement, which were seen as positive:

*“It does mean the staff have the time to spend that little bit of extra time with the guys, with the young adults, because they need it. And as I say, we do see quite an improvement.”*

*(Officer)*

Staff appreciated Stuart’s leadership of the project, primarily for pushing forward the vision and not allowing it to atrophy amidst the practical challenges, while still trusting staff to deliver.

*“Stuart’s leadership was a big part of getting the project started, keeping it focused and on track. He gave me the breadth to develop the offer as I wanted, and always gave clear feedback, whether he agreed or not.”*

*(Staff member)*

### **Life on the unit and its effects**

Despite the considerable challenges of providing a tangibly improved regime, strong relationships and a sense of community were having an impact. Young adults spoke positively about their increased engagement with staff and appreciated that those staff had chosen to work on the wing with them. Staff also saw benefits from the example set by Enhanced Plus residents.

*“Seeing the interaction between the enhanced plus and staff teaches [young adults] how to be around the staff and how to talk and how that relationship can be made easier just by the way that you are interacting.”*

*(Staff member)*

The climate on the unit was described as generally very calm and settled. The young adults landing was less so, but both groups were positive about the atmosphere and community that was taking shape.

*“It’s a lot less stressed. Everyone seems to get on more. I think we all get on rather well.”*

*(Enhanced Plus resident)*

*“The youngsters do their bit, but it’s harmless. We muddle along very quietly and things get done. And as the unit matures, it’s settled more and it’s quietly evolving in the right sorts of ways.”*

*(Enhanced Plus resident)*

*“Everyone just wants to do their time. There’s hardly any fights. Don’t need to be worried. It’s just a calm environment.”*

*(Young adult resident)*

The incentivising effect of the unit was also being felt.

*“I guess it just gave me something to strive for. I was on the young adults landing as an Enhanced and, yeah, it just gave me something extra to better myself and I guess the place I’m living. A bit like a goal.”*

*(Young adult resident)*

The concept of role modelling was also appreciated by both groups. Some young adults suggested they would benefit more from mixed landings rather than a separate one, though opinions on this varied. One Enhanced Plus resident reflected on how recognition of young adults was important for everyone.

*“When I was their age, I was in a three man dorm, with a 40-year-old drug baron and a 50-year-old murderer. It was scary, do you know what I mean? Here it’s more like everyone’s getting on together, like everyone’s trying to teach.”*

*(Enhanced Plus resident)*

The additional facilities provided the basis upon which these “teachable moments” could happen. They represented far more than simple living standards. Living a less austere life helped with community relationships.

*“We talked about how some [young adults] not even knowing that you can’t put a spoon in the microwave, or a tin, and things like that.”*

*(Enhanced Plus resident)*

*“Staff observed that the wing shop was contributing to a more settled atmosphere and fewer complaints about access to personal items.”*

*(Field notes)*

There had been reductions in violent and anti-social behaviour from young adults as a group, and officers who were key working individuals were positive about behaviour changes.

*“A massive improvement in the guys that come on here. They won’t tell you that. They don’t see it. But if you look at certain guys, they’ve come from other units after being placed on Basic, and then we do see less incidents.”*

*(Officer)*

Stuart’s project brought into sharp focus some of the most tangible problems of the prison system. Prisons have endured deep funding cuts over the last decade, and beyond that, the idea of prisoners accessing “luxuries” (which often would be considered modest in the community) dampens political will to improve regimes.

But such a view is incredibly short-sighted when set against the wider stated purposes of imprisonment.

People grow and change if they are given opportunities to learn, thrive, progress, and hope. Incentives and community are a vital basis upon which these things can be built—for prisoners of all ages. The incentives that Bure were able to offer made a substantial difference to the climate of the unit. Further investment in such units could make a far-reaching difference to people’s time in prison.

Stuart and the wider community’s innovations within austere restrictions were a determined reformist effort. Much more fundamental changes are needed to living standards, and available progression opportunities, but while wider political debates rumble on about “tough” punishment, we need reformist leaders like Stuart to keep striving to provide the best for people in their care today.

### Reformist leaders can...



Create tiered incentives above Enhanced—consult throughout on what’s meaningful and use a staff/prisoner working group to generate creative ideas



Continuously communicate what’s been explored, what can/can’t happen and why



Draw on the prison departments and community to see what incentives can be offered



Combine incentives and role-modelling to improve behaviour support for young adults



Train and deploy specially selected staff to work with young adults, with extra time to engage

## HMP Coldingley

### Inclusive purposeful activity in a working prison



**At HMP Coldingley, a refurbishment programme underpinned an ambition to create purposeful activity for everyone and redefine what it means to be “industrious”.**

HMP Coldingley opened in 1969 as an “industrial prison” and in the late 1990s was estimated to be generating around 5% of earnings across all prisons. It long offered training and employment across sectors including engineering, printing, and horticulture, but the 21st century saw a reduction in these opportunities, as well as physical deterioration of facilities. Dave, our Next Gen Leader, observed that the prison’s industrial spaces had been neglected and become cluttered with storage and waste.

Alongside a drift from Coldingley’s character, the very notion of industry has become less fit for purpose in the modern prison environment. An ageing population means that many prisoners are now past retirement age or have health conditions that restrict their activity. There is also increasing recognition that traditional approaches to education, work and skills are exclusionary, and even harmful, for neurodivergent prisoners. Yet the desire for structure and purpose remains present for most people in prison, and the system needs to respond more inclusively.

Dave sought to respond to these new realities with a broader and better offer of the opportunity to be “industrious” at Coldingley. Consultations were held with prisoners and staff about how purposeful activity could be enhanced for all, resulting in two strands of work that both continued and diversified the prison’s approach:

#### Physical changes to prison space

- Creating the Coldingley Construction Centre, with new courses offered in bricklaying, drylining and roofing, alongside existing courses.
- Refurbishing two workshops.
- Repurposing a warehouse for storing material from industrial activities.

- Clearing excess waste and materials to make better use of the prison’s space.
- Creating a Prisoner Repair Team.

#### A more inclusive, enrichment-focused profile of purposeful activity

- A focus on “industriousness” in a broad sense, rather than solely qualifications.
- Creating gardens maintained by prisoners as enrichment instead of employment.
- One sensory garden designed, created and maintained by neurodivergent prisoners.

A permanent Orderly Officer and a daily Oscar 2 role were also created to increase consistency in regime delivery and movements, as well as a streamlined induction process that allowed quicker access to purposeful activity, and increased pay/gym sessions linked to attendance.

Dave’s efforts were the most ambitious we saw at a tangible transformation of a prison, with a very concrete focus on clearing, tidying, fixing, refurbishing and reorganising space. Staff told us how a leader that “failed to see” barriers was necessary to be effective in this effort.

*“He doesn’t see barriers. He sees them, but he doesn’t care about them. And I think that’s probably how he should be, because if he allowed projects to grind to a halt when another department says they can’t shift something till next week, absolutely nothing would happen.”*

*(Staff member)*

The battle to marshal the prison’s space into something workable was dwarfed, however, by the efforts needed to secure improvements. Dave spent an inordinate amount of time seeking funding for basic repairs, modern refurbishments, and new facilities. Funding for a new workshop roof was withdrawn due to contractual delays and a new bid was required before work could start. Staff were frustrated at how local ambition was impeded by the centre.

*“They’re not in the slightest bit interested. They have no interest in expanding what we offer. They have no interest in evolving away from industries that are dying. They have no interest in updating payment methods. I could go on.”*

*(Staff member)*

Within these constraints, Dave created a circular economy. A regraded Prison Officer who knew the site well took charge of the Prison Repair Team, comprised of prisoners with trade experience, who could respond quickly to local needs and mentored other prisoners in handyman skills. Waste from the neglected space was repurposed into planters, seats and borders, and rubble was used to level space for the new gardens.

Dave also “traded” effectively with prison partners, including agreeing building repairs with an on-site contractor in exchange for use of half the building for temporary storage. External course providers trained Coldingley workshop instructors to undertake additional course delivery. This was a particularly creative interpretation of our brief to “bring the outside in” and underscored how much can be achieved through tapping into what is already there.

Alongside these practical efforts, an evolving idea of purposeful activity took place primarily through the lens of neurodiversity, and broader recognition that industries can create sensory overwhelm for many prisoners. Staff told us about the importance of leadership in driving a more inclusive culture around purposeful activity.

*“When governors and senior managers champion neurodiversity, it sends a strong message that inclusion matters. It helps shift attitudes and encourages staff buy-in.”*

*(Staff member)*

While the project achieved some tangible improvements by September 2025, including more course delivery; a functioning warehouse; one refurbished workshop; and one new roof pending, staff noted the most substantive impact was on prisoners, through seeing the transformation they brought about by their contribution.

*“They’re very motivated to do short term projects, especially if it’s physical. It’s just that sense of getting the job done, and the satisfaction of seeing chaos turn into order, you know? They do really enjoy that.”*

*(Staff member)*

Coldingley’s latest inspection, published in February 2026, clearly showed it to be a prison facing enormous challenges. It has ageing infrastructure (two wings still lack night sanitation), national uncertainty over staff visas, and a need for major investment in updating security. These issues all require national responses from beyond the prison, but in the meantime, prisons of this nature are exactly where reformist leaders are needed.

*“Prisoners were overwhelmingly positive about their time out of cell and the consistency of the regime.”*

*“A wide range of impressive enrichment opportunities were available across the prison.”*

*“Most prisoners in education, skills and work were well motivated, diligent and took pride in their work and studies.”*

*(HMIP report, February 2026)*

## Reformist leaders can...



Create a Prisoner Repair Team



Consult prisoners on what purposeful activity means to them—particularly those who may experience barriers to traditional forms of education and work



Reconfigure available space



Create circular economies to reduce waste and maximise resources



Deploy a permanent Orderly Officer and Oscar 2 role



Streamline allocation to purposeful activity from induction

## HMP Highpoint

### Equitable opportunities for young adults



**At HMP Highpoint, Kate developed a pathway for young adults (aged 21-25), which supported them to gain life skills and build stronger relationships. Three cohorts of 12 young adults have been run so far, with 83% of participants graduating from the pathway.**

Young adults in custody often have distinct needs due to their ongoing maturation and adverse childhood experiences. They are over-represented in violence, self-harm, use of force, and adjudications, which is linked to their lack of maturity and difficulty managing emotions, behaviours and peer influences. These experiences can significantly affect their wellbeing in custody and engagement with opportunities on offer.

However, young adults are also particularly receptive to rewards and incentives, and are at an age where, with the right support, desistance from crime is most likely. Kate, our Next Gen Leader, decided to take an opportunities-focused approach to Highpoint's young adult cohort.

Crucially, Kate first spent time engaging with Highpoint's Community Engagement Representatives (CERs)—prisoners who provided peer support and had spent a lot of time with young adults in the prison. They endorsed the need for a bespoke approach to this group, and recommended a pathway focused on goal setting, progression and achievement, as well as a reward for completion that represented something they would not usually have. The CERs also helped design the project compact.

A 12-week pathway for 12 young adults at a time was developed, which was delivered alongside work/education. It included football; gym; games; discussion groups; cooking; and life skills sessions. Opportunities for engagement with staff and peer mentors were also maximised. There were no formal criteria aside from age, though keep-apart arrangements were reviewed.

HMP Highpoint is a large Category C prison, where at the time of the project only 13% of prisoners were aged 21–25—and in many prisons this is

much lower. Consequently, young adults' needs (if not their disruptive behaviours) can be overlooked, and a lack of staff training can mean that reward sensitivity in this group is ignored.

Kate's biggest challenge was to secure buy-in from staff for a bespoke, incentives-focused approach to young adults. Several thought it was unfair to other prisoners, not worth the resource for such a small group, pointless because young adults are incapable of self-control, and that the programme would reward poor behaviour. Cooking sessions were briefly withdrawn during the project owing to items going missing, which was later found to be not due to the young adults on the pathway. Kate's core values came to the fore during this period.

*"My sense of fairness prompted me to do this. Fairness and equity don't mean providing exactly the same thing to everyone. It is about being responsive to need and providing opportunities to change, which at times certain cohorts can find difficult to access."*

*(Kate, Next Gen Leader)*

She worked hard to secure the buy-in needed through a combination of getting key stakeholders on board early, such as the Physical Education Instructors and senior management team, and co-working with the Safety team and CERs to conduct a messaging campaign with dedicated time for floor-walking, to explain the programme and its rationale.

Kate also brought the outside in by partnering with the charity Unlock to deliver life skills sessions.

A further initial challenge was attendance, compounded by temporary removal of the (popular) cooking sessions and prison-level issues with the CERs moving around the site—they were crucial in motivating attendance by the young adults. Kate dealt with these day-to-day issues astutely and through a personal commitment to, in her words, "positivity and drive":

*“The prison’s general stability, pressures across the estate and motivation levels of the participants themselves, that meant I needed to ensure that I remained positive, found creative solutions and personally drove the project forward.”*

*(Kate, Next Gen Leader)*

**Example of a weekly timetable for the 12-week pathway**

Day	AM	PM
Monday	Work/Education	U25 Football
Tuesday	Work/Education	Games and discussion group, followed by the library
Wednesday	Work/Education	Peer-led cooking session – life skills
Thursday	Work/Education	6-week course by Unlock with life map lessons
Friday	Work/Education	U25 Gym session. This will be a group decision with the PEIs to select the activity each week.

Kate’s project is a particular testament to the resilience, drive and core values that are so often tested by reformist prison leadership. From the beginning of the project, where the initial vision of a separate landing for the cohort had to be abandoned due to population pressures, Kate adapted, persisted and persuaded in a way that eventually created a valuable opportunity for young adults which had not existed previously. Age, immaturity and adversity in this group makes them particularly vulnerable to falling through the cracks of a large mixed-age prison.

We need leaders like Kate advocating for reforms alongside them.

**Reformist leaders can...**

-  Create bespoke opportunities for young adults (aged 18–25 or 21–25) in their prison
-  Ensure opportunities are incentives-led and centred on progression/achievement
-  Give young adults extra opportunities for positive engagement with staff, mentors and role-models
-  Adopt the 12-week pathway model (opposite) or similar
-  Ensure visible leadership/championing, messaging campaigns, and ideally training for staff about young adults and their needs
-  Involve prisoners in designing pathway content, compact and rewards that young adults are more likely to respond to

## HMP Hollesley Bay

### Improving transfers for prisoners serving indeterminate sentences



#### **At open prison HMP Hollesley Bay, Mel, our Next Gen Leader, worked to improve the experience of indeterminately sentenced prisoners (ISPs) arriving from closed conditions.**

Hollesley Bay is an open prison housing just over 600 prisoners. ISPs may be recommended to serve a period in an open prison by the Parole Board, as a means of testing whether they can be safely released into the community and to support them with reintegration.

However, many ISPs have lived in closed conditions for years, often decades, where they receive much greater support than that available in open conditions. This is particularly true for ISPs arriving at Hollesley Bay from nearby specialist prison Warren Hill. On arrival, they often find the structure, expectations and support networks markedly different, which can impact their confidence, progression, and overall stability.

Mel's project aimed to firstly create a more prepared and seamless transition for prisoners, and secondly to increase staff capability in working with ISPs, as many staff had less than two years' experience. In recent years open prisons have been forced to accommodate many more short-sentenced prisoners, to ease overcrowding in the closed estate. This has risked causing drift from their crucial role in assisting longer-serving prisoners to reintegrate, and reduced staff expertise with this group, particularly with the now abolished Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentence.

Mel consulted with prisoners and staff on both "sides" of the closed/open transition, including:

- Staff at Warren Hill, to understand which elements of support might be transferable to open conditions.
- Men at Warren Hill who were preparing to seek Category D approval, to understand their expectations, anxieties, and what support they found most valuable.
- Staff at Hollesley Bay (in induction and on residential units) to understand challenges they faced when working with ISPs.

- Men who had transferred from Warren Hill to Hollesley Bay, to understand whether their needs were being met on arrival, and to what extent their transition experience aligned with what they expected.

Technically speaking, Mel did not bring the "outside" in on this project, but utilising this kind of cross-establishment approach was the most valuable way of addressing the issue. Often prisons are divided from each other, as well as from the outside, which can be to the detriment of prisoners transferring from one establishment to another, particularly at important milestones like going to an open prison. Mel understood this and sought to bring understanding from both sides together.

Consulting with prisoners both pre- and post-transfer also allowed a rounded view of how expectations were related to reality. People can be unreliable narrators of their past selves, or simply may not remember what they "expected" to happen, once it has happened. By being present with ISPs, Mel was able to build a better picture of what happens in the transfer process from a prisoner-centred perspective. Similarly, consulting with staff at both sites got a range of views from more and less experienced people.

Substantial operational challenges mean that full realisation of the project's goals is still underway. Midway through the Next Gen programme, an announcement was made that Warren Hill and Hollesley Bay were to merge as one jointly managed site. In tandem, the open estate experienced pressure to change its operations in order to absorb overcrowding from the closed estate, and Hollesley Bay faced local challenges with staffing.

However, some early proposed improvements to the transition process for IPP prisoners were identified. People serving IPP face unique challenges owing to the sentence's structure and abolished status, particularly serving lengthy periods beyond their minimum term, and heightened levels of anxiety and uncertainty which can lead to poor mental health. Early outcomes

from consultation indicated that successful IPP transitions require:

- Allocated staff<sup>29</sup> who have good knowledge of the complexities caused by the IPP sentence and good awareness of key dates.
- Consistent and regular communication
- Enhanced monitoring of coping and mental health
- Staff from open conditions speaking to the prisoner (either in person or via videolink) before transfer takes place
- A good understanding of individual needs before arrival
- Ensure—from good knowledge—that progression plans continue to be adhered to in open conditions.
- Under the merged model, people transferring from Warren Hill maintain the same Prison Offender Manager.

Some of these measures will be equally effective for prisoners serving other types of indeterminate sentence, and the project continues to work towards reshaping the transfer experience for this group.

Broader reforms are needed to sentencing, with current legislation and practice seeing people given much lengthier sentences, and making eventual transfer to open conditions more challenging. The open estate itself is under considerable strain. While lengthy efforts continue to reform long sentences and improve progression, we need reformist leaders like Mel improving open conditions for long-serving prisoners who do make it that far.

### Reformist leaders can...

-  Consult with both “sides” to understand how ISPs experience the transfer from closed to open conditions. Get a before/after view.
-  Understand the gap between expectations and experiences—and try to close it
-  Ensure staff working with ISPs have good sentence literacy, particularly for the IPP sentence and different types of life sentence
-  Not see walls—improve relationships and transfer processes with sites that frequently receive/send
-  Ensure good staff knowledge and appropriate allocation of key staff prior to transfer. Ensure the prisoner meets them if possible.
-  Embed processes to monitor coping/mental health after transfer.
-  If sites are close by, retain the same key staff after transfer.

<sup>29</sup> Prison Offender Manager (POM) and key worker.

## **Kent, Surrey and Sussex region**

### **Procedurally fair long-term segregation reviews**

**In Kent, Surrey and Sussex, our Next Gen Leader, Paul reformed the monitoring and review of long-term segregated prisoners, to ensure that their voices were heard in decisions being made about them.**

Segregation is a deep form of custody where prisoners are confined separately to others, often on a very restricted regime. It is well recognised as psychologically harmful, particularly if endured over long periods of time.

However, the reasons for segregating prisoners can be more complex than they first appear, as can the ability of the prison to house them safely elsewhere. The cut-off nature of segregation can often obscure these complexities—and also opens up room for non-compliant or abusive practices. It is therefore absolutely vital that there is good monitoring of prisoners' treatment in segregation and meaningful support.

Kent, Surrey and Sussex region has five closed prisons. Paul, our Next Gen Leader began a role overseeing segregations across them, with personal responsibility for chairing reviews of prisoners segregated for more than 84 days, and oversight of those segregated for 42 (the point at which a stay in segregation becomes defined as "long-term").

The very nature of segregation can be dehumanising, and Paul sought to change the review process to be more person-centred. He observed that many reviews were conducted solely on paper and via email. Prisoners were not always asked to contribute and sometimes were not aware that a review of their circumstances was scheduled. The review process was not always timely or well prepared.

Paul introduced a requirement to ensure and evidence a meaningful conversation with long-term segregated prisoners ahead of their review, with the aim of fully understanding how they were feeling and what they would like to happen. This could be with segregation staff, a planned visit from the regional Safety Lead, or ad-hoc visits from the Prison Group Director team on site visits.

To further humanise the process, paper-only reviews were discontinued and all reviews began taking place on Teams, to allow space for multi-disciplinary conversation, reflection and planning. Better tracking was introduced, in order to ensure prisoners received reviews on time and that information was gathered well in advance.

Paul's project was one of the most challenging efforts to meet our brief of "collaborating with prisoners". Segregated prisoners could not personally attend meetings, and Paul noted how some prisons believed review meetings were solely about transferring "problematic" prisoners. Meaningful inclusion of their voices required a commitment to a person-centred approach:

*"The key message I want to convey is the importance of considering the prisoner's voice during these reviews. Too often, I heard that prisons simply wanted to transfer individuals who were seen as problematic. What I've been trying to understand is how the prisoner is feeling."*

*(Paul, Next Gen Leader)*

A significant barrier to achieving this goal was bringing staff along. As well as increasing assurance that prisoners were consulted, Paul wanted to "change this mindset among staff" to a more empathic and supportive approach. He began personally chairing 42-day reviews as well 84-day ones. He also empowered the Regional Safety Lead to work with segregation staff on welfare and exit strategies, and create a follow-up process after reviews to support staff in carrying out agreed actions.

These actions were intended to shift the dial on attitudes to prisoners in segregation, ensuring they were prioritised, understood and supported. These were all already possible under existing policy, but Paul recognised the importance of changing the "how" as well as the "what".

*"While the project may not appear "shiny" or new, it represents a significant shift in direction—focusing on the prisoner's voice rather than staff seeking an exit strategy. As Head of Office, my direct interaction with prisoners is limited. However, this is an area where I can exert influence."*

*(Paul, Next Gen Leader)*

Reformist leaders must be astute in recognising where their best levers of persuasion and influence lie, and Paul represents a particularly effective effort to do this without losing sight of prisoners, particularly a group who are especially vulnerable to being overlooked without stringent oversight. Staff working with Paul agreed that a change in overarching approach had been positive.

*“Paul has brought a refreshing approach to the process. He has made it more personable, and focused on the prisoner by giving them the opportunity to have a voice on their current segregation and exit strategy.”*

*“He is always focused on the best outcomes for the prisoners. He encourages prisons to have conversations with those in the CSU and on how they are feeling and what would work to relocate them.”*

*(Staff member)*

A case study illustrates the importance of taking a person-centred approach to long-term segregation. Ricky (not his real name and some details of his case have been changed) was segregated after assaulting another prisoner, but had spent lengthy periods in segregation throughout much of his sentence.

When asked for his input, Ricky explained that he found it easiest to remain drug-free in the segregation unit, owing to pressures from other prisons on normal location and a persistent cycle of debt. He was proud of the length of time he had remained drug free, and was worried about losing his progress and “being ignored” if he returned to a mainstream unit. Ricky said that segregation was not an ideal place to live, but considered it better than the alternative.

He was a low priority for substance misuse support owing to his current stability, which in any case was not available to segregated prisoners, but did not want to locate to the drug recovery wing owing to the ease with which drugs were available there.

Ricky’s situation illustrates the complex trade-offs prisoners make to survive in a place where the entire system carries dangers and difficulties, not just the segregation unit. At the time of writing, a staged handover period of three weeks had been planned for Ricky to another prison, and he remained in segregation in the meantime.

Nobody in Ricky’s situation should end up living in segregation, nor should any prisoner be there except in rare circumstances. But until fundamental changes happen to improve prison environments, such cases will continue to occur.

While efforts towards that goal continue, it is vital that reformist leaders like Paul tackle the deepest parts of prisons, not just the more progressive areas that are selectively showcased.

## Reformist leaders can...

-  Assure that prisoners’ voices are meaningfully included in long-term segregation reviews (using multiple options for seeking their input)
-  Require reviews to take place as a full discussion, not just on paper
-  Take personal responsibility for chairing reviews, to model a person-centred approach
-  Track all long-term segregated prisoners to ensure information is gathered well in advance and that reviews are timely
-  Introduce a follow-up system to ensure actions from reviews are carried out

## HMP Onley

### Communal dining in a men's prison



**At HMP Onley, Sam, our Next Gen Leader, created a communal dining room in conjunction with a large pub/restaurant chain with experience in designing pleasant eating environments. The wing was experiencing an unexplained spike in violence and Sam believed that changing the environment could help.**

*“I genuinely believe that most issues can be settled over a meal together and that it is a sign of a disordered community where men are choosing to take their meals and eat in a cell with a toilet in it, rather than using communal spaces.”*

*(Sam, Next Gen Leader)*

Communal dining has become a rarity in closed men's prisons. Many prisoners eat in (cramped, overcrowded) cells near insufficiently screened toilets; an unhygienic and degrading dimension of punishment. Dining space is either unavailable or barely different to the rest of the prison.

Sam convened a group of interested prisoners, staff, and carpentry instructors who used inspiration from the existing staff canteen and books from the library to make a mood board reflecting the environment they wanted to eat in. The staff canteen was designed by the same restaurant chain and the group commented it was “like stepping out of the prison for a while”. Experts from the chain then created a design based on the group's ideas.

Each piece of furniture was made and installed by the prison's carpentry workshop. While not elaborate, they stand out from the more utilitarian aesthetic of the prison. Prisoners thanked Sam for the initiative, but some responses underscored how unfamiliar communal dining has become:

*“A few of the men have taken the time to thank me for taking the time to do this. Sadly, one asked me if I was sure I wanted to allow them to have chairs in there as the chairs could be used “for weapons”. I explained that the day we decide it is too dangerous in our prisons to allow men to sit to eat I think I probably need to find a new job.”*

*(Sam, Next Gen Leader)*

Working with a commercial provider who had the requisite expertise helped to ensure a design based in community rather than prison principles, but funding (and spending) were a challenge. Sam also worked with other contractors working in the prison:

*“The contractor building three new houseblocks here agreed to fund the costs of the paint for us. This helped as contractually it would have been really difficult for us to legitimately buy the products that were recommended to us. It is so difficult to find money within prisons and then to find legitimate ways to spend it within the rules.”*

*(Sam, Next Gen Leader)*

We heard repeatedly about such funding and procurement issues across Next Gen, with leaders having to effectively beg, borrow, trade and barter their way towards reforms. Yet in many prisons, there is a community very ready to innovate:

*“It was an easy sell for the staff that I needed help from as it allowed them to step out of their traditional roles and do something creative.”*

*(Sam, Next Gen Leader)*

The drag towards the “traditional” and away from innovation is a constant challenge for reformist leaders, and they must draw on a deep wellspring of motivation and values to keep even modest projects on track.

*“There have regularly been moments where I have thought that I should just leave it and get on with the day job. But I committed to the men that we would do it and it is important to me that if you give your word then you see it through.”*

*(Sam, Next Gen Leader)*

Having only recently opened, it is too early to say whether a normalised communal dining space is reducing violence on the wing at Onley, but the commitment and progress is impressive given the prison's much wider recent problems with security, drugs and organised crime.

While wider reforms (and major investment) in securing prisons are required, it is vital that reformist leaders do not lose sight of humanising them. We need leaders like Sam to read their prison environment through a lens of humanity and ensure that in the push to secure, basic human relationships are not neglected.

*“I think we forget about how design can encourage prisoners to use a space in the way we want them to and instead think about safety/security and then don’t get further than that.”*

*“This project was about humanising prisoners. If we forget that first and foremost we are looking after people then everything else we do will be for nothing.”*

*(Sam, Next Gen Leader)*



## Reformist leaders can...

- ✔ Consider where and how to create communal dining opportunities
- ✔ Work with partners to create pleasant eating environments
- ✔ Involve everyone in the prison in designing environments they want to live/work in
- ✔ Create circular economies on site that allow use of good materials
- ✔ Prioritise human(e) living alongside security

## HMP Stafford

### Shared reward and recognition across one community



**In HMP Stafford, Teresa, our Next Gen Leader, introduced the Inspire Awards. They recognised and celebrated both staff and prisoners, adopting a whole-prison approach focused on community contribution. 90 staff and 64 prisoner nominations were received for the 2025 awards, and the 2026 awards have just taken place.**

*“The drive to have positive staff-prisoner relationships is always a challenge. A challenge for HMP Stafford is increasing the meaning of these relationships due to us having a 100% PCOSO population.”*

*(Teresa, Next Gen Leader)*

HMP Stafford holds just over 750 men convicted of sex offences. Owing to the nature of their offending, they face heightened rejection and stigmatisation in the community, which can also follow them into prison. Often already experiencing low self-worth and awareness of the difficulties they will experience in reintegrating, many lose hope and struggle to regain a positive sense of identity.

*“The Rehabilitative Culture Awards recognise the tireless work that is carried out by both prisoners & staff at HMP Stafford. Whether they have helped you personally or improved the prison community & environment, it’s your chance to say thank you.”*

*(Awards advertisement)*

Teresa decided to enhance both self-worth and relationships by bringing everyone in the prison together under one effort to recognise contributions to their shared community. Both staff and prisoners were able to submit nominations across a range of categories and also worked together to decide what kinds of qualities should be recognised. They included:

- Big thank you
- Hardest working
- Most effective team
- Contribution to prisoner community
- Role model
- Charitable contribution

- Innovation
- Selflessness
- Improvement in standard of education, temperament rehabilitation, weight loss or fitness
- Worker of the year

The judging panel was comprised of Senior Leaders and Rehabilitative Culture representatives (including staff and prisoners). All nominees were invited to attend a community awards event where certificates and trophies were given out, nominations were read, and the prison band (‘JAMS’) played. The event aimed to bring staff and prisoners together in celebration of their achievements.

Securing buy-in from staff was a challenge during the project and a mindset shift across the prison was needed.

*“Sharing equally positive experiences for staff and prisoners was a joy, but also unusual for some to easily accept. However, that is the point of these events which sensitively erode some of those preconceived ideas and allow a culture shift to take place.”*

*(Teresa, Next Gen Leader)*

*“Staff recognised it was okay to offer praise in a formal way, and in return prisoners were forthcoming with acknowledgement of staff achievements and support.”*

*(Staff member on the project)*

Staff noted that Teresa led from the front in this regard, advocating for the project at senior level, endorsing the work of prisoner project representatives, promoting the event, and supporting other staff to be visible champions of the initiative.

*“The Governing Governor & Deputy Governor make it genuine, which allows staff and prisoners to buy into the concept of a prison-wide community.”*

*(Staff member on the project)*

A significant step towards “bringing the outside in” was allowing staff who work for external organisations to be nominated. Often, they cannot be recognised through standard HMPPS processes, even though they often form a core part of the prison community. Recognising their contribution was an important step in breaking down cultural divides.

As a staff member observed to us “everyone in life likes to feel the sense of worth and achievement, none more so than prisoners”. Recognition schemes do happen elsewhere in the prison estate, but they are especially important in maintaining hope and self-worth at prisons like HMP Stafford.

Much wider reforms to society’s attitudes towards people convicted of sex offences are needed. But while that is a much more fundamental challenge, Teresa showed reformist leadership by challenging notions of stigma and divide, and bringing together the contributions of all who live and work at HMP Stafford under one community.

*“All of our nominations inspired people. It does not matter how many people or by how much. What matters is that all of our nominations made a difference to someone.”*

*(Teresa, Next Gen Leader)*

There were signs of wider shift in attitude across the prison. In 2024,<sup>30</sup> inspectors noted:

*“In the last six months, more positive than negative entries had been made in individual prisoner case notes.”*

*(HMIP report, December 2024)*

# iNSPIRE Awards '24

Inform, include, involve and inspire to make a change

## RECOGNISING PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2024

The Rehabilitative Culture iNSPIRE Awards 2024 recognise the tireless work that is carried out by both Prisoners & Staff at HMP Stafford. Whether they have helped you personally or improved the prison community & environment, it's your chance to say Thank You. The award categories include:

**Biggest Improvement Awards, Team Award, Charitable Contribution, Most Valued Contribution Award, Simply the Best Rehabilitator Award, Peer Led Contribution Award, Most Caring Individual Award, Simply the Hardest Working Award, Worker of the Year Award, Most Inspirational Award & Above & Beyond Award.**

The awards ceremony will be held in the visits hall at the end of January 2025. It will be HMP Stafford's version of the Oscars, recognising the excellent work that goes on at Stafford.

To nominate a prisoner or an officer for an iNSPIRE Award '24, please use the nomination forms available from your Rehabilitative Culture wing representative or your PID!

Prisoner nominations must be given to your Rehabilitative Culture wing rep and Officer nominations sent to Governor Stedman.

**Closing date for nominations is 13th December 2024.**

**HMP STAFFORD**  
Proud to return active citizens  
Through rehabilitation, to our communities

A HMP Stafford  
Rehabilitative Culture Initiative



### Reformist leaders can...

- ✔ Create reward and recognition schemes that emphasise community over cohorts
- ✔ Involve the whole prison community in deciding what qualities should be recognised
- ✔ Create a broad concept of community that includes external partners
- ✔ Tackle the additional stigma faced by people convicted of sex offences in prison

<sup>30</sup> While the first award ceremony took place in early 2025, the bulk of planning and nominations took place in 2024.

## HMP & YOI Styal

### Improving attendance through a 'one prison' approach



**At HMP & YOI Styal, an Activity Attendance Taskforce was established to address low attendance at education and work, which improved by 17% during the project.**

Purposeful activity is a crucial element of a prison regime, providing structure, meaning, connection and personal development. However, the secure nature of prisons means that simply getting to different places during the day can be a challenge, especially when attempting to lead a 'normal' life of work, recreation and personal appointments.

These attempts to live an integrated life can be worsened by fragmentation in the prison. Each member of staff has their own sphere of responsibility, whether that's a nurse offering care, a teacher taking classes, or an officer managing moves securely. All may work for different organisations within the prison.

On the outside, people manage these different spheres of life through their own autonomy and organisation. In prison, that is largely taken away. Carol, our Next Gen Leader, recognised the need for 'one prison' to help each woman live one integrated purposeful life each day.

Styal is one of the most complex and challenging women's prisons in England and Wales. It houses women of all ages and sentence lengths from a few weeks to life, and receives women remanded by the courts throughout the north of England and much of Wales.

Inspectors have noted that "the vulnerabilities of the women were evidenced everywhere" in Styal, including mental health need, rising self-harm, and self-inflicted deaths. The prison buildings date from the 1900s and require refurbishment, and positive drug test results are very high for a women's prison. The site is inherently difficult to monitor owing to its Victorian orphanage layout.

Styal is, in effect, stark evidence of why women's imprisonment does not work and needs radical, wholesale change. Meanwhile, we need reformist leadership implementing changes at local level

while national efforts to fundamentally change the system for women are pursued.

*"Interventions led by the deputy governor were having a tangible impact"*

*(HMIP report, December 2024)*

Styal has had considerable instability in leadership over the last five years, but at the end of 2024 inspectors noted "a deputy who was active in getting to grips with important operational challenges" who was "proactive" and with a good knowledge of the women in the prison's care.

During her time with us, Carol addressed the issue of low attendance at education and work. There were several key elements of reformist leadership evident in her approach:

**An evidence-led approach to understanding the problem:** Carol combined improvements on attendance data with the equally important method of simply asking prisoners what was going on. Purposeful activity can be beset with assumptions about prisoners' motivations, particularly that non-attendance is down to individual laziness or disorganisation. Carol recognised that aspects of the prison regime itself made attendance difficult, which unlocked systemic solutions as well as paying attention to barriers faced by individuals.

**Bringing people together under a 'one prison' approach:** Carol brought together leads from each part of the prison that managed different forms of activity, and together they developed a system that began to fit activity around prisoners. In particular, Healthcare began scheduling appointments around individual prisoners' purposeful activity, and a dedicated team for escort to and from Healthcare was created.

**Fostering a culture of attendance:** Carol and the taskforce recognised the crucial role of officers as culture carriers, and of leaders too. They embedded activities that built a stronger relationship between healthcare, education and residential officers, inducted new officers about the importance of purposeful activity, improved their training, and

encouraged the use of supportive conversations with prisoners to motivate attendance.

Over time this approach created a cascading message that a core function of the prison was purposeful activity. Systems, no matter how effective, can quickly fall apart without a culture that supports them.

Styal’s ‘one prison’ approach to attendance is, as Carol herself observed to us “never a closed action”, owing to ever-shifting prisoners, staff and challenges faced by the prison. However, there were promising changes in 2025, with attendance rising from 50% in January to 67% in August.

### Activity Attendance Taskforce dashboard

Monday 22/09/25					
OVERALL	83%	EDUCATION	73%	WORKPLACES	84%
<b>DATA</b>		<b>DATA</b>		<b>DATA</b>	
ALLOCATED	285	ALLOCATED	29	ALLOCATED	256
ATTENDED	233	ATTENDED	21	ATTENDED	212
ROLE	408	PERCENTAGE (At/AI)	72%	PERCENTAGE (At/AI)	83%
% of role attended	57%	ACCEPTABLE	2	ACCEPTABLE	26
NON RECORDED	6	UNACCEPTABLE	1	UNACCEPTABLE	12
		REST DAY/ SICK	5	REST DAY/ SICK	0
<b>DATA</b>		<b>DATA</b>		<b>DATA</b>	
ALLOCATED	287	ALLOCATED	27	ALLOCATED	260
ATTENDED	244	ATTENDED	20	ATTENDED	224
ROLE	408	PERCENTAGE (At/AI)	74%	PERCENTAGE (At/AI)	86%
% of role attended	60%	ACCEPTABLE	7	ACCEPTABLE	15
NON RECORDED	8	UNACCEPTABLE	0	UNACCEPTABLE	11
		REST DAY/ SICK	0	REST DAY/ SICK	2
ACCEPTABLE ABSENCE					
<b>UNAVOIDABLE</b>		<b>UNAVOIDABLE</b>		<b>UNAVOIDABLE</b>	
PRISONER RELATED	3	PRISONER RELATED	1	PRISONER RELATED	2
STAFF RELATED	2	STAFF RELATED	0	STAFF RELATED	2
UNCLEAR	32	STAFF RELATED	4	STAFF RELATED	28
HEALTHCARE	0	UNCLEAR	0	UNCLEAR	0
INCORRECTLY INPUT	9	HEALTHCARE	4	HEALTHCARE	5
	6	INCORRECTLY INPUT	0	INCORRECTLY INPUT	6

## Reformist leaders can...

-  Develop good data monitoring systems and ensure staff use them
-  Scrutinise non-attendance reasons—do not assume all reasons lie with the prisoner
-  Develop a system that schedules healthcare appointments around individuals’ purposeful activity
-  Build strong relationships between healthcare/education/Res officers
-  Have Learning and Skills Manager speak at officer inductions
-  Train new officers in the importance of purposeful activity
-  Create a dedicated Tango team for movements to/from healthcare appointments
-  Create a culture of attendance—drive home the importance of education, skills and work at all levels across the prison

## HMP Usk

### Improved living conditions for people serving indeterminate sentences

**At HMP Usk, our Next Gen Leader Dai and his team created a unit for prisoners serving life and IPP sentences who had completed risk reduction work and were awaiting a parole hearing. The unit offered an improved regime and additional support to prepare for release.**

HMP Usk is a small Category C training prison holding around 276 prisoners mainly convicted of sex offences.

People serving indeterminate sentences must serve a minimum term in prison as punishment, followed by indefinite detention until the Parole Board decides they are safe to release. However, the lengthy sentences served by this group often means that risk reduction work forms a relatively small part of their time in prison.

There is also no formal distinction between the conditions that pre- and post-minimum term prisoners should be held in, despite differing purposes of punishment. This can lead to feelings of hopelessness and stagnation, often referred to as “dead time”.

Dai and his team created a unit at Usk which was initially dedicated to life and IPP prisoners then extended to other long-termers, with an expanded regime offer and more wing facilities. Although the wing is locked off at night, the unlock regime is otherwise the same as at Usk’s sister site Prescoed, which is an open prison. The wing has a lounge area and additional cooking/domestic facilities.

Prisoners on the unit receive dedicated monthly support (from peers and from staff) to prepare for their parole hearings. Dai is also pushing for tangible improvements to their preparation opportunities.

Indeterminately sentenced prisoners are restricted in their opportunities to access Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL)—days out of the prison to undertake work/education, reignite family ties or simply practice life skills for living in the community. They must be assessed as suitable for open conditions—something which cannot happen until their parole hearing. However, ROTL itself helps to prepare and demonstrate readiness for release on parole.

Dai, in his words “raised challenges” to this impasse and is pushing for increased discretion via the use of individual risk assessments.

There are much broader challenges to securing community reintegration opportunities for people convicted of sex offences. There is a high degree of mistrust, misperceptions about reoffending rates, and risk management complexities in a digital age. Dai was acutely conscious that Usk is located in a marginal political seat.

However, in reality around 22% of people in prison are convicted of sex offences, and strong social support and meaningful activity foster desistance from offending. While society continues to grapple with how it wants to deal with sex crime, we need reformist leaders like Dai to maximise reintegration and desistance for people in their prisons.

## HMP Prescoed

### Improved living conditions for people in open prisons

**At HMP Prescoed, Dai and his team also began several initiatives to improve living conditions, particularly for disabled and less mobile prisoners. Usk and Prescoed share a senior management team.**

In open prisons, the emphasis is on prisoner reintegration with the community. Dai observed that Prescoed itself had been neglected: its living arrangements lacked clear purpose and were sometimes not appropriate. He drove the creation of a prisoner taskforce to undertake repairs and instigated regular decency checks.

Alongside general improvements, Dai planned to diversify Prescoed’s accommodation into an Incentivised Substance Free Living Unit, a Disability Discrimination Act compliant unit, and a unit dedicated to prisoners with lower mobility, which is reflective of the ageing prison population. The ISFL unit is now open and work is underway to convert units to the right facilities for disabled/low mobility prisoners.

Prisoners on the ISFL unit have been able to undertake a number of local activities on day release, better fulfilling the open prison function. For those who cannot access it, additional facilities and

opportunities for prisoners to undertake horticulture jobs are being installed, and two wing residents have built a garden.

Beyond calls to have more of them—and government indifference to those calls—open prisons are all too frequently overlooked. Their very existence remains fragile, only one high profile abscond away from calls to abandon them. While we strive to protect and expand the existence of open prisons, we need reformist leaders like Dai to pay careful attention to the quality of what is on offer and strive to ensure open prisons truly fulfil their purpose.

### The Camp Hill garden at Prescoed

Before



After



After



### Reformist leaders can...

- ✔ Meaningfully fill “dead time” for long-serving prisoners
- ✔ Consider how to create progression between minimum terms and indefinite detention while waiting for a parole hearing
- ✔ Consult with long-serving prisoners about what (if any) kind of unit would best meet their needs
- ✔ Expand ROTL offers from closed conditions
- ✔ Ensure open prisons are decent places to live and work, as well as sleep in
- ✔ Improve living facilities for disabled/less mobile prisoners

## HMP Wandsworth

### Two pioneering units in a local prison



**At HMP Wandsworth, Cathy, our Next Gen Leader, facilitated the creation of two new units: a neurodiversity wing and a Scandinavian-style wing. Both adopt more compassionate and inclusive principles of imprisonment, which can be especially challenging to implement in busy local prisons.**

HMP Wandsworth was built 170 years ago and holds almost 1,500 men in space designed for less than 1,000. Victorian prisons often attract the worst of critiques as inhumane places that are no longer fit for purpose. Inspectors frequently highlight issues with ageing infrastructure, crowded space and inability to safely manage people in crisis who are often in their first days of custody. But other evidence indicates that not all is hopeless, with such prisons' central location providing enhanced links to families, communities and reintegration opportunities.

However, Victorian architecture combined with a “local” function (receiving prisoners from the courts and releasing them at the end of their sentences) is often—with good reason— seen as an especially toxic form of imprisonment with intractable barriers to improving conditions. Wandsworth received an Urgent Notification in 2024—with the chief inspector of prisons raising serious concerns about safety. UNs are tough for prisons to receive but are also an abnormal opportunity to make the case for change (and funding). Cathy seized the opportunity and made it possible for staff to innovate.

Evidence suggests that neurodivergent prisoners are often marginalised or disciplined for behaviours rooted in their neurodivergence. They can experience difficulties engaging with education or treatment programmes, and challenges complying with rules and routines. As a result they can disproportionately experience isolation and poor mental health in prison.

The Sunflower Unit is designed to provide tailored support for up to 20 prisoners who are neurodivergent or have additional learning needs including those with autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, or other cognitive differences.

The unit aims to provide a therapeutic, structured environment which provides support to engage with prison life and facilitate rehabilitation. Staff will be trained in working responsively with neurodiversity and to enact trauma-informed practice. The unit will run a structured and predictable regime; create spaces designed to reduce sensory overload; use clear and accessible communication; and foster a culture of patience and dignity, with interventions tailored to this cohort's needs.

An initial barrier to the very concept of the unit was staff scepticism regarding its necessity, the likelihood of successful implementation, or its potential impact. Regular communication was carried out about the rationale for the project and the evidence base on neurodivergent prisoners' experiences. Consultation with prisoners and staff throughout the project also aided understanding of how the unit could work in practice.

Multidisciplinary input and hearing from a range of voices was crucial. Amongst others, Cathy involved neurodivergent prisoners, Neurodiversity Representatives (other prisoners trained to support people with neurodivergent conditions), and a staff member from a similar unit running at another local prison.

Creating a unit conducive to neurodivergent prisoners' needs in an ageing Victorian prison like Wandsworth is no easy task. Sensory spaces had to be created on very tight budgets, as did necessary repairs, including those needed to meet fire safety requirements. Staffing and resources were limited, and Cathy observed that improvements “required substantial persuasion and negotiation”. This project is therefore a real exercise in the art of the possible. We often need reformist leaders to “unsee” barriers and norms, in order to provide better conditions for people in their care. At the time of writing, the unit was approaching completion.

*“I am committed to making the Sunflower Unit a reality because it is the right thing to do. Rehabilitation cannot be one-size-fits-all. There needs to be a tailored approach recognising that prison is the punishment, not a place for punishment. Ultimately our goal is to give the prisoners in our care a fighting chance to cope in society [while] in a Cat B local—no easy challenge. Watch this space.”*

*(Cathy, Next Gen Leader)*

In tandem with these efforts, Cathy also facilitated establishment of a Scandinavian-style unit at Wandsworth. The Vanguard unit opened in November 2025, holding 120 prisoners, and is inspired by Scandinavian imprisonment principles of autonomy, innovation, and community. The prison environment is intended to resemble everyday life as closely as possible, with a focus on trust and responsibility.

To integrate these concepts, the wing will include initiatives which reduce feelings of institutionalisation and promote responsibility, such as a prisoner-managed garden, a prisoner-run cafe, and productive communal areas which promote social interaction. Staff working on the wing were specially selected and provided with additional training to facilitate the unit’s key principles. Partner agencies and local organisations will deliver workshops to those living on the unit, and regular family engagement sessions will strengthen family ties.

This project is “bringing the outside in” from the furthest afield, with officers sent to spend five days in Sweden for training. A university will study the unit, with prisoners randomly allocated in order to better understand its effects. This represents the

gold standard in measuring whether new initiatives “work” but has become rarer practice.

As with the Sunflower Unit, the unit faces the difficulty of creating a non-institutional setting within a Victorian prison structure. This has required imagination in how spaces could be repurposed, including changing storage areas into productive communal spaces and group rooms. Cathy herself observed this challenge, but also the gains which could be made from its success:

*“It will be the first time that a wing like this has been tried in UK prisons, and it is hoped that it will provide a model for how UK prisons can do things differently. While HMP Wandsworth does present some specific challenges, including the built environment, this is also one of the reasons the project is so innovative as it is intended to demonstrate that if it can be achieved in this setting, it is transferable to many others.”*

*(Cathy, Next Gen Leader)*

While broader plans and debate about restructuring the Victorian prison estate rumble on, we need reformist leadership to strive to make the most of what they have, and refuse to slide into acceptance of what “cannot” be achieved within an outdated estate. They deserve the investment to support their ambition.

*“Many well-meaning and hard-working leaders and staff persevered at Wandsworth, but they were often fighting against a tide of cross-cutting, intractable problems that require comprehensive, long-term solutions.”*

*(HMIP report, May 2024)*

## Reformist leaders can...



Turn Urgent Notifications into opportunities to drive forward ideas



Link up with the increasing number of prisons trialling neurodiversity units and replicate what is effective



Trial a Scandinavian approach and send officers for training



Reimagine how space is best used in cramped Victorian prisons



Involve prisoners in designing their environment, as well as people who have “done it before” in other prisons





The logo for the Prison Reform Trust, featuring the words "PRISON REFORM TRUST" in white, bold, uppercase letters on a dark red rectangular background.

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This report presents the Prison Reform Trust's Next Generation Leaders programme, which empowers aspiring prison governors to be the bold, courageous, values-driven leaders that are needed to reform prisons from within.

The report showcases the innovative projects completed by the first Next Gen cohort, and the findings and lessons learned from an in-house process evaluation of the programme's delivery model.