



Understanding and improving the Category A review process

A peer-led review by the HMP Frankland Building Futures Network Group in partnership with the Building Futures programme

May 2026

The 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 2029,¹ 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 vulnerable 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.

prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/building-futures

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to everyone who took part in the consultations that shape this report, in particular the Building Futures Network Group at HMP Frankland who played a central role. We would like to thank: Lee Robson, Peter Buckle and Paula Harriott, who supported the group and helped to facilitate our discussions; Simon Scott of Nottingham Trent University, Rachel O'Brien and David Maguire for their input; and the PRT and Building Futures teams for their support.

Cover image: Andy Aitchison.

¹ Ministry of Justice (5 December 2025). *Prison Population Projections 2024-2029*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029>

Contents

Executive summary: Understanding and improving the Category A review process	1
Recommendations.....	3
About this report	5
The Building Futures programme	5
Purpose of this report	5
HMP Frankland Building Futures Network Group	5
Methods.....	6
Report structure.....	6
Category A classification and review	7
Key players	9
Critical data and information	11
Sentence plans	12
P-NOMIS (Prison National Offender Management Information System).....	12
Participants' experiences and perceptions	13
Resource impacts.....	13
Emotional impacts	13
LAP minutes.....	15
Understanding how to progress	16
The Category A Review Team.....	16
The review process.....	16
Personal and legal representation	17
The relationship with Prison Offender Managers.....	18
The relationship with psychology	19
Key worker contact and reporting	22
Security intelligence.....	23
Conclusions and recommendations	24
Appendix 1. Surveys 1 and 2: the Cat A review process	28
Appendix 2:	30

Executive summary: Understanding and improving the Category A review process

This report forms part of PRT's Building Futures programme and explores complexities and challenges of the Category A review process, which is used to assess whether Category A prisoners can have their risk downgraded. It is based on consultations with those who have direct experience and expertise of the review process. Central to this is work done by the Building Futures Network Group at HMP Frankland, and surveys completed by those serving time at the prison. The report also draws on discussions with His Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS), including the central Category A Review Team (CART).

What is the Category A review process?

The prison system in England and Wales categorises adult men based on the security measures required, using categories that range from A to D. Category A is assigned to those individuals deemed to pose the highest risk if they were to escape. The assignment of Category A is linked to people's index offence and is usually reviewed shortly after sentencing and then, with some exceptions, again after two years and annually thereafter.

Balancing security with rehabilitation is a central challenge for the prison system. Within this, the Category A review process is vital to public safety, individual wellbeing and to using prison capacity – which is currently under huge pressure – efficiently, ensuring people can progress through the sentence and be held in prisons appropriate to their risk. In doing so, the review process should ensure fairness and transparency.

Local Advisory Panel (LAP)

The review process begins with a thorough collection of reports and assessments from various sources, including prison officers and psychologists. These documents are collated by the Category A Clerk to form a dossier that is evaluated by the prison-based LAP alongside any written representations made by or on behalf of the applicant. The LAP makes a recommendation whether to downgrade an individual's categorisation or not.

Category A Review Team Review (CART)

Centrally located in HMPPS headquarters, the CART receives the LAP recommendation and dossier and provides an assessment and recommendation for senior decision-makers within the High Security function. Final decisions regarding Category A downgrades are taken at senior level within the High Security function of HMPPS, following recommendations from the Category A Review Team (CART). The decision and its rationale are communicated to the applicant following the central review process.

Applicants and/or their solicitor can make written representations but do not attend the LAP or CART, although in rare cases the CART will offer an oral hearing.

Consultation findings

Below we summarise the core themes that emerged from consultations with prisoners who have direct experience of the Category A review process. Participants' experiences and feedback suggest that:

- *The review process is opaque, and its importance is not always understood or evidenced by the actions of those involved.* Participants highlighted that fairness requires the review process to be based on accurate and high-quality information about an applicant's behaviour, engagement and progress being consistently recorded prior to review. However, many felt that the LAP and the CART often make decisions based on inaccurate data and poor-quality reports, giving examples of gaps in reporting key information, inaccuracies, or out-of-date information being included. Some also felt frustrated by not being able to challenge the inclusion of non-disclosable intelligence from security, which is routinely not summarised in accordance with PSI 08/2013.
- *Poor communication and inconsistency left many confused by the process and the range of factors that feed into a review.* For example, the consolidation process (where people need to demonstrate learning from programmes they have undertaken) was not understood by many participants or explained by psychologists. Participants also found the various tests for assigning and downgrading Category A status confusing and illogical. Some people are unaware whether and when their reviews are taking place, leading to feelings of helplessness and a lack of trust in the system.
- *Pressures on the prison system are undermining the review process and the relationships that shape the timing and quality of information considered.* Many participants highlighted a lack of contact with and high caseloads of Prison Offender Managers (POMs) and keyworkers. In addition, some reported a lack of contact with prison-based psychologists and not being able to access interventions that would help them to reduce their risk. Combined, this undermined the quality, accuracy and relevance of reports.
- *The review process did not always reflect the representations made by applicants and/or their legal advisors in explaining outcomes.* Some participants reported not being able to make representations due to delays or errors in receiving the category A review dossier. In addition, many participants felt that the process gave far more weight to prison-based (as opposed to independent) psychologists and did not adequately consider the views of those officers that saw them frequently. Some participants felt that the workings of the CART in particular do not operate under the principles of fairness, openness, transparency, and accountability.

Taken together, these experiences suggest that the Category A process is being hampered by a lack of transparency, low levels of engagement from some key players, poor or inaccurate data, information and reporting, and delays. This is resulting in a lack of accountability, low levels of trust in the system and negative impacts on prisoners including confusion, helplessness and anxiety.

Recommendations

Below we set out the changes that those involved believe would bring greater transparency and accountability to the Category A review process, as well as improve people's trust and perceptions of its fairness. The core recommendation of this report is that *the Category A review process should be subject to a root and branch review*. The process has not been substantially reformed for a decade and the last major change, the introduction of oral hearings, has not resulted in significant changes. New guidelines [titled Category A Report Writing Guidance] were introduced between 2014-2020, following work completed by members of the LTHSE and psychologists from HMP Frankland. This led to the introduction of new templates for report authors to use and instructions on best practice on how to write the reports, but the guidance has so far remained unpublished. The templates within Annex A of PSI 08/2013² are no longer in use for the purpose of writing Cat A reports. Alongside and feeding into this process, there should also be *a Thematic Inspection of the Category A review process by HMIP*. Such a review should involve interested parties, including those with lived experience, and should address specific issues raised by participants, including:

- *Clarity and communication about the role of Category A Clerks and proper resourcing of the roles.* Participants felt that CACs were fundamental to a fair and accurate review of Category A status. There was broad agreement that CACs should be a central point for the compilation of the reports and communication with the applicant about the timing of completion of the dossier, dates and deadlines for representations.
- *Broadening attendance at LAP reviews.* Participants believed that the review process would be fairer and more transparent if residential officers, key workers and CACs were to attend LAP reviews. Participants felt that this could be achieved by an efficient and open scheduling process. Given that applicants are not represented in person at the LAP, participants felt that those who had regular contact with them were well placed to speak to the content of the reports and dossier. This would be particularly important when the LAP considers a dossier that does not provide sufficient evidence because an inquisitorial approach would elicit additional information.
- *Improving LAP communications.* Participants felt this would ensure that applicants were informed about the evidence being considered, and the reasons for the LAP's recommendation. Any mistakes made prior to the LAP, with regards to the practices and procedures and the report content, should be highlighted, reviewed, corrected and referenced within LAP minutes.
- *Greater CART transparency and communication.* This should include greater transparency in CART procedures and communications about the team's composition and decision-making processes, ensuring that decisions are relayed in clear and specific language.
- *Taking a more holistic approach at LAP and CART reviews.* This should include considering the full range of evidence presented and ensuring that applicants receive credit for their efforts to reduce risk and demonstrate positive change. In order for the process to be fair, and to be perceived as fair, there should be consideration of representations, weighing the evidence they contain, and making explicit the reasons why the case made has been accepted or not.
- *Increasing Senior decision maker contact and the use of oral hearings.* Participants felt more contact, transparency and clarity in communication with senior leaders within the High Security function would be beneficial, including the possibility of more decisions being made following an oral hearing. While acknowledging the potential for increased resource demands, a review of the Category A review process should explore whether expanding the use of oral hearings would support fairness and transparency in the decision-making process.
- *Clearer procedures for transfers during review window, including the deferral of reviews.* Participants felt that this would make the process of transfers during a review window and the use of deferrals fairer and could also reduce delays. This should give applicants the opportunity to present a complete and accurate case for downgrade.
- *Disclosure of reports in a timely manner.* Participants felt there is a need for timely and complete disclosure of reports to applicants and the provision of adequate time for them to secure legal advice and make representations.
- *Prior sight of disclosable information and warnings about non-disclosable intelligence.* Participants wanted to see greater transparency in the handling of security information. Security should disclose monthly how many disclosable and non-disclosable reports were submitted, in a summary of the intelligence and the reason for relying on them. This would enable applicants to know more about what to expect from a review. Non-disclosable intelligence should be briefly summarised within the dossier, as per PSI 08/2013.

2 Ministry of Justice & HM Prison and Probation Service. (2025). *The review of security category – Category A / restricted status prisoners* (PSI 08/2013) [PDF]. UK Government. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67c5cd9ba0f0c95a498d21f8/review-security-category-category-a-restricted-status-prisoners.pdf>

Wider improvements

Any exploration of the Category A review process raises wider factors that shape information used and people's progress in the high security estate. These include:

- *Clearer guidelines and transparent procedures for Psychologically Informed Planned Environments (PIPE) referrals.* This should increase understanding and people's sense of fairness about access.
- *Equitable access to programmes and interventions.* This should be regardless of sentence length so that people can address their risk factors and demonstrate progress when ready and throughout their sentence.
- *Clearer information on consolidation.* Participants felt that the amount of confusion experienced could be reduced by clear guidelines and transparent procedures for evidencing consolidation work, ensuring that people understand expectations and receive appropriate recognition for progress.
- *Improve monitoring and revisit targets.* Participants felt this would help ensure that an individual's efforts are recognised, and appropriate feedback on progress is received. Regular monitoring would also enable the early identification of any issues, allowing for timely interventions.
- *Clearer and more comprehensive psychological Summary of Contact (SOC) reports.* These need to accurately reflect the behaviour and engagement in interventions and programmes.
- *Improving Category A prisoners' contact with POMs.* People stressed the importance of regular and meaningful contact with Prison Offender Managers.
- *Improve P-NOMIS recording and sharing.* Group members suggested that staff should print negative/positive warnings and entries off Prison National Offender Management Information System (p-NOMIS) at the time of creation, and upon request from the subject of the entry, as this would provide opportunities for people to challenge and review these prior to the creation of reports for Category A reviews. This would also allow prisoners some insight into their recorded positive behaviour.

Staff training and capabilities

Throughout this consultation participants raised the need for *improved staff training around the Category A review process* and a consensus that this would go some way to ensuring greater consistency and accuracy in reporting. Without proper training, staff may not fully grasp the importance of their contributions or the most effective ways to communicate their observations. This training should cover:

- The vital importance of p-NOMIS. One group member suggested that posters could be created to raise awareness of the importance of regularly updating P-NOMIS and to remind staff/heads of departments/functions to record contacts of note along with any active involvement in representative/mentor roles.
- If staff lack the insight and awareness of key targets/objectives for progression, and the ability to record any risk-related achievements or consolidation of skills in a comprehensive manner, then opportunities for a risk assessment and downgrade can be negatively impacted.
- Given the critical importance of reports and the dossier itself, there was a consensus that more needs to be done to not only ensure that data is effectively collected and collated, but that staff involved are aware of their importance, what needs to be included and how.

Consideration of risk and security permeates the long-term high security estate. Participants felt that, despite this, staff needed to be better *equipped for working with long-term prisoners to assess risk*. This includes training but also ensuring that guidance is explicit, clear and available to prisoners and other criminal justice professionals, with clearer information about what kinds of behaviour is likely to lower or elevate risk in future assessments. Participants felt this needed to be supported by consistent use of thorough and accurate risk assessments, conducted using appropriate tools and methods, and transparent procedures that allow prisoners to understand and challenge the assessments without being deterred from challenging, suffering a detriment or feeling persecuted.

Lessons from parole

Some participants wanted earlier involvement with the Parole Board in reviewing progress. This would allow any potential roadblocks to release to be identified early and for a plan to be developed that outlines the steps an applicant can take to progress in their sentence. With so many years in custody to work with, the system should aim for far more prisoners to be ready and safe for release when the period set for punishment expires.

Some felt that using the best practice adopted by the Parole Board could improve the Category A review process (see Appendix 2 for a comparison between the two processes). For example, over the past decade the Parole Board has moved away from the position where only cursory examination would be given to an applicant who did not have favourable reports. The board are now more likely to give full consideration regardless, particularly where there is an oral hearing.

About this report

The Building Futures programme

Launched in 2020, Building Futures is the Prison Reform Trust's six-year programme, funded by the National Community Lottery Fund. The programme gives a voice to people serving long prison sentences (10 years or more for men and eight years or more for women), aiming to improve their conditions, experiences and progression.

Central to the programme's approach is creating, developing and supporting Network Groups comprised of a small number of people serving long custodial sentences in a range of prisons. These groups consult with their wider prison community, acting as a conduit for larger numbers of people to contribute to positive change. This provides MoJ, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and the social justice sector with sources of lived expertise, and participants with opportunities to speak directly with operational leads, policymakers, funders and other interested organisations.

Purpose of this report

There were no escapes of Category A prisoners in 2023/24.³ This is critical. However, the effectiveness of the Category A system, including reviews, should also be measured by the extent to which it is understood by all those involved, and is experienced as fair, consistent and transparent by those subject to its rules. It should also be measured by the extent to which those assigned Category A status are able to reduce their risk and access interventions that support their progression.

This report aims to add to the evidence around these factors. Previous work by Building Futures found that individuals serving long sentences were often confused about how to go about reducing their risk. Some believed they were being held in higher-security conditions longer than necessary and that this prevented them from gaining skills they would need for release. As well as being vital to public safety and individual wellbeing, progression is critical to using prison capacity (currently under huge pressure) efficiently and to holding people in prisons appropriate to their risk.

HMP Frankland Building Futures Network Group

Comprised of eight men serving long sentences, the group is one of the most developed and active within the Building Futures' programme. Meeting regularly, the group has been visited by senior PRT staff and Ministry of Justice officials and has explored a range of issues including: the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme; equality and diversity; prison family days; keyworker policy; and what makes a good prison officer.⁴

HMP Frankland

One of a handful of high security prisons able to hold adult men who have committed the most serious crimes, at the time of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) latest inspection, Frankland was holding 821 men (258 assigned Category A and 13 high risk). Many were serving indeterminate sentences, and a small number will never be released. HMIP found that the prison was: "calm and well-run" and that "leaders and staff were clear about their priorities and mission".⁵ HMIP primary concerns were insufficient investment from HMPPS leaders in the physical fabric of some areas; insufficient priority given to fair treatment and inclusion; and insufficient time out of cell and full-time activity places.

3 HMPPS (updated 27 February 2025). *HMPPS Annual Digest 2023 to 2024*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hmpps-annual-digest-april-2023-to-march-2024/hmpps-annual-digest-2023-to-2024>

4 Dawson P. (PRT 2024). *Potential Unlocked: building a sustainable prison workforce*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/potential-unlocked-building-a-sustainable-prison-workforce/>

5 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2024) *Report of an unannounced inspection of HMP Frankland*. <https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2024/07/Frankland-web-2024.pdf>

Methods

Aims	Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify problems with the Category A review process, plan consultation approach and methodology.• Understand policies and procedures.• Understand how policy and procedures are used and understood by those responsible for their implementation.• Gather prisoners' views on and experiences of the review process and examples of good practice.• Engage participants in drafting conclusions and recommendations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussion with the Building Futures Network Group, facilitators and HMP Frankland staff.• Analysis of policies and procedures and the use of Freedom of Information requests.• A series of meetings with both national and local prison service staff, including officials at the Category A Review Team (CART).• Conduct survey 1 and 2 with the prison community and facilitate discussions with the group at HMP Frankland, supporting those with literacy and/or language issues.• Dissemination of drafts with those locally or nationally responsible or with influence over the Category A review process.

A note on judicialization and procedural justice

In recent decades, prison governance in England and Wales has become increasingly shaped by processes and principles traditionally associated with the courts. This trend, often described as judicialization, refers to the growing influence of legal norms, rights-based frameworks and formal review mechanisms within administrative decision-making. In the prison context, this has resulted in a greater reliance on structured review processes, particularly where decisions affect risk classification and progression through the sentence.

Alongside this shift, procedural justice has emerged as a key framework for assessing the legitimacy and effectiveness of decision-making processes. Procedural justice emphasises the fairness of the process itself, focusing on whether individuals are treated with dignity and respect, have the opportunity to be heard, understand how decisions are made and perceive decision-makers as neutral and trustworthy. Research consistently suggests that where procedural justice is present, individuals are more likely to view outcomes as legitimate, even if the decisions are unfavourable.⁶

These concepts are key when considering the Category A review process, because they operate at the intersection of administrative decision-making and fundamental questions about risk and legitimacy. Category A reviews determine whether an individual continues to be assessed as presenting the highest risk, with significant implications for prison conditions, progression and access to rehabilitative opportunities. As such, the process has become increasingly judicialized. Assessing the Category A review process through a procedural justice lens therefore allows for closer examination of whether those subject to the process experience it as fair, transparent and participatory, or whether the increasing formalisation of the process enhances or undermines its perceived legitimacy.

Report structure

The *next section* provides an overview of the Category A classification and review process. Given its critical importance, we focus on the dossier prepared to support a Category A review, the key players involved in this who assess risk and progression, and the range of information provided to inform the process. The *third section* outlines the themes that emerged from the consultations set out above, and the *final section* sets out our conclusions and recommendations. Throughout the report we use anonymised direct quotes from consultations. We have also tried to reflect key points made in face-to-face discussions between the Network Group and frontline staff and policy leaders.

6 Ryan, C. & Bergin, M. (2022) 'Procedural Justice and Legitimacy in Prisons'. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*. 49, 2. 143-163. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00938548211053367>

Category A classification and review

The purpose of Category A

The prison system in England and Wales categorises adult men based on the security measures required, using categories that range from A to D. In line with the National Security Framework for the Category A function, the official definition of category A status is:

2.1 A Category A prisoner is a prisoner whose escape would be highly dangerous to the public or the police or the security of the State, and for whom the aim must be to make escape impossible.

2.2 In deciding whether Category A is necessary, consideration may also need to be given to whether the stated aim of making escape impossible can be achieved for a particular prisoner in lower conditions of security, and that prisoner categorised accordingly. This will arise in a limited number of cases since escape potential will not normally affect the consideration of the appropriateness of Category A, because the definition is concerned with the prisoner's dangerousness if he did escape, not how likely he is to escape, and in any event it is not possible to foresee all the circumstances in which escape may occur.⁷

This assigned level does not necessarily reflect an individual's inherent nature or potential. There are three groups of Category A prisoners:

- *Potential*: where an interim decision has been made to manage an individual as Category A, following a report from the local receiving prison or the police, but a final decision is yet to be made.
- *Provisional*: where a decision has been made after consideration by CART that Category A status is warranted. This applies before conviction.
- *Confirmed*: where Category A is assigned at the first formal review after conviction.

A central team, CART, sits within the Long-Term High Security function of HMPPS and deals with Category A classification and review. While responsibility for final decisions sits at Director level, CART reviews cases following recommendations from the Local Advisory Panel before decisions on Category A status are confirmed. There are eight high security prisons in England, including some that have mixed purposes (for example, HMP Belmarsh holds about 100 Category A prisoners as well as people who are on remand/unsentenced).

The adult men's prison estate in England and Wales

Cat.	A	B	C	D
Risk	Highest-risk prisoners for whom escape must be made impossible	Prisoners for whom escape must be made very difficult	Those unlikely to make an escape attempt	Lowest risk prisoners reasonably trusted in open conditions
Type	High security	Servicing local courts & Training	Training & Resettlement	Open prisons
	HMP Belmarsh	HMP Frankland	HMP Long Lartin	HMP Full Sutton
	HMP Manchester	HMP Wakefield	HMP Whitemoor	HMP Woodhill

A parallel classification system exists for women and young adults, known as Restricted Status. While sharing similarities with Category A, the protocols for people with Restricted Status differ in some respects and are outside the scope of this review, although findings may be relevant. Both systems operate within a complex prison environment and system facing pressures including overcrowding, staff shortages, and an increasing number of long custodial sentences. In 2023, HM Inspectorate of Prisons published a thematic report exploring the experiences of women and children under restricted status.⁸ The report argued for more individualised security conditions which pay close attention to the unique wellbeing and progression needs for women and children on restricted status. While this may be more realistic within a system managing a much smaller number of prisoners, it may provide useful context when considering how the Category A process could be improved.

7 HM Prison and Probation Service & Ministry of Justice. (2025). The review of security category – Category A/restricted status prisoners: Prison Service Instruction 08/2013 (Revised 3 March 2025). <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67c5cd9ba0f0c95a498d21f8/review-security-category-category-a-restricted-status-prisoners.pdf>

8 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2023) Restricted status children and prisoners held in women's establishments: A thematic review by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. Retrieved from: <https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2024/02/Restricted-status-thematic-web-2023.pdf>

Who is assigned Category A?

Category A assignment is often triggered by the nature of an individual's index offence (the crime for which they have been sentenced). HMPPS maintains a table of offences that often lead to a Category A designation, including murder, kidnapping, rape, robbery, importation of Class A drugs, terrorism-related offences, and offences under the Official Secrets Act.

However, the presence of one of these index offences does not automatically guarantee a Category A classification. The categorisation decision considers several factors, including the specific circumstances of the offence, police intelligence and potential connections to organised crime groups. For example, a conviction for murder does not always result in a Category A designation, while an individual involved in a large-scale drug importation conspiracy might be classified as Category A, even when there is no history of violence.

Within Category A, a further three-tier classification system assesses the individual's perceived potential for escape:

- *Standard Escape Risk*. Where there is no specific information or intelligence to suggest a threat of escape.
- *High Escape Risk*. Where one or more factors suggest that the individual may pose a raised escape risk, including: access to finances, resources and/or associates that could assist an escape attempt; position in an organised crime group; the nature of current or previous offending; links to a terrorist network; and previous escape(s) from custody.
- *Exceptional Escape Risk*. Similar to High Escape Risk, but where there is also credible information or intelligence suggesting an escape is being planned.

This recognises that risk of escape depends on a combination of factors, including: the prison's design and management, and the individual's resource, connections, life history and motivation. Information contributing to this classification may be gathered from offence details, intelligence sources, and prison staff observations.

An overview of the review process

Balancing security with rehabilitation remains a key challenge for the Category A system and understanding its review process, intricacies and challenges is crucial for all involved, including those directly affected by resulting decisions. The review process plays a critical role in enabling progression, potentially facilitating people to move to a lower security prison where they can access more opportunities for work, education and community reintegration. The process needs to ensure public safety, fairness, transparency and opportunities for people to progress.

Following an initial categorisation, people undergo a formal review process. If Category A assignment is confirmed, this is reviewed after two years, then annually thereafter, although earlier reviews may be authorised by senior leaders within the High Security function.

The Local Advisory Panel (LAP)

Achieving downgrade from Category A status involves a two-stage process where the primary test is convincing evidence of a significant reduction in the risk of re-offending were the individual to be unlawfully at large.

A recommendation for downgrade from the prison-based Local Advisory Panel (LAP), chaired by a prison governor, is a necessary first step in achieving a downgrade. The review process begins with - what should be - a thorough collection of reports (guided by standard forms) from various sources, including Prison Offender Managers (POMs), key workers, residential staff and psychologists (both prison-based and potentially independent⁹). A prison-based Category A Clerk (CAC) plays an important role in requesting these reports, liaising with those responsible for their production, providing administrative support and compiling a dossier for the LAP.

The CAC should share completed dossiers with the applicant at least four weeks before the LAP meeting, allowing time for them and their legal advisor to make written representations and for these to be reflected in the formal LAP review. The dossier is then submitted to the LAP, which will usually include attendees from departments that have provided reports and potentially observers. Neither the applicant nor their legal representative attends the LAP, and it is not guaranteed that report authors will attend.

⁹ Reports from independent psychologists do not form part of the dossier as such, although prisoners can choose to include them as part of their personal representations.

The Category A Review Team (CART)

Following a LAP review, its recommendation moves to the CART. This is a paper exercise completed without in-person representation by the applicant or their legal representative. If the LAP recommends that Category A status continues, then the CART can confirm this decision without further input. This will be communicated to the applicant via a letter from the CAC. If the LAP recommends a downgrade and the CART agrees, the case is referred to senior decision makers within the High Security function who determine whether Category A status should be removed. If the applicant has not received a LAP recommendation for a prolonged period (for example within five years), the dossier may be referred centrally for review within the High Security function.

Central to this process is the Category A review dossier, which consists of information split into sections and is likely to contain around 20 pages, though sometimes may be up to 50. By way of comparison, a dossier for a Parole Board review for the same person would probably contain at least 300 pages of information. Given the vital importance of the dossier and the reports that feed into it, the next section outlines in some detail, key areas covered and people involved, highlighting types of information that would be expected to have been recorded and provided.

The Category A review dossier

The dossier should offer a comprehensive summary of the applicant's behaviour, their progress towards sentence plan targets, and any reduction in risk levels. Risk assessments in this setting refers to the psychologically informed evaluation of an individual's risk to the public and of reoffending. There are a range of tools used in relation to different index offences and offence backgrounds. These tools use static and dynamic indicators that vary from person-to-person and will usually generate a numerical score that corresponds to a risk category in a secure setting.

Key players

Key workers and residential staff (section 4 reports)

The key worker scheme assigns a named prison officer to each prisoner for support and advice in relation to their progression. Key workers are supposed to dedicate 45 minutes each week to direct contact with the individual, and should record observations, give feedback and engage in a positive and supportive manner.

This section of the dossier should include a summary of the applicant's reporting period, and the contact between the key worker and the applicant, comments on general behaviour gleaned from this contact and that between the applicant and wing residential staff. It should also include notes of any adjudications, visitor contact, interactions with peers and attitudes towards work or leisure activities. Specific advice is given to record positive interactions.

Psychology (section 5 reports)

The influence of forensic psychology within the prison estate is difficult to overstate. This is especially true for those assigned Category A status. Psychologists can carry out formal structured risk assessments and may assign percentage probabilities to future events (such as reoffending and convictions). Psychologists can make recommendations for Offender Behaviour Programmes (OBPs) and psychiatric or medical assessments (for example, ADHD or autism), and can initiate referrals to specialist units, such as Psychologically Informed Planned Environments (PIPE).

PIPE

As part of the wider HMPPS and NHS England Offender Personality Disorder (OPD) pathway, PIPEs offer a programme for people who are considered high-risk and high-harm, and who are likely to have a personality disorder. They are designed to support the transition and progression of prisoners and those on probation (through Approved Premises PIPEs), at significant stages of their sentence and beyond. Staff who work in PIPEs are trained and supported to work in an evidence-based, psychologically informed way, and to understand the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment. There are currently 29 PIPEs across England, with 20 in prisons (three of which are in women's prisons) and nine in Approved Premises (two of which are for women).

Legal aid funding is available for people facing Category A reviews and an applicant's lawyer can instruct an independent psychologist to conduct an assessment of risks and protective factors and provide further evidence to the review. This could be privately funded although the cost can be prohibitive.

An independent psychologist has a professional responsibility to use appropriate tools and methods to assess risk and write reports and may provide evidence that addresses areas of concern not fully covered by the prison-based psychologist. This may be because they have the time to fully interview the applicant, or they may carry out an additional assessment not included by the prison-based report. In addition, they can work with prisoners over consecutive years, building up a clear understanding of historical risk.

This section of the dossier relates to an individual's progress towards addressing areas of risk associated with their conviction and index offence. The contents may be completed following a current analysis using a structured risk assessment tool, or a report of historic use of such tools, or an 'arms-length' assessment due to lack of contact (which may be because of a range of reasons). Independent reports may be based on formal interviews and structured risk assessments or carried out on the basis of existing reports and collated information without contact with the applicant.

Offender Behaviour Programmes (OBPs)

With the aim of changing the attitudes, thinking and behaviours which may lead people to reoffend, OPBs focus on encouraging pro-social attitudes and goals, and on the development of skills that support desistance. These skills include problem-solving; perspective-taking; managing relationships; and self-management. OBPs often use cognitive-behavioural techniques and tend to be delivered in groups although one-to-one provision is available. They include work to address specific offences, for example sexual or domestic violence, general patterns of offending behaviour, and substance misuse related offending.

This section of the dossier should include information about completed OBPs and consolidation, a period in which people are expected to show how programme learning has been applied daily (some OBPs include consolidation in their end phase). The potential to achieve a downgrade will be heavily dependent on whether an individual can show that learning has been integrated into their 'way of being'.

Evidence from psychological assessments, interventions and consolidation is pivotal in the assessment of risk of future offending, a key element in the downgrade test. The quality of psychologists' reports and the use of the appropriate structured risk assessment tool is therefore vital.

Offender Management Units and Prison Offender Managers (section 6 report)

The Offender Management Unit (OMU) and Prison Offender Managers (POMs) in each prison are pivotal to progression through the prison system, to Category A reviews, sentence planning and parole reviews. Although it can vary, typically each prison has one POM responsible for key inputs into decision-making processes which impact on the daily life of people in prison and their potential to progress.

Completed by the POM, who is responsible for maintaining people's Offender Assessment System (OASys) reports, this section of the dossier contains a number of sub-sections that will help to determine whether the downgrade test is met. This includes:

- Assessment of an applicant's static and dynamic risk (see OASys below), including details of OASys risk areas flagged and a rationale for inclusion.
- An applicant's sentence planning targets and achievements during this reporting period.
- Concerning and positive behaviours noted in relation to the applicant during the reporting period.
- Protective factors – i.e. those factors seen to mitigate risk.
- Recommendations for progression.

Security department

This section of the dossier should contain disclosable and a summary of non-disclosable information relating to behaviours, both where there has been a formal disciplinary process (an adjudication) and where there is intelligence (from staff or peers) on indiscipline, escape, violence, associations or other non-specific information.

Activities

This section should contain positive and/or concerning reflections on the applicant's interactions and engagement with staff in parts of the prison where they undertake work, recreational, leisure or other activities. This could include engagement with the chaplaincy, gym, education, visits, healthcare, recovery services, peer support roles or training. As well as noting positive or protective lifestyle factors and behaviours, evidence may be given as to how the applicant demonstrates personal change in attitudes or beliefs, which may be seen as consolidation of learning from interventions such as OBPs.

Critical data and information

Below, we outline the types of information that will be contained in a dossier; the accuracy and quality of this can have a direct impact on an individual's chance of receiving a fair and just review. The bar for a downgrade is set high and poor practices and inaccuracies, however small, can undermine chances of a downgrade. For those people assigned High Escape Risk there is an additional review process, and the paperwork compiled for this is referred to as the gist.

i. OASys (Offender Assessment and Sentence Management)

OASys is the IT-based assessment system used by the prison and probation services in relation to adults and is designed to integrate supervision and sentence planning into the process of assessment.

POMs are responsible for undertaking OASys assessments and reviews at different stages of an individual's sentence. An initial assessment should be made shortly after sentence (within 10 weeks for those serving a determinate sentence of over 10 months, and within 16 weeks for those serving an indeterminate sentence).

OASys

Aims

- Assess the likelihood of reconviction.
- Identify and classify offending-related needs.
- Assess risk of harm (to self and others).
- Assist with management of risk of harm.
- Link assessments, supervision and sentence plans.
- Indicate any need for further specialist assessments.
- Measure how an individual changes during the period of supervision/sentence.

Reviews

- At least every two years when an individual is serving a determinate sentence of over two years.
- At least every three years when an individual is serving an indeterminate sentence.
- Two years and 24 weeks prior to parole eligibility date and for a pre-tariff sift (where a transfer to open conditions can take place before a parole hearing).
- Prior to a transfer to open conditions and where a significant event could change risk management and/or sentence plan.

An OASys review is critical to the Category A review process and should provide a comprehensive picture of an individual's sentence plan, risk assessment, behaviour and progress towards goals. It will generate a summary risk score in relation to the likelihood of reoffending and risk of harm to self and others arrived at through using a range of risk assessment tools, including:

- OASys General reoffending Predictor (OGP)
- Offender Group Reconviction Scale (OGRS)
- OASys Sexual reoffending Predictor (OSP)
- OASys Violence Predictor (OVP)
- Risk of Serious Recidivism (RSR)

Sentence plans

Shortly after an individual arrives in prison an OASys assessment will be used to create an action plan to address the identified needs and risks. For those people assessed as having a risk of serious harm which is medium, high or very high it will include things they need to do to reduce the risk of harm. This could include activities, including OBPs, and goals aimed at changing behaviour related to their offence, and/or how they are going to tackle problems to do with drugs and alcohol.

Alongside OASys assessments, sentence plans should be reviewed during an individual's time in prison, in particular when a significant change impacts or could impact risk such as a parole review, or when objectives have been achieved.

The *Managing the Custodial Sentence Policy Framework* states that "all prisoners who are in scope of OASys must be provided the opportunity to participate in their sentence planning".¹⁰ In addition, *PSI 19/2014 Sentence planning* states that engaging prisoners in developing the plan is "essential", including being "involved in considering what actions might be needed to reduce the risk the offender poses, both in terms of causing serious harm and further offending".¹¹

This PSI also contains guidance around setting targets, which should be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound), with actions set in order of priority. Where completion of an action is dependent upon other factors this must be noted and the framework states that people "must not be disadvantaged for not achieving an objective outside of their control".¹²

P-NOMIS (Prison National Offender Management Information System)

P-NOMIS combines 'static' data about the individual with information regarding what is happening during their sentence. The system is used to provide evidence relating to an individual when preparing reports, including for Category A reviews.

P-NOMIS scope

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal details, including age group, religion and gender.• Criminal history, including convictions.• Information about type of custody, including those remanded on bail and sentenced.• Sentence length details. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tracks prisoner movement data (both internal and external).• Stores case note information, including those relating to behaviour perceived as either positive or negative.• Manages addresses of the prisoner (release, on reception).• Monitors involvement in breaches of prison discipline and adjudication records.• Provides details of the visits from friends, family and legal advisors.• Tracks activities, such as paid/unpaid work and engagement in OBPs.• Maintains prisoners' financial records |
|--|---|

Our consultations highlighted a range of assessments that can be made in relation to people's needs and risk, as well as ways they can engage to reduce their risk and support their progression. As we shall see in the second half of this report, which sets out the key themes that emerged from the consultation, critical questions include when and whether programmes and interventions are accessible, whether assessments are understood, and whether progress is accurately recorded and/or sufficiently recognised as part of the review process.

10 Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. (2018, November 28). *Manage the custodial sentence policy framework*. UK Government. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c9b6ae040f0b633f24d0515/manage-custodial-sentence-pf.pdf>

11 HM Prison and Probation Service & Ministry of Justice. (2015, October 5). *Sentence planning: PSI 19/2014, PI 13/2014* (PSI 19/2014, PI 13/2014). GOV.UK. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f3ee07fe90e072eca142049/psi-19-2014-pi-13-2014-sentence-planning.pdf>

12 Ibid.

Participants' experiences and perceptions

In the previous section we outlined some of the key procedures, stakeholders and data sources involved in the Category A review process. This highlights the complexity involved and the importance of factors that may impact but take place outside of the specific review process, including effective needs assessments, sentence plans, and access to OBPs and other activities that support progression and risk reduction.

It is important to recognise that even if these systems were working entirely effectively, long prison sentences bring inherent challenges. Building Futures has highlighted how a long sentence can shape people's relationships¹³, wellbeing¹⁴, and care needs.¹⁵ The programme is currently exploring the post-release experiences of those who have served these sentences.

Category A status adds complexity and can exacerbate these factors. One participant powerfully articulated the fear and frustration this can bring.

"I'm over tariff and I can see the headline now... 'lifer found dead in his cell, wrapped in a prison issue green sheet, with a chicken bone stuck to his chest and an army of ants fighting for a pack of tasty custard cream'".

Survey respondent

Most people assigned Category A will be serving life or indeterminate sentences, where release depends upon a successful parole application. The increasing length of these sentences and the high numbers of people to remain inside beyond their minimum term brings additional uncertainty for individuals and the review process.

Resource impacts

These challenges are made harder in the context of overcrowding, capacity issues and resource pressures. As the previous sections show, the Category A review process relies heavily on a range of people, all of whom are impacted by the current challenges facing the prison system. While the high security estate tends to have fewer staff shortages, issues around resource pressures – including staff workload, time constraints, and availability and access to some programmes – were implicit throughout the consultation, with some participants raising these issues explicitly.

"Often [they rely] on old reports because workloads are so demanding. [This] usually leads to a detrimental outcome for the individual."

Survey respondent

"There are only a few case workers to process over 1,000 Cat A reports each year. So is it really manageable to get us all an annual review?"

Group member

Emotional impacts

Our consultations focused on practical issues, but it was clear that people's experiences of the Category A process could shape how they felt, their sense of hope, motivation, agency, of being listened to and treated fairly. For example, poor communication can result in people feeling neglected.

"The director never responds to my letters, so I feel as though I'm not being listened to, and that's partly why I've lost hope to ever come off Cat A. I know I'm going to die in prison."

Survey respondent

"Nobody has come to see me about any of this..."

Survey respondent

A lack of progression and limited access to rehabilitative opportunities can generate feelings of anxiety and being overlooked. Likewise, being repeatedly told they will remain Category A can lead to feelings of being trapped and undermine motivation.

"I don't engage as it's a waste of time."

Survey respondent

13 Hutton M. and O'Brien R. (PRT 2024) *A Long Stretch: the challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.* https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A_Long_Stretch.pdf

14 Vince C. and Evison E. (PRT 2023) *Invisible Women: understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment. Briefing: Hope, health and staff prisoner relationships.* https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/invisible_women3_web.pdf

15 Price J. (PRT 2024) *Growing Old and Dying Inside: improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences.* <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Growing-old-and-dying-inside.pdf>

“No faith. Given up. No hope.”

Survey respondent

In addition, imprisonment in remote locations and the vetting requirements for visitors can severely limit contact with loved ones, while invasive monitoring and constant scrutiny can lead to feelings of having no privacy, as well as misunderstandings and accusations of criminal activity. Some people feel powerless when unable to correct inaccuracies in reports or challenge misperceptions of their behaviour as threatening or violent.

Overall, the opaque nature of the Category A review process, the difficulty in meeting the downgrade test, lack of contact with key staff or opportunities to address the issues identified to facilitate a downgrade can lead to people feeling confused and as if they are being treated unfairly.

“The actual risk being assessed is rarely the risk that was originally relied on to place us on Cat A. Why is this?”

Survey respondent

“I think it’s unfair, because in this prison you’re lucky if you see your POM once a year and then they write a report on you based on that one meeting.”

Survey respondent

Below we outline participants’ responses to issues related to the review process, their views about the specific workings of the LAP and CART, the range and quality of the information gathered, and their relationships with those involved. Combined, they suggest that the process - and the wider procedures that feed into it and support people’s progression - are often poorly understood, inconsistently followed, lacking transparency, and not completed in a timely manner.

“A lot of staff do not understand firstly how to do a Cat A report. Also, staff which I have spoke to don’t believe their input matters, only psychologists. Staff also do not know how to ... detail the progress prisoners are making during these periods.”

Survey respondent

“The mandatory instructions set out in the Policy (para 4.17) and the guidance in the report templates (Annex C) is often not followed/understood by report authors, meaning they do not write comprehensive summaries of behaviour and progress to date, that will enable assessment of any reduction in the prisoner’s level of risk.”

Survey respondent

In particular, issues were raised around the quality and accuracy of the information recorded, how this impacted the reports used and the dossier itself. Sometimes these issues involved basic errors. People reported encountering various issues related to the compilation and disclosure of the dossier, such as missing pages, outdated information, inaccurate reporting periods and the inclusion of sensitive information belonging to other prisoners.

“My Cat A papers arrived a few weeks ago, but it was impossible to read it as they had copied both sides on to one side of the whole dossier. I thought I was blind trying to read it in double Dutch. I sent it back for a readable copy, only to then discover they have gone ahead with my LAP without me ever receiving a full copy of my reports.”

Survey respondent

“I received a so-called dossier today and it has someone else’s information plastered all over it. And to make it worse, he sounds like he’s from the bottom end. It’s also several months late.”

Survey respondent

The Local Advisory Panel

Our consultation shows that there are concerns about the workings of the LAP. This included the role of the Category A Clerk (CAC), delays in receiving minutes and these not always reflecting personal representations or recommending clear pathways to progress in accordance with the guidance.

ii. The role of the Category A Clerk (CAC)

Many participants highlighted the importance of the CAC in the review process. However, what emerged was a sense that CACs have different roles depending on which establishment they are in. Some participants raised the lack of a clear published definition of exactly what the CAC role entails and their absence at some LAPs, which could impact on the accuracy of information coming out of the panel.

“The CAC is not being scheduled to attend all of the LAPs, which can lead to inaccurate/missing data within the LAP minutes.”

Survey respondent

Participants emphasised the need for a clear definition of CAC responsibilities, consistent practices and effective communication with prisoners. Some felt the role should include being the point of contact for prisoners and staff in the build-up to Category A review reports being drafted and assembled, checking and disclosing the dossier, attending the LAP and taking minutes.

“Surely it isn’t that hard to schedule a member of staff who is capable of taking detailed minutes, to attend the LAP, which would provide us with a summary that actually reflects what happened on the day.”

Survey respondent

Many participants reported delays, ambiguities, and mistakes related to CACs’ communication about the process, including deferrals and handling of the dossier.

“Deferral applications are often not answered by the CAC, who is best placed to answer them.”

Survey respondent

“The CAC does not work full-time, limiting her ability to address all concerns regarding the dossier/process raised in a timely fashion e.g. deferral applications, delays and inaccuracies etc.”

Survey respondent

LAP minutes

In particular, many participants raised the issue of delays with sharing LAP minutes with applicants, causing prolonged anxiety as people waited to find out the outcome. It appears that in some cases LAP minutes are not provided to the applicant in a timely manner, including when additional representations are needed for the CART.

“We are being forced to wait in excess of four weeks for our LAP minutes, which causes us lots of stress due to not knowing the recommendation.”

Group member

“We are not informed of the outcome after the LAP meeting, which leaves us anxious, uneasy and apprehensive.”

Group member

Participants’ responses indicate that applicants find it hard to ascertain what information the LAP is considering and whether the minutes are a fair reflection, particularly when there is non-disclosable security information considered by the LAP or other information that was not contained within the dossier. We return to this issue later.

“The dossier is often incorrectly filled out so that we have no idea we have a non-disclosable report, due to the two separate boxes not being ticked and [securities] failure to provide a description of the information. Often, the first thing we know about it is when we receive our LAP minutes and read the comments about a non-disclosable contribution.”

Survey respondent

In addition, some participants felt that the LAP sometimes reached conclusions about the accuracy of information in the dossier, or comments made by attendees, without fully considering the evidence provided by the applicant.

“Information not included within the cat A dossier, is now being introduced on the LAP and relied upon without us having any opportunity to challenge or make representations.”

Survey respondent

“Inaccurate claims are being introduced on the LAP, that can easily be disproved, and which we have never been informed of in order to make representations.”

Survey respondent

Understanding how to progress

Participants frequently gave examples of reviews where the LAP had made no recommendation for a downgrade and where the minutes did not include any record of a clear progression path identified to inform the applicant of what was required for a downgrade.

“My LAP minutes didn’t have a recommendation/targets of how I could reduce my risks for my upcoming reporting period.”

Survey respondent

“There is occasionally a failure to comply with policy by not recommending what we can do in the upcoming year in order to reduce our identified risks.”

Survey respondent

Participants reported that even when a previous LAP had made recommendations, and the applicant had complied with them, this was not always considered in the next review. Some raised the issue of repeated reviews over several years where the LAP and CART do not consider in full the overall progress that an applicant may have made over this time.

“If you’ve done things such as previous recommendations that effect your risk reduction, you would think these would be put forward and noted by the LAP board, because this then has a knock-on effect when it goes on to the CART.”

Survey respondent

“If you have fully complied with your previous LAP recommendations, why do they not reference them, as this would clearly influence the CART decision.”

Survey respondent

The Category A Review Team

Those applying for downgrade felt remote and distant from the CART and senior decision makers within the High Security function, not knowing where they were and not feeling properly represented during reviews to the CART. Some also reflected that they had not received clear recommendations from the CART on how to progress.

“I don’t know who the CART is?”

Survey respondent

“The decision letter...is occasionally ambiguous, whereby there is no clearly identifiable recommendations for what is required of us to reduce our risk.”

Survey respondent

The review process

People questioned the capacity of the CART to effectively review all cases, given the limited number of CART caseworkers, the volume of reports to be processed and CART’s distance from the applicant.

A key element of contact with the director is the decision letter. It was felt these often do not clearly state the reasons when the decision has been made not to approve downgrade. There were also concerns around limited information and guidance around what applicants can do to address issues raised with regards to risk.

“The decision letter is routinely ambiguous e.g. caseworkers rarely make clear recommendations as to what is required of us in the subsequent reporting period to evidence risk reduction.”

Survey respondent

Additionally, it was felt by some participants that caseworkers should be able to identify missing or low-quality information and ask for further clarification rather than this leading to a negative decision.

“They are not experienced enough to identify explicit information missed by psychology, or the LAP, during the reporting period which evidences risk reduction.”

Group member

“It’s unclear whether or not the caseworkers ever follow the policy and refer those not recommended by the LAP for a full review by the [Senior leadership team]?”

Survey respondent

A common perception was that the CART over-relied on information from security and were potentially overlooking or dismissing evidence of progress and risk reduction. We return to this later in relation to views on the review dossier.

“The assessment of risk reduction needs to rely less on the completion of courses and more on prisoner’s behaviour, IEPs and negative entries, because they show how a prisoner acts through an entire year. If there are [no negatives] that should be a big positive for risk reduction.”

Survey respondent

Personal and legal representation

The consultation responses suggest that there is inconsistency in approach to people being able to make personal or legal representations at the LAP or CART. They also suggest that it is common for representations to be provided but for LAP minutes to record that these were not received. Even when representations are received, LAP minutes may not record that they were considered in any detail.

“...a distinct failure to make any reference in the LAP minutes to key issues raised within the prisoner’s personal reps, especially re disputes/inaccuracies.”

Survey respondent

“We are often informed there were no reps, even though our solicitors have the dated email record, and also when wing staff have personally delivered the reps to OMU, which has been independently confirmed by additional staff.”

Survey respondent

Some participants felt that a key problem was information not being provided in time for representations to be made. For this to be possible, an accurate dossier must be provided in a timely manner (in line with policy) before the LAP takes place and again with LAP minutes. Some participants reported not having time to take legal advice, following receipt of LAP minutes and before the CART decision. It is possible to envisage a situation where the LAP has commented on evidence provided at their meeting and where the applicant has additional evidence which could be submitted to the CART to counter the new evidence.

“Intelligence not refenced/deemed relevant in the Cat A dossier is somehow being discussed on the LAP without prisoners having had the opportunity to make representations about it.”

Survey respondent

“Some prisoners are invited to sign a document at the outset of their reports getting started, which asks for solicitors’ details, yet a copy of the completed report is not sent to the identified solicitors.”

Survey respondent

Participants reported that lack of acknowledgment of the work that goes into applying for downgrade and writing representations (often including third party character statements) was disheartening and could lead to disengagement.

“LAP minutes never reference any information from within character statements, unless it’s for a prison source and you receive a LAP recommendation. This is disheartening and causes us to lose hope that we are on the right path...”

Survey respondent

Participants reported wider issues about legal representations. Legal aid is available to most applicants (the financial limit to access is £1000 savings/£93 a week income, far above what most will have access to.) However, engaging a solicitor is difficult and takes time and the number of individuals qualified to give advice is also dwindling. Even when a solicitor is engaged, it can be difficult to arrange legal visits, find time to speak and access the dossier in time to make representations.

“Only one dossier is being sent to prisoners, causing delays for those wishing to send a copy to their solicitor.”

Survey respondent

Many participants felt that the perception of any representation given in support of downgrade on behalf of the applicant is somehow biased or even manipulative. People felt there is a pervasive sense in the prison system that individuals who play an active part in their sentence and progression are trying to ‘game the system’.

“The prison doesn’t request reports from everyone who I come into contact with, so I receive my own character statements from them. However, for some reason, no emphasis or reliability is ever based on them. It’s wrong mate!”

Group member

“Prisoners personal reps do not appear to be taken seriously by the LAP, especially if they have not been recommended for downgrade, or the referenced information is not recorded within the available reports/on P-NOMIS.”

Survey respondent

Some felt there could be benefits to using more oral hearings (which are relatively rare) in the review process, as these would allow applicants to present their case directly, clarify ambiguities and challenge inaccurate or misleading information.

“It’s unclear if the [Senior leadership team] ever authorises a short oral hearing to better understand a prisoners change/reduced risk, or to seek more insight into a suggested dispute/impasse by the prisoner”

Survey respondent

The relationship with Prison Offender Managers

Establishing a strong working relationship with the POM is crucial for applicants, to enable the effective presentation of evidence of risk reduction and achieving downgrade. However, a recurring concern amongst participants was the inadequacy of contact with their POM. Some did not know who their POM was.

“There is a distinct lack of contact between POM’s and prisoner’s prior to preparing Cat A reports.”

Survey respondent

Many participants shared accounts of POMs being unavailable and there was a common perception that they were in a state of crisis due to being under-staffed, with extensive caseloads, and were unable or unwilling to respond to applications in a prompt or reasonable manner, and were rarely visible on the wing. Participants highlighted infrequent meetings, limited opportunities for meaningful interaction, lack of support in correcting inaccuracies in reports, delays in paper applications being responded to and reports being produced without face-to-face contact.

Feedback on Prison Needs Assessment

Needs assessments were not well understood by many participants who said they found it difficult to voice their confusion and concerns openly for fear of this being seen as a problem and/or risk concern. Participants highlighted challenges related to the timely completion of assessments, expressed frustration about lengthy waiting times for programmes, and being told they were not deemed a priority due to their lengthy sentences. Some reported that it was not uncommon for people to be assessed as needing an intervention which is not available, or of being given a referral to the PIPE only to find out that they do not meet the criteria.

Many participants felt that limited or infrequent contact with POMs made delays more likely, led to inaccurate reports and meant positive events were often missed. They emphasised that accurate and timely reporting on P-NOMIS was particularly important for those facing the Category A review process.

“POMs rarely update P-NOMIS re: progress made related to risk factors, consolidation work or application of skills.”

Survey respondent

“Some positive behaviours recorded on P-NOMIS during the reporting period are often omitted from reports (OASys, sentence plans, SOC/risk assessments & cat-A reports).”

Survey respondent

This feedback echoes recent Building Futures’ consultations on progression where participants felt that relationships with POMs were distant and remote.¹⁶ Some participants in those consultations felt POMs did not always take account of information that was relevant to their development and wanted wing officers, whom they interacted with daily, more directly involved in recording information relevant to progression.

16 Jarman B. and Vince C. (PRT 2022). *Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences.* https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Making_progress.pdf

Feedback on OASys

Participants reported concerns about accuracy in OASys reviews and sentence plans, cut-and-paste practices, with progress not being updated. They felt this can distort risk assessments and prioritisation for programme interventions, which in turn can influence the dossier and people's ability to evidence a reduction in risk.

"Each time it comes up to Cat A reports or OASys, things don't seem to be updated. Things get copied; [the POM] don't put updates on what tools have been learnt on courses to lower risks. There is not any contact coming to the wings on reporting periods, going over how things have changed since the last time you met and how your scores have changed."

Survey respondent

They gave examples of where reports were produced without face-to-face contact, of not being provided with up-to-date sentence plans and OASys and not being able to correct inaccuracies due to a lack of support from their POM.

"POM's appear to routinely receive extended deadlines (beyond other authors) for completing their Cat A reports, which can negatively affect synchronization of reports/cause delays and confuse current/subsequent reporting periods."

Survey respondent

Some participants felt that too often POMs made recommendations based on a poor understanding of the downgrade test or the psychological interventions available. Some also felt they were heavily influenced by others and that this undermined their role and the process.

"Some POM's who assess a prisoner does not require residence on a PIPE, fail to record this opinion on P-NOMIS, which can contribute to confusion, obstacles, conflicting views, frustration and periods of impasse, causing frustration."

Survey respondent

"POM's appear to be given full access to a prisoner's completed Cat A dossier, before drafting their own contribution, which has at times proven to negatively/adversely influence their own opinion and/or report."

Survey respondent

The relationship with psychology

"POMs clearly rely on the psychology report to make their own recommendations, when surely, they should be doing their own risk assessment and making a recommendation based on their own judgement."

Survey respondent

The sentiment above, about the weight that assessments by prison-based psychologist are given, was a recurring theme and helps shape the complex relationship between prisoners and psychologists. While recognising the importance of these assessments and interventions, participants raised a number of concerns. For example, some believed there was bias when it came to independent psychologists' assessments, feeling these were dismissed in favour of prison-based psychologists, potentially undermining the objectivity of the process.

"It's a waste of money allowing us to have independent psychology reports each year, as the LAP and CART never take a shred of notice of what they say."

Survey respondent

"Even though all psychologists are governed by the Healthcare Professional Council (HPC) and they each have the same duties to the Parole Board, independent psychologists are too easily dismissed by those carrying out reviews, often on the word of a trainee psychologist barely out of school."

Survey respondent

When discussed with members of the CART, it was stated that the prison-based psychologist, having more access to the applicant was better able to assess risk than an independent psychologist. However, the Serious Further Offence review of the Anthony Rice case emphasises that a psychologist not involved closely with a subject may be better able to make an accurate assessment.¹⁷

¹⁷ Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. (2006). *An independent review of a serious further offence case: Anthony Rice*. BBC News. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/10_05_06_probation.pdf

The CART members also stated that solicitors may instruct four or five independent reports and pick the one which best meets their needs. This view was held despite most representation for Category A reviews being funded by Legal Aid and the need for each independent report to be approved in advance by the Legal Aid Agency. The costs of reports would also make multiple instruction unlikely in most cases.

“More emphasis should be placed on the reliability of independent psychology reports because they get to know us a lot better than prison psychologists. For example, they read all of our previous reports, OASys reviews and data protection docs e.g. psychology, security files & P-NOMIS case notes before they visit us. Plus, they correspond with us for further information, write over consecutive years and contact our POMs etc.”

Survey respondent

Participants argued that, in line with best practice, an independent psychologist who has an opportunity to interview the applicant and review the dossier and other information is best placed to make an individual assessment of the risk. This view was driven in part by a lack of contact with prison-based psychologists, an issue raised throughout our consultations.

“Most Cat A reports are written by psychologists without building proper relationships with prisoners or the staff that spend more time and have more understanding of the growth prisoners have made to show consolidation.”

Survey respondent

Many participants felt a lack of contact resulted in limited understanding of those being assessed; some were unaware of psychologists’ role. It was also noted by some that progress was not always recognised and that psychologists at times failed to make clear recommendations for further work required.

“I’ve never met a psychologist and I’m seven years into my sentence.”

Survey respondent

“Disgustingly, I’ve been here over 10 years, and no-one has been to see me officially. So, all reports... have been done from other department’s report’s, which is malpractice.”

Survey respondent

“My latest report made no effort to consider... the work I have done this year, to address the targets I was set to reduce my risks ... last year.”

Survey respondent

An alternative view expressed was that psychologists did not always properly address the downgrade test in submissions. Both prison-based and independent psychologists are generally more accustomed to working on Parole Board cases and participants reported that it is not uncommon for the wrong test to be applied or for the report writer to focus on whether the applicant can be ‘managed in Category B conditions’ rather than the test at hand.

Feedback on OBPs

Some participants reported, for a number of reasons, not being ready for OBPs but being pressured to participate. Others reported wanting to take part from ‘day one’ but being repeatedly denied this due to their length of sentence and told they were not a priority. These themes echo Building Futures’ work that found access to OBPs (that occupy a tiny fraction of a long sentence) was not always available, and that engagement was not always seen as useful, meaningful or effective.¹⁸

There was significant confusion amongst participants surrounding the process of evidencing consolidation work and use of the My Strengths work they had done. People expressed confusion about the methods and timeline for consolidation, often reporting inadequate feedback and a lack of recognition for their efforts.

All of the participants that responded to questions around consolidation struggled to comprehend the process. They raised questions around why the methods of consolidation were never disclosed to them during participation in courses, why there was no published guidance detailing the range of methods available to those wishing to consolidate; and why no timeline for consolidation was available.

“I done a course as required, but then the psychologist who completed my risk assessment failed to reference any of my treatment gain, insight or use of skills while consolidating.”

Survey respondent

18 Jarman B. and Vince C. (PRT 2022). *Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences.* https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Making_progress.pdf

“I have completed four My Strengths workbooks and received feedback from dozens of staff on record sheets, yet every time I receive a psychology report, they leave all my work and feedback out.”
Survey respondent

As well as inconsistent contact, many participants expressed frustration about their experiences of psychology not being able to provide meaningful opportunities or support to reduce risks. This included access to a PIPE.

Feedback on PIPE

PIPE was acknowledged by many participants as valuable to providing a structured and supportive environment for individuals to address their needs and reduce risk. Some raised issues around lack of spaces or timing. There was also confusion about the process, eligibility, clarity and consistency of referral criteria.

“There are only ever a few spaces available on the PIPE units, yet they seem to be recommending everyone to do the PIPE. How does this make sense?”
Survey respondent

“The whole point of a PIPE is to consolidate skills (post treatment) with extra supervision (as they are struggling to consolidate on their normal location). Yet by the time they get on there (several years) most of us have already consolidated our skills and amassed lots of evidence to prove it... no-one seems to take notice.”
Survey respondent

Group members felt this was particularly relevant to psychological Summary of Contact (SOC) reports, which they felt often left out vital risk reduction work. This was also raised in relation to full risk assessments, where the absence of key information increases the likelihood that downgrade will not be recommended.

Feedback on summary of contact (SOC) reports

Participants expressed significant concerns about the lack of clarity and consistency surrounding SOC reports, with many uncertain about their purpose and content. 60% of survey participants did not know the difference between a SOC report and a full risk assessment, but the overwhelming majority (93%) said they would take part in a risk assessment and complete courses if given the chance. Issues around inaccuracies, incomplete information, and the omission of positive behaviours and risk reduction efforts, were also raised.

A key issue arising from discussions about SOC reports, was the disparity in contact and content between different prisons in the high security estate.

“SOC reports tend to exclude any information related to the seven Progression Pathways and completion of courses such as victim awareness.”
Survey respondent

“There seems to be a wide-ranging difference in how different staff in different HSEs write SOC reports, meaning some include a few bullet points, while others provide a comprehensive summary of your reporting period.”
Survey respondent

There were also concerns about the accuracy and transparency of risk assessments, with reports of inaccurate information, limited opportunities to review and challenge assessments, and a lack of adherence to data protection regulations.

“I had a risk assessment by an independent psychologist who used to work at [another prison]. When she recommended me for a downgrade, the CART implied she applied the wrong test. However, my solicitor informed me that the same psychologist applied the same test for two other prisoners in here last year and the CART agreed that they had reduced their risks and downgraded them.”
Survey respondent

In addition to these issues, participants highlighted inconsistencies in how psychological reports were produced, including differences in format and the forms used. Some felt that reports did not change over time, giving the impression that assessments had been copied and pasted or not considered in sufficient detail.

"It's the same report I've had for the last six years."

Survey respondent

"These psychology reports are not following the templates in PSI 08/2013, meaning two of these reports are not risk assessment."

Survey respondent

People who maintained their innocence for the index offence experienced particular difficulties in working with psychology: they and others felt pressurised to take part in interventions which they believed had no solid evidence-base of reducing risk, while others who were keen to engage were told that they were not a priority.

Key worker contact and reporting

Many participants raised concerns about the consistency and quality of contact and reporting from key workers. Some reported infrequent meetings, inadequate communication, and reports that lacked detail and depth, potentially undermining their ability to effectively present evidence of progress.

"Some keyworker Cat A reports are significantly below par, possibly due to a lack of training, and some KW's claim to have been instructed by OMU or POM's not to write more than 30 words for each section."

Survey respondent

"There is a distinct lack of keyworker contact as per the policy, which limits the meaningful information they can gain/bonds they can create, to enable their ability to write a comprehensive summary for a Cat-A report."

Survey respondent

In particular, participants highlighted key workers' lack of reporting on P-NOMIS and a lack of transparency when their key worker did not inform them that they or someone else had made entries onto the system, whether positive or negative.

"Most [key workers] don't meet with prisoners to review the reporting period prior to writing their Cat A reports."

Survey respondent

"[Key workers] often don't print you a copy of their [P-NOMIS] entries upon creating them, or on request, which restricts your ability to quote/cite your positive behaviour/risk reduction evidence, such as an application of skills and consolidation evidence."

Survey respondent

Some participants felt that even when there was contact, key worker reports did not reflect their behaviour and/or were inaccurate or of poor quality.

"My...keyworker report amounted to five bullet pointed sentences. How is that going to provide anyone with evidence of my progress?"

Survey respondent

"[Key workers] occasionally write inaccurate/misleading entries, e.g. due to not taking notes/clear notes, which can create issues when a report author reads/wrongly interprets them. Or if a member of staff associated with the subject of the inaccurate information reads it. This failure becomes aggravated if the member of staff fails to confront you, instead choosing to view you negatively."

Survey respondent

Similar issues were raised in relation to residential staff and their role in relation to the Category A review process.

"Wing staff with no real knowledge of a prisoner, are attending LAPs and making allegations that are not recorded anywhere, and which are news to the prisoner when he finally receives the LAP minutes."

Survey respondent

Feedback on P-NOMIS entries

The importance of accurate and timely entries on P-NOMIS was highlighted by participants, who expressed concerns about the lack of regular updates, particularly regarding positive behaviours and risk reduction efforts. Many felt this could hinder their ability to present a comprehensive picture of their progress during the review process.

There was a broad consensus amongst the Network Group members that most of the problems surrounding staff contributions to Category A reports, stemmed from a lack of capacity and training. This included a failure to regularly update P-NOMIS where there was considerable support for staff training to ensure that entries accurately and consistently reflect behaviour and engagement.

Security intelligence

The handling of security information, particularly the inclusion of non-disclosable security information and major incident reports (MIRs) in the dossier, was raised by some participants. Some expressed concerns about the lack of transparency, inconsistency and the potential for this information to be used unfairly against them.

“I was recently refused a recommendation by the LAP, primarily based on unproven security information that seemed very trivial.”

Survey respondent

“MIR’s are inconsistently used for different prisoners e.g. some, but not all, prisoner’s will [have] information repeated from a previous reporting period within their dossier.”

Survey respondent

“I don’t understand why I can’t have sight of the MIRs that are going to be included within the dossier, prior to it being issued to me, so that I can address any of the IRs early and with enough time to have them removed or updated. Because once the dossier is disclosed, there seems to be a reluctance to correct anything in it.”

Survey respondent

Conclusions and recommendations

Category A reviews do not happen in a vacuum. As this consultation demonstrates, people's perceptions of fairness were shaped not only by the review process itself but also by factors such as their ability to access programmes and interventions that helped them reduce their risk. Some of these issues arise through priorities and timings, but they can also be shaped by the resource pressures facing the prison system.

Throughout the consultation there was widespread recognition of the pressures facing the prison system and the impact this can have on the people responsible for implementing the Category A review process and the range of people and procedures that feed into it. This includes the work of the CAC, high caseloads for key workers and POMs, and time constraints that can impact sentence plan/OASys reviews and needs assessments.

Some of these pressures have been raised in recent reports from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP). HMIP's 2024 report on HMP Woodhill found that: "A chronic shortage of prison officers remained at the heart of the prison's difficulties, with almost twice as many officers leaving than joining," and that prisoners felt "very frustrated by the lack of opportunities for progression."¹⁹

In 2024, HMIP raised key concerns about progression and engagement in sentence planning targets at HMP Frankland as well as broader concerns around insufficient activity places and enrichment activities that support progression.²⁰ HMIP's inspection of HMP Whitemoor in 2022 reported that "Many prisoners were very angry and frustrated with the lack of opportunity to move on with their sentences." The report highlighted the curtailing of the work of the OMU and the reduced number of accredited programmes, which was "leaving prisoners feeling stuck in their sentences and unable to demonstrate the behaviours they needed to progress".²¹

While many of the recommendations included here focus on specific and practical changes that participants suggested throughout consultations, it is clear that the ability of the system to work as effectively and efficiently as it should will continue to be undermined until these pressures are eased. Most of what is suggested below would not involve significant resources and we have included examples of good practice that should be transferable across the estate.

A root and branch review

The core recommendation of this report is that *the Category A review process (as set out in PSI 08/2013) should be subject to a root and branch review*. The process has not been reformed substantially for a decade and the last change, the introduction of oral hearings, has not resulted in significant changes. Alongside and feeding into this process, there should also be a *Thematic Inspection of the Category A review process by HMIP*.

Such a review should involve interested parties, including those with lived experience, and should address specific issues raised by participants, including:

- *Update the PSI to fully incorporate the current category A report writing guidelines that are set out in the Frankland review document dated 2021*. This guidance has been rolled out throughout the HSE for many years now, yet it does not feature within the PSI and it is not yet a published document, making the ability of those it affects to ensure full compliance almost impossible.
- *Clarify, better resourcing and communicate the role of Category A Clerks*. Participants felt that CACs were fundamental to a fair and accurate review of Category A status. There was broad agreement that CACs should be a central point for the compilation of the reports and communication with the applicant regarding the timing of completion of the dossier, the LAP date and deadlines for representations. It was also felt that the CACs should be supported by a dedicated Cat A advocate (CAA), similar to the process facilitated at Whitemoor, where a band 3 officer works closely with the OMU and CACs in the buildup to disclosure of the category A dossier and LAPs. CAA liaise with prisoners immediately before their dossiers are disclosed, discuss concerns, offer general guidance and attend LAPs, where they are able to clarify some facts on behalf of the applicant. They do most of this work whilst deployed to residential wings as operational officers.
- *Clearer procedures for transfers and deferrals of reviews*. Participants felt that this would make the process of transfers during a review window and the use of deferrals fairer and could also reduce delays. This should give applicants the opportunity to present a complete and accurate case for downgrade.

19 HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2024). *HMP Woodhill: Independent review of progress (29–31 July 2024)*. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-woodhill-4/

20 HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2024). *HMP Frankland: Report on an unannounced inspection (4–14 March 2024)*. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-frankland-2/

21 HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2023). *HMP Whitemoor: Report on an unannounced inspection (5–15 December 2022)*. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-whitemoor/

- *Disclosure of reports in a timely manner.* Participants felt there is a need for timely and complete disclosure of reports to applicants and the provision of adequate time for them to secure legal advice and make representations.
- *Prior sight of disclosable information and warnings about non-disclosable intelligence.* There should be greater transparency in the handling of security information, ensuring that people are informed about the nature of the information being used and have an opportunity to challenge its relevance and accuracy before the information is referenced within the dossier. Security should disclose monthly how many disclosable and non-disclosable reports were submitted, with a summary provided in accordance with the categorisation and intelligence policies. This would enable applicants to know more about what to expect from a review and avoid delays and increased stress.

“Only relevant intelligence from the reporting period should be used.”

Survey respondent

“All [incident reports] deemed disclosable and likely to feature within a Cat A dossier, should be brought to the prisoner’s attention upon creation, in order for them to have an opportunity to explain/ challenge or add context while it is still fresh in their memory... there could be supporting evidence available to help dispute/add context.”

Survey respondent

- *Broadening attendance at LAP reviews.* Participants believed that the review process would be fairer and more transparent if residential officers, key workers and CACs were to attend LAP reviews. Participants felt that this could be achieved by an efficient and open scheduling process. Given that applicants are not represented in person at the LAP, participants felt that those who had regular contact with them were well placed to speak to the content of the reports and dossier. This would be particularly important when the LAP considers a dossier that does not provide sufficient evidence as an inquisitorial approach could elicit additional information. Whitemoor has an effective process whereby requested key workers or other wing staff are called up to attend the LAP 15 to 20 minutes before they are required and staff who have already attended the LAP, either return to their wings or cover for staff attending the LAP.

“Why can’t they do a bit of time management and rotate the staff on LAPs so that our keyworkers or preferred staff can attend the LAP when our case is being reviewed?”

Survey respondent

“Other prisons ensure that...keyworkers and staff designated to attend the LAP are spare or on keyworker duties on the day of the LAP, so that they can attend. Once the first officer that is required to attend from a wing has finished, they will swap roles with the 2nd officer required to attend the LAP.”

Survey respondent

- *Improving LAP communications.* Participants felt this would ensure that applicants were informed about the evidence being considered and the reasons for the LAP’s recommendation. Any mistakes made prior to the LAP, with regard to the practices and procedures and the report content, should be highlighted, reviewed, corrected and referenced within LAP minutes. This is already suggested within the PSI and the CARWG, but it is rarely complied with.
- *Short video links should occasionally be arranged to support the LAP.* If there are issues of concern or disputes of the accuracy or reliability of information within the reports, prisoners should be permitted to have a short window to interact with the LAP via video link. This would allow the LAP chair or a delegated member of staff to put pre-arranged questions to the prisoner, allowing them to clear up key issues and to add clarity where required. This process was introduced in Whitemoor in 2022. The CAA would be the only person visible to the prisoner.
- *Improve monitoring and revisit targets.* Participants felt this would help ensure that an individual’s efforts are recognised and appropriate feedback on progress is received. Regular monitoring would also enable the early identification of any issues, allowing for timely interventions.
- *Taking a more holistic approach at LAP and CART reviews.* This should include considering the full range of evidence presented and ensuring that applicants receive credit for their efforts to reduce risk and demonstrate positive change. In order for the process to be fair, and to be perceived as fair, there should be consideration of representations, weighing the evidence they contain and making explicit the reasons why the case made has been accepted or not.
- *Greater CART Transparency and communication.* This should include greater transparency in CART procedures and communications about the team’s composition and decision-making processes, ensuring that decisions are relayed in clear and specific language. Prisoners should be left in no doubt as to what is required of them in order to reduce their risk and support a downgrade to category B.

- *Increasing senior decision maker contact and the use of oral hearings.* Participants felt more contact, transparency and clarity in communication with senior decision makers within the High Security function would be beneficial, including the possibility of more decisions being made via the provision of an oral hearing. While acknowledging the potential for increased resource demands, a review of the Category A review process should explore whether expanding the use of oral hearings would support fairness and transparency in the decision-making process. Short oral hearings whereby prisoners are looped into the CAT review at the point when key issues are being discussed would allow for prisoners to add context to any concerns or disputes that are troubling the CAT.

Wider improvements

In addition, any exploration of the Category A review process raises wider factors that shape people's progress and the information included in the reports that inform the review dossier. As such any root and branch review would need to address these factors within high security prisons. This includes:

- *Improving Category A prisoners' contact with POMs.* People stressed the importance of regular and meaningful contact with POMs and professionals involved in the assessment or risk reduction process. Some examples that emerged from consultations provided practical suggestions that would aid this process and bring wider benefits.
- *Equitable access to programmes and interventions.* This should be regardless of sentence length so that people can address their risk factors and demonstrate progress when ready and throughout their sentence.
- *Clearer information on consolidation.* Participants felt that the amount of confusion experienced could be reduced by clear guidelines and transparent procedures for evidencing consolidation work, ensuring that people understand expectations and receive appropriate recognition and feedback for progress.
- *Clearer and more comprehensive SOC reports.* These need to accurately reflect the behaviour and progress made within the reporting period, especially where it may relate to achieved objectives and risk reduction.
- *Clearer guidelines and transparent procedures for PIPE referrals.* This should increase understanding and people's sense of fairness about access. All too often prisoners who do not score on the OPD pathway, are recommended to reside on a PIPE, without receiving a clear understanding of why the criteria is being disregarded in their case. It is of note that professionals routinely fail to provide an alternative pathway to the PIPE, in spite of this being a requirement when setting targets related to risk-related work and treatment recommendations.

Good practice

- In some prisons OMU representatives provide information, advice and guidance for those preparing for/due an OASys review and this provides a relief to POMs and staff, along with prisoners receiving the peer support.
 - In some prisons OMU and POM's phone numbers are included on prisoners' PIN so contact can be made from their cells. Some prisons provide email access to contact POMs, staff and other professionals, which participants felt would take some pressure off staff.
 - One Network Group member explained his previous role, where as an OMU rep, he would help provide feedback (from staff/prisoners) on the key worker scheme, offering possible/realistic suggestions based on the specific dynamics of their individual wings. He also worked closely with the Category A advocate (CAA), supporting prisoners to prepare for their upcoming Cat A reviews and to submit representations to the LAP and CART.
- *Improve P-NOMIS recording and sharing.* Group members suggested that staff should print negative/positive warnings and entries off P-NOMIS at the time of creation, and upon request from the subject of the entry, as this would provide opportunities for people to challenge and review these prior to the creation of reports for Category A reviews. This would allow prisoners some insight into their recorded positive/negative behaviour. In this way they could refer to it in any representations or interviews for upcoming reviews.

Good practice

- In some prisons POMs print P-NOMIS case notes for prisoners and independent psychologists. This supports people's ability to evidence risk reduction and prepare their representatives for a review.
- Members of Frankland's senior staff, set up a forum with the Network Group to review the local Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) policy, the result of which included an agreement to inform prisoners when they are given a negative/IEP entry on p-NOMIS.

Staff training and capabilities

Throughout the consultation, participants raised the need for improved staff training around the Category review process and a consensus that this would go some way to ensuring greater consistency and accuracy in reporting. Without proper training, staff may not fully grasp the importance of their contributions or the most effective ways to communicate their observations. This training should cover:

- **P-NOMIS:** The vital importance of P-NOMIS (which should be communicated consistently). One Network Group member suggested that posters could be created to raise awareness of the importance of regularly updating P-NOMIS and to remind all staff/heads of departments/functions to record contacts of note along with any active involvement in representative/mentor roles on P-NOMIS.
- **Report writing:** Given the critical importance of reports and the dossier itself – and some of the poor examples given – there was a consensus that more needs to be done to not only ensure that data is effectively collected and collated, but that staff involved in producing them are aware of their importance, know what needs to be included and how to capture information in a meaningful manner.

“My keyworker doesn't know how to write a report, so I think there should be bespoke training for KWs with the input of a select few prisoners who can elaborate on what is wrong with the current system, how it's perceived by prisoners and any possible solutions to improve how they complete them.”

Survey respondent

Consideration of risk and security permeates the long-term and high security estate. Participants felt that, despite this, staff needed to be better equipped for working with long-term prisoners to assess risk. This includes training but also ensuring that guidance is explicit, clear and available to prisoners and criminal justice professionals, with clearer information about what kinds of behaviour is likely to lower or elevate risk in future assessments. Participants also felt there is a need for the consistent use of thorough and accurate risk assessments, conducted using appropriate tools and methods, and transparent procedures that allow prisoners to understand and challenge the assessments.

Lessons from parole

Some participants wanted earlier involvement with the Parole Board in reviewing progress. This would allow any potential roadblocks to release to be identified and a plan to be developed which outlines the steps an applicant can take. With so many years in custody to work with, the system should aim for far more prisoners to be ready and safe for release when the period set for punishment expires.

Some felt that using the best practice adopted by the Parole Board could improve the Category A review process (see Appendix 2 for a comparison between the two processes). For example, over the past decade the Parole Board has moved away from the position where only cursory examination would be given to an application who did not have favourable reports. The board are now more likely to give full consideration regardless, particularly where there is an oral hearing.

Appendix 1. Surveys 1 and 2: the Cat A review process

Survey 1. This aimed to assess respondents' views on the current practice and their experiences surrounding the Category A review process. The survey comprised three parts – local practices, national practices and Prison Service Instructions – with seven questions in total. These questions are based on topics that had emerged either in initial discussions within the group and/or consequent to informal feedback and experiences that were articulated to group members from peers on their residential wings and workplaces. The questions are intentionally open to encourage a broad range of responses.

Questions	
Local practices	
1	What do you think about the practices and procedures used by Prison Offender Managers to annually write reports/assess risk and update your OASys/sentence plan?
2	What do you think about the practices and procedures used by psychologists to annually write Category A reports, review treatment gain/consolidation work, and assess risk?
3	What do you think about the practices and procedures used by all other staff/report authors, when annually writing Category A reports
4	What do you think about the practices and procedures annually used to compile and disclose Category A dossiers/high risk gists ?
5	What do you think about the practices and procedures used by members of the Local Advisory Panel, to annually review your progress/completion of previous recommendations, and assess risk reduction
National Practices	
6	What do you think about the practices and procedures used by members of the CART, to annually review your progress/completion of previous recommendations, and assess risk reduction
Prison Service Policy	
7	Does the Category A Review policy (PSI 08/2013), annually provide all Category A prisoners every reasonable opportunity to evidence significant change/risk reduction?

Survey 2. The purpose of this survey was to identify examples of good practice. This survey comprised three parts: good local practices and procedures; good national practices and procedures; and suggested recommendations.

Questions	
Good local practices	
1	Please provide examples of good practices and procedures used by Prison Offender Managers when annually writing reports/assessing risk and updating your OASys/sentence plan?
2	Please provide examples of good practices and procedures used by psychologists when annually writing Cat A reports, reviewing treatment gain/consolidation work, and assessing risk?
3	Please provide examples of good practices and procedures used by all other staff/report authors, when annually writing Cat A reports?
4	Please provide examples of good practices and procedures annually being used to compile and disclose Cat A dossiers and high risk gists ?
5	Please provide examples of good practices and procedures being used by members of the Local Advisory Panel, when annually reviewing your progress, completion of previous recommendations and assessing your risk reduction
Good National practices	
6	Please provide examples of good practices and procedures being used by members of the Cat A Review Team, when reviewing your progress/completion of previous recommendations and assessing your risk reduction
Recommendations	
7	Please provide recommendations that may help to improve the Category A Review policy (PSI 08/2013), so that it annually provides all Cat A prisoners every reasonable opportunity to evidence significant change/risk reduction?

Respondents of both surveys had experienced the Category A review process in the following establishments: HMP Whitemoor, HMP Full Sutton, HMP Long Lartin, HMP Woodhill, HMP Manchester, HMP Belmarsh, HMP Wakefield and HMP Frankland.

Appendix 2:

Comparisons between the Category A review process and the Parole Board

Similarities	Differences
<p>Public protection</p> <p>Both prioritise protecting the public from harm caused by people with convictions.</p>	<p>Focus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Category A review focuses on preventing escape and assessing the risk of re-offending if an escape were to occur. • The Parole Board focuses on the risk of re-offending upon release and whether this can be safely managed in the community.
<p>External decision-makers</p> <p>Decisions are made by individuals or bodies external to the prison.</p>	<p>Scope</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Category A review is considered an administrative function. • The Parole Board process directly engages with the applicant's liberty. This has an impact on challenging decisions in court.
<p>Risk assessment</p> <p>Both conduct assessments of an individual's risk of re-offending.</p>	<p>Decision-making body.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The final downgrade decision in a Category A review is taken at senior level within the High Security function of HMPPS, following consideration of recommendations from the central Category A Review Team (CART), supported by a small team of caseworkers. • The Parole Board is a larger and more structured body with a secretariat and numerous members involved in decision-making.
<p>Dossier review</p> <p>Both review dossiers contain various reports, including those from prison staff and psychologists</p>	<p>Volume</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CART handles a significantly smaller number of applications than the Parole Board.
<p>Applicant representations</p> <p>Both allow for representations from the applicant.</p>	<p>Downgrade rates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rate of successful downgrades from Category A is considerably lower than the rate of release decisions by the Parole Board.
<p>Oral hearings</p> <p>Both have the provision for oral hearings, although their frequency and application differ significantly.</p>	<p>Transparency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Parole Board has evidenced its commitment to open justice, transparency, and accountability, with published annual reports and the possibility of public attendance at hearings. • The Category A review lacks this level of transparency.
<p>Public law principles</p> <p>Both are bound by principles of public law, requiring fair and rational decision-making.</p>	<p>Oral hearings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral hearings in Category A reviews are rare and only conducted in exceptional circumstances. • Such hearings are more common in Parole Board reviews and are directly based on specific criteria. <p>Reconsideration process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unlike CART, the Parole Board has a built-in process for reconsidering decisions upon application from involved parties.

The logo for Prison Reform Trust, featuring the words "PRISON REFORM TRUST" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, stacked vertically on a dark red rectangular background.

PRISON
REFORM
TRUST

15 Northburgh Street,
London. EC1V 0JR
020 7251 5070
www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk
contact@prisonreformtrust.org.uk

This report presents the findings of a peer-led review by the Building Futures Network Group at HMP Frankland, drawing on the experiences of people with direct knowledge of the Category A review process. It explores how the process is understood and experienced by those subject to it, highlighting the emotional and practical impacts of a system often perceived as opaque, inconsistent and difficult to navigate.

The report identifies significant challenges in communication, access to opportunities to demonstrate progress, and the quality and use of information that informs decision-making. It highlights how these factors can undermine trust, create confusion and anxiety, and undermine progression. Drawing on lived experience, the report sets out recommendations to improve fairness, transparency and accountability, including a call for a root and branch review of the Category A process.