

Building Futures: Project Evaluation 2020-2026

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Foreword

The **Building Futures programme (BFP)** was a Prison Reform Trust project established to explore the experiences of people who will spend, or have spent, ten or more years in prison custody (eight years or more in custody for female prisoners). The project focused on how long sentences impact prisoners, their families, and wider communities. Working collaboratively with prisoners, prison staff and others, 'the programme aims to provide solutions and shape a prison environment that is safe, humane, encourages accountability and fosters hope. It places a strong emphasis on promoting prisoner leadership and self-advocacy and the creation of inter-prisoner support networks.' Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, the programme took place 2020-2025.

The Building Futures programme facilitated listening forums, promoted prisoner-led consultations, established research networks, and brought together policymakers and the people impacted by long-term imprisonment. It drew upon the personal experiences and insights of prisoners, former prisoners, and other key stakeholders to call attention to the impact of the recent and dramatic increase in the numbers of people serving long-term sentences.

PRT initially commissioned **Justice Studio** to become their evaluation partner from April 2021, primarily to engage in an ongoing impact analysis of the programme. During this period, the key Justice Studio staff working on the project were Dr James Kearney (Lead Evaluator) and Marianne Moore (CEO).

Upon submission of the Building Futures Programme evaluation end of year 3 report (submitted May 2023), James Kearney took over the evaluation in an independent capacity. During 2024, the evaluator created a new evaluation framework that established a structured methodology for assessing the emerging outputs of the programme. The independent evaluator submitted three yearly reports and presented the findings to the Building Futures 'Advisory Group' and to representatives of the National Lottery Community Fund. The following report represents the culmination of that work.

PART 1

Introduction to the evaluation

1.1 Conceptualising Building Futures

The work of Building Futures was originally structured around five ‘workstreams’: Invisible Women; Progression; Hope, Meaning and Responsibility; Family Contact; and the creation of practical information – a manual – for long-term prisoners. In 2024, it became clear that these areas were no longer the most intuitive way of understanding or assessing the work, *nor* to what extent the work was having a positive impact. As outlined in the 2024 Evaluation report, the work has been sub-divided into two parts, each with their own constituent sections. Prisons are obviously at the heart of this work, but Building Futures quickly reached a point where prisoners, through the working groups, were generating their *own* outputs related to research and policy.

Within the prisoner-facing aspect of the programme, four types of work became apparent, each in turn driving the other. The work may be neatly conceptualised in terms of ‘information provision’; ‘training’; ‘access to external parties’; and ‘policy work’ (**Figure 1**).

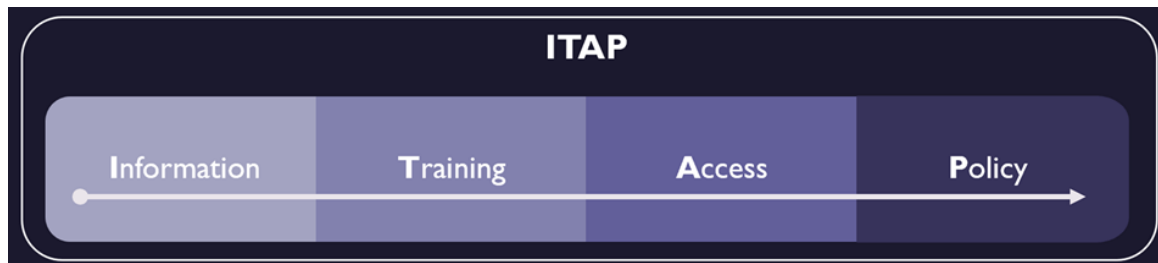


Figure 1. ‘ITAP’: Information, Training, Access and Policy

Information: the provision of practical information and related material (largely written material) to prisoners, particularly the provision of resources at the beginning of a sentence.

Training: the organisation of practical learning and skills training.

Access: the facilitation of meetings with external parties whom the prisoners would not normally interact with.

Policy: empowering the prisoners to input into policy at the prison level and nationally.

From the evaluator’s perspective, Building Futures is best conceived as the fusion of these four areas – encapsulated by the umbrella term ‘ITAP’ – with the external research work conducted independently by PRT and other parties such as academics and

independent analysts (**Figure 2**). Through this lens, the programme’s ‘impact indicators’ come more clearly into focus and, consequently, are more easily assessed.

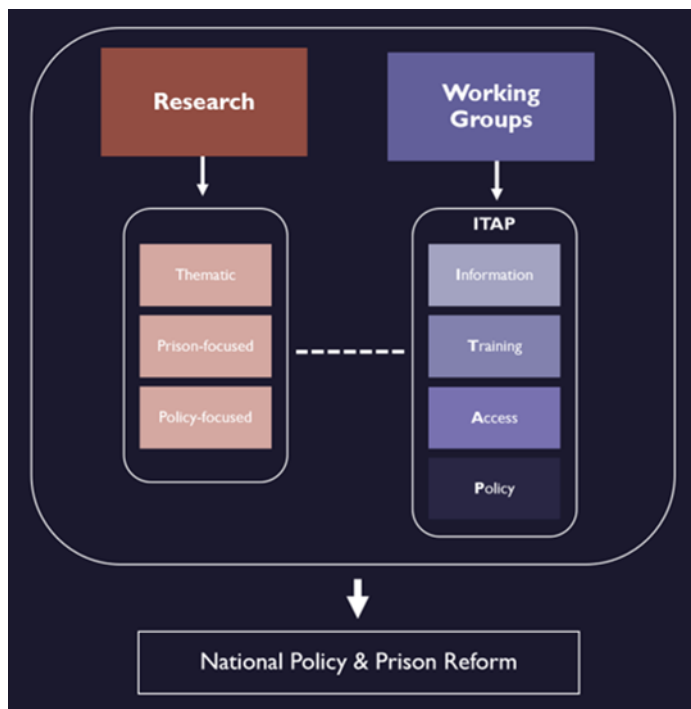


Figure 2. Categorising the key components of Building Futures

Rather than undermining the five original workstreams, these new categories were designed as a tool through which the success of Building Futures could be more effectively conceptualised and gauged for impact. An increase in numbers is one indicator of success. A more accurate indicator of success is the extent to which the programme has empowered prisoners or positively impacted prison procedure; how policy within *and* outside prison has been addressed; and to what extent the work of Building Futures could be perpetuated beyond December 2025.

Throughout 2024 and 2025, the evaluator sought to explore to what extent working groups and prison personnel had the potential to sustain activities that were then being conducted with the support of PRT. To that extent, surveys were formulated and deployed to several working group members, the results of which are discussed in sub-section 2.3.

1.2 Reconceptualisation of the programme’s outputs

After submission of the 2021-2022 evaluation report (submitted April 2022), Dr James Kearney carried out a review of the tools, methods, and modes of engagement that Justice Studio had used up until that point. These had been stymied by the challenges both PRT and Justice Studio had had to navigate during, and in the aftermath of, Covid-19. It quickly became obvious that a more formalised framework had to be established and implemented, one that was consistent in terms of data collection and in terms of amassing information that could be used

to measure the impact of Building Futures. With the goal of collecting information from as many sources as possible, and in an unprejudiced manner, the lead evaluator developed several methods for information collection and analysis of impact. These included:

- Interviews with, inter-alia, current long-term prisoners; prison administrators and other staff; PRT Building Futures programme staff; and external stakeholders (including HMPPS and Parole Board)
- Attendance at, and observation of, working group sessions
- Participation in PRT-organised events
- Assessment of Building Futures publications and how they link to the programme's main themes
- Assessing uptake of PRT-produced materials, including through media channels and news outlets
- Surveys of a cross-section of working group members
- An assessment of Building Futures' impact on policy

From the outset, and in discussion with the then Programme Director Dr David Maguire (who had agreed the approach with the National Lottery Community Fund), it was decided that the programme would be allowed to evolve 'organically' and, consequently, the evaluation would require flexibility. An 'Outcome Harvesting' model was determined as the best way to achieve this.¹ That flexible approach is reflected in this evaluation.

1.3 Building Futures: outcomes 1 to 4

It is the evaluator's role to determine how best to assess the work conducted as part of Building Futures. What does this mean in practice? At the outset, the Prison Reform Trust agreed a set of four 'outcomes' anticipated for the programme; these included:

1. Outcome one: creation of pathways to policy impact for long term prisoners.
2. Outcome two: the creation and monitoring of measures of personal fulfilment and hope within the very long-term population.
3. Outcome three: an improvement in the rates at which indeterminate prisoners achieve release on parole at the first opportunity and go on to live successfully in the community without being recalled to prison.
4. Outcome four: a coherent long-term strategy for the treatment of very long-term prisoners and their way of life in custody, and the means to monitor its implementation, including through inspection.

¹ See: <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/outcome-harvesting>

Each of these outcomes contained a set of ‘indicators’, ‘indicator levels’ and a timescale for implementation. As an example, outcome one’s components are shown in **Figure 3**.

Outcome 1: Creation of pathways to policy impact for long term prisoners.		
Indicators	Indicator level	Timescale
Developing and embedding sustainable infrastructures for prisoner policy influence and self-advocacy.	The development of 10 or more self-sustaining and representative communities or groups of long term prisoner policy leaders. Spanning key sites across the UK prison estate and recognised as ‘go to’ expert policy groups/ advocates by respective justice leaders/prison managers. Prisoner influence evidenced in up to 10 impactful co-produced outputs that are taken up by a range of stakeholders. Including: prisoners; ministers; officials; select committees; prisoners (leaders); prison staff; and associated agencies in this space.	End of project

Figure 3. ‘Outcome One’, Building Futures outcome framework (adapted from PRT’s programme update to the National Lottery Community Fund, March 2025)

However, the outcomes originally envisaged were adapted during the programme’s life cycle. For example, in March 2025 it was agreed with the funder that Outcome three’s goal of achieving a 10% improvement on ‘Ministry of Justice statistics on timely parole release for indeterminate sentence prisoners’ was an overly ambitious target to accomplish within the lifespan of the project . It is for this reason that this evaluation is mindful of the outcomes framework but is not bound by it. Similarly, the programme’s goals have been understandably ‘organic’ and evolving; this is not necessarily an indication of the programme’s limitations, but, rather, a reflection of the challenges of operating in a sector where access to a particular group of beneficiaries – long-term prisoners – is extraordinarily difficult.

In previous, yearly evaluations, outputs were discussed and assessed individually. This was effective in providing a snapshot of the programme’s work and evolution, but it was less successful in gauging relevance, reach and impact. Following on from ‘reconceptualising the programme’ discussed in section 1.1, this final evaluation assesses the programme through, after close observation of Building Futures since 2022,

what the evaluator gauges to be the main areas of focus: information provision, training, access and policy. Equally, and as highlighted in **Figure 2**, the two fundamental foundations of Building Futures are the prisoners and the policy that affects prisoners. It is for that reason that each shall be given equal status in terms of assessment. In terms of structure, part 2 provides a snapshot of the working groups, including feedback from members and an assessment of respective working groups' growth or decline; part 3 looks at the 'I' and 'T' of ITAP, that is, the provision of information to prisoners and training provided to working group members; part 4 focuses on how the Prison Reform Trust provided access to external parties, including how it facilitated events and workshops; finally, part 5 considers the policy and research side of Building Futures, including how Building Futures has been received externally.

Beyond these, part 6 introduces two case studies: the first, 'prisoner-focused', scrutinises one prison working group – HMP Rye Hill; the second case study looks at work conducted on one of the major themes of Building Futures – the case of long-sentenced women within the prison estate. Part 7 includes a brief conclusion and assesses the overall impact of the Building Futures programme. From the outset, it is important to note that it is not within the scope of this report to discuss in detail every programme output since the beginning of the project. For example, as of May 2026, the programme has generated 20 separate reports; there are a further five reports due for publication later in 2026. Although all outputs are cited, what is most critical is the way the various reports (a) have been critically received; (b) fit into and support the project as a whole; (c) where appropriate, have influenced policy or filled research gaps.

1.4 The challenge presented by Covid-19

During the first year, the restrictions brought in during the Covid-19 pandemic substantially impacted the programme, and as a result both PRT and Justice Studio had to use a flexible and creative approach to facilitate effective delivery.

Prison accessibility is limited in non-pandemic times, however with the onset of Covid-19 the prison estate became even more restricted. Covid-19 measures were introduced by HMPPS to protect prisoners and staff in England and Wales in March 2020. This included ceasing all inter-prison transfers, separating new arrivals, isolating symptomatic prisoners, and shielding vulnerable prisoners.² Whilst in the community many organisations, such as PRT, were able to move to remote working, the lack of digital access within prisons meant that communication with prisoners was initially challenging.

² Justice Select Committee, (27 July 2020), Section 2.
See: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3590/documents/34677/default/>

HMPPS constructed a National Framework for Prison Regimes and Services consisting of a five-stage coronavirus alert system for the prison regime. PRT's research was delayed by the pandemic and could not begin until prisons reached stage 2.³ Stage 2, 'Reduce', indicated that either no infection was present in the prison, or was at very low levels where spread could be contained. At Stage 2, classroom-based education was re-introduced, alongside workshops, indoor physical activities, and communal worship. In the wake of Covid-19, PRT also suffered setbacks. Staff capacity was reduced as some members of staff were put on the national furlough scheme. This, coupled with the need to communicate with prisoners, made implementing the programme in line with the original timescales challenging (see **Figure 4**).

Responding to these challenges, PRT concentrated on how they could harness prisoner voices and put infrastructure in place to communicate with prisoners when in-person visiting was not possible. Consultations at the outset of the programme established a dialogue that initiated two-way communication. PRT developed a comprehensive database to track and interact with prisoners during the pandemic, something that was subsequently utilised throughout the lifespan of the project.

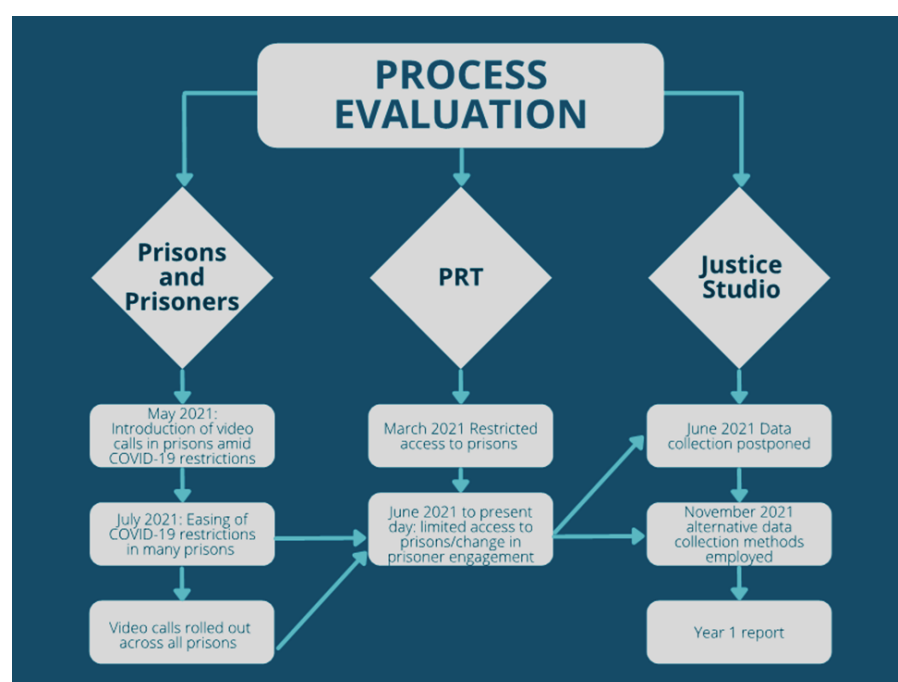


Figure 4. Flowchart identifying processes put in place to manage lack of access to prisons

³ The full National Framework for Prison Regimes is available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1011828/prisons-national-framework-august-2021.pdf

Difficulties in setting up meetings with Prison Governors due to the Covid-19 restrictions hampered the speed at which working groups were able to be set up in the prisons. Once working groups had been established, outbreaks of Covid-19 led to prisons being shut down and BFP staff being unable to attend groups. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, several working groups were established, and these began to show early signs of achieving exactly the type of leadership and agency that PRT staff were seeking to cultivate. Prisons established by October 2021 included HMPs Rye Hill, Swaleside, Low Newton, Send, Aylesbury, Frankland, Bronzefield and Warren Hill.

Unfortunately, although Justice Studio was scheduled to undertake initial visits to working groups prior to Christmas 2021, Covid-19 outbreaks and the infancy of some groups made this unviable. As such, Justice Studio switched data collection to the analysis of secondary data from PRT in the form of reflection logs and engagement tracking.

PART 2

Working Groups and Network

2.1 Expansion of the Building Futures Network

The Building Futures Network established in 2020, (BFN) is partly composed of members of PRT's Prisoner Policy Network (PPN – launched in July 2018) and has an active membership composed of prisoners, former prisoners, and external contacts associated with prisoners (including family members). Learning from the development of the PPN, the BFN provided people with experience of long-term imprisonment a way of externalising their insights and concerns pertaining to long-term imprisonment. The network initially began work remotely in Autumn 2020 and quickly became a cornerstone of Building Futures:

“A fundamental component of this work is the development of a network of prisoners and former prisoners with direct experience of long-term imprisonment, to allow for impactful collaboration with those the programme represents”.⁴

During the period 2022-2025 a database was used to securely record information pertaining to BFN members by, where appropriate, prison establishment, sentence duration, gender, sexuality, race, nationality, and disability.

The database further facilitated the tracking of:

- **Consultation contributions**
- **Active membership**
- **Working group membership** (where appropriate)
- **Correspondence records**

By the beginning of 2025, Building Futures passed its original target of recruiting 900 network members. By March 2025, the database was populated with the details of 902 network members, up from 656 at the end of March 2024. At programme's end in December 2025, the number had reached 969 (**Figure 5**).

⁴ See: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Making_progress.pdf p. 7

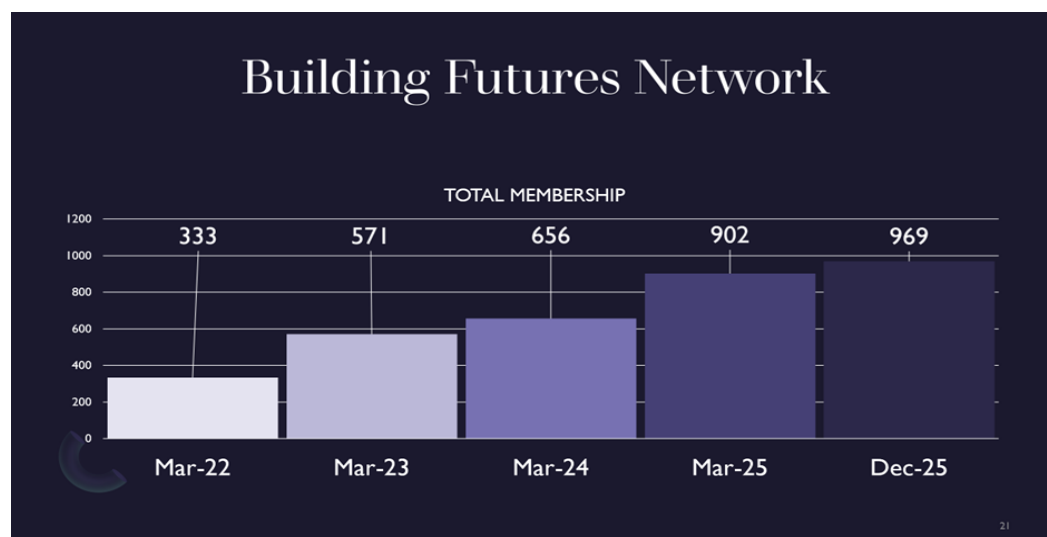


Figure 5. The Building Futures Network membership, 2022 - 2025

2.2 Growth of the working groups

While the total number of those prisoners involved in the working groups more than doubled in the 24 months to March 2024 (from 54 members in March 2022, to 109 members across 8 prison sites by early 2024), the period April 2024 to March 2025 saw those numbers fall to 94. Troublingly, membership plummeted to 46 by the end of the project (**Figure 6**), partly due to groups being dissolved at HMPs Frankland, Parc, Swinfen Hall and Hydebank. Access became a significant challenge for the PRT team, with staff commenting that access was restricted due to prison staffing issues and site lockdowns. Although a challenge from the beginning and indeed throughout the project, the dissolution of working groups so near the end of the Building Futures programme is concerning in terms of perpetuating such groups in 2026 and beyond.

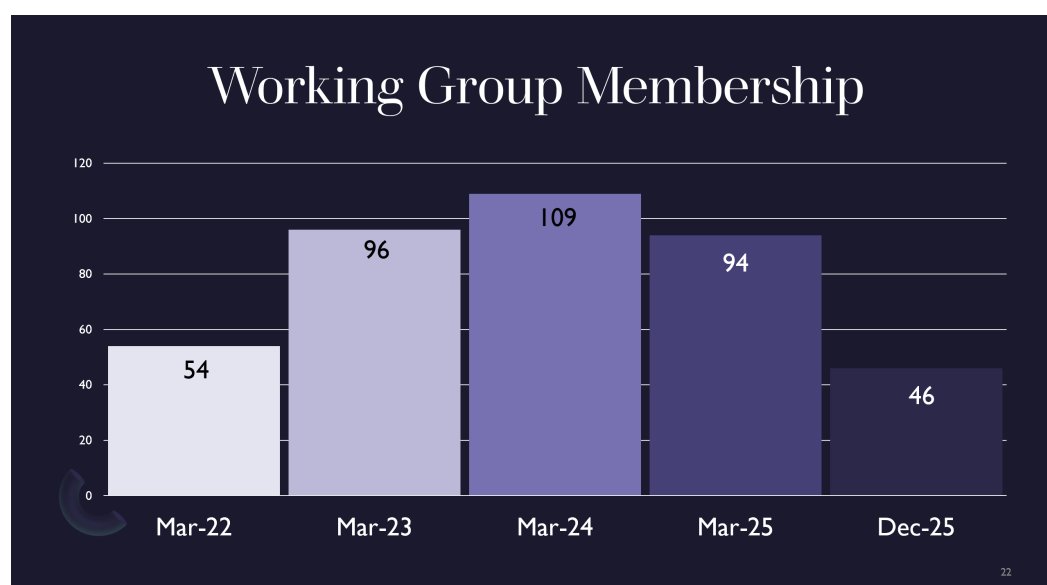


Figure 6. Working Group membership, 2022 - 2025

While the levels of working group membership within HMPs Warren Hill, Frankland, Rye Hill and Swaleside remained largely constant between 2022 and 2025, others, including HMPs Send and Bronzefield (both female prisons) fluctuated greatly (**Figure 7**). This was also reflected in the number of members who attended PRT-organised working group meetings. In contrast, HMP Rye Hill – visited by the Evaluator on four separate occasions – had the same core number present during each meeting. This was not only reflective of the generally high morale and motivation of the group membership but was also an indication of the access provided by the prison and the evident ‘buy-in’ of the prison leadership (to be discussed in a case study in Part 6).

The lack of such buy-in was limited at HMPs Low Newton, Magilligan and Aylesbury, where working groups were no longer sustainable by the beginning of 2023. HMP Bronzefield witnessed a large transfer of prisoners in 2024 which negatively impacted the activities of the working group there. Although 17 female prisoners regularly received invitations to join the meetings, invariably it was a core group of six that constituted the working group; similar transfers had an impact on working group membership at HMP Send.

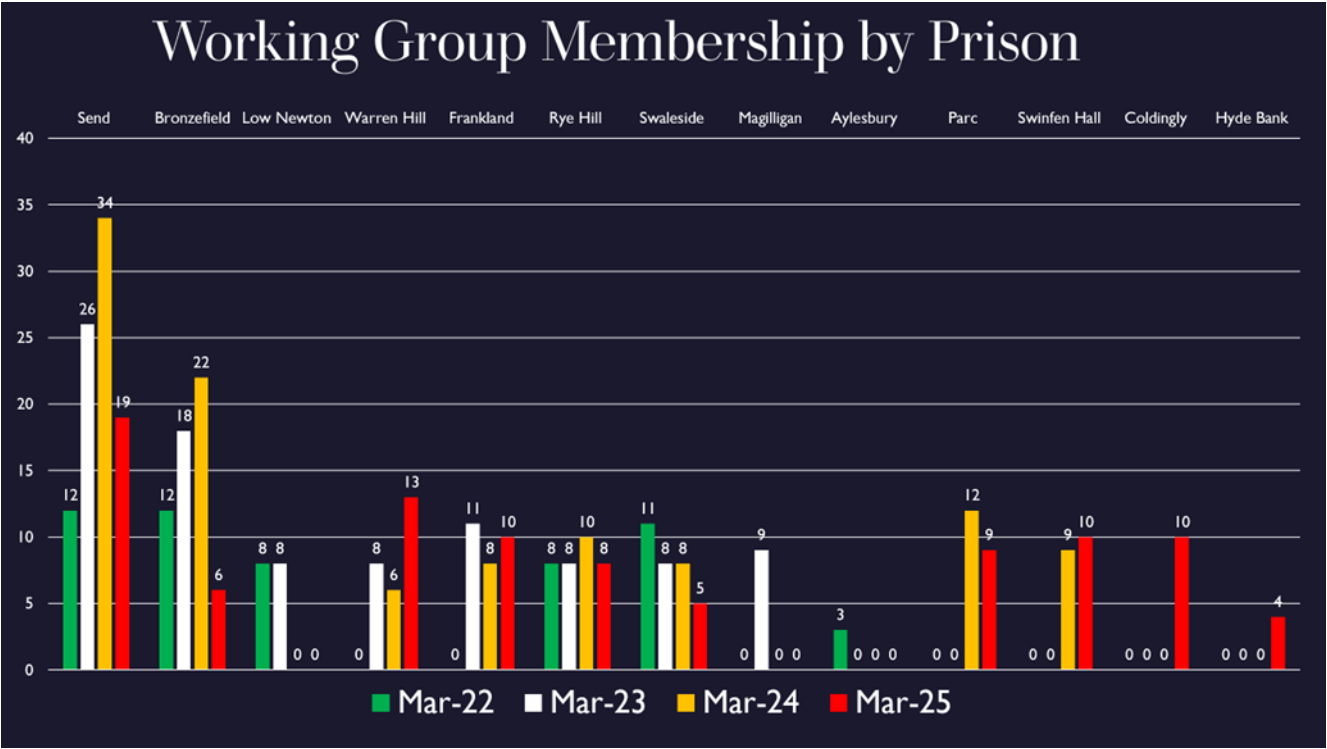


Figure 7. Working Group membership by prison, 2022 - 2025

In contrast, Warren Hill, after a year of inactivity in 2024, saw its numbers more than double in 2025.⁵ This was largely because of a ‘recruitment drive’ by PRT staff, a drive that,

⁵ The drop-off in activity in 2024 stemmed from difficulties related to prison access.

in the words of PRT, ‘has revitalised the work there’. Working group numbers received a boost in 2024 with the establishment of working groups at HMPs Coldingley and Hydebank (**Figure 8**).

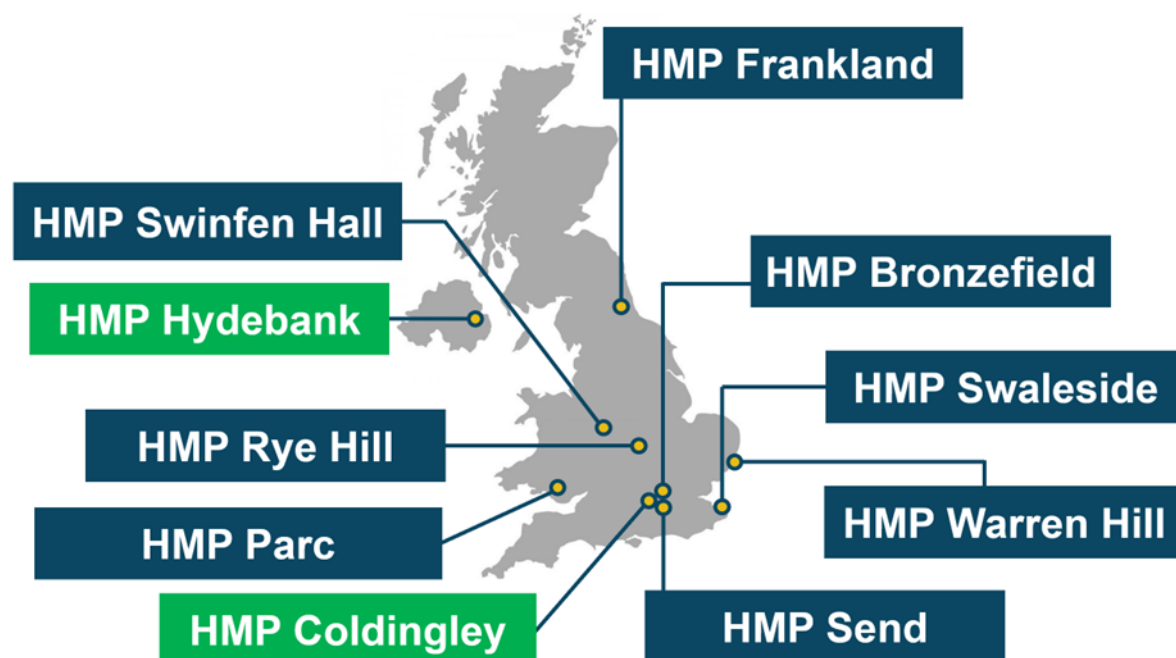


Figure 8. Working group prison locations (active as of March 2025).

HMP Coldingley holds a large number of long-term prisoners, prisoners who, for example, frequently ‘progress’ from other prisons such as HMP Swaleside (HMP Coldingley is a male Category C training prison and is focused on prisoner resettlement⁶).

Crucially, HMP Coldingley was also seen as a positive addition to the Building Futures working group system as it had already instigated ‘lifer forums’ on-site, something that strongly suggested that the prison was actively considering the needs of its long-term prison community. Additionally, many HMP Coldingley-based prisoners were active in the Building Futures Network and proved key in supporting PRT's initial activities.

A desire to have a footprint in another UK nation drove PRT to explore the possibility of establishing a working group in Northern Ireland. With support from HMP Hydebank's Governor Richard Taylor and Deputy Governor Mark Holmes, a four-person working group was established in the prison near Belfast in 2024. The site, which holds 150 women and young men across two premises, in November 2024 was given top ratings in independent inspections.⁷ By March 2025, PRT had co-facilitated five and six working group sessions respectively at HMP Coldingley and HMP Hydebank.

⁶ See: https://hmiprison.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-coldingley-2/

⁷ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx2l32revpvo>

2.3 Efficacy of the working groups: feedback from members

In addition to attending working group sessions during this time, the evaluator conducted a survey of 20 prisoners across five groups – HMPs Bronzefield, Rye Hill, Send, Swaleside and Warren Hill – utilising a 7-point Likert ordinal scale (points ranged from strongly agree through to strongly disagree). Ten survey questions were created to explore three themes:

- To assess **working group members’ understanding** of the Building Futures programme
- To gain insight into members’ views on the **programme’s utility**
- To solicit feedback from members on how the working groups **might continue without the support of the Prison Reform Trust**

While all working group members intimated that they understood the general thrust of the Building Futures programme, unsurprisingly there were those who were less confident that awareness of the programme extended to non-working group members (see Figure 9).

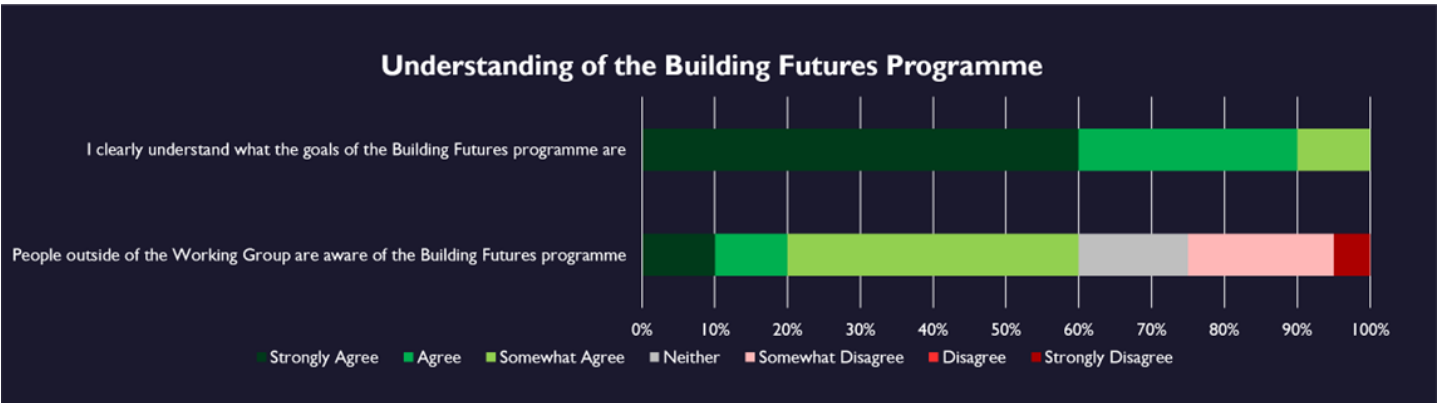


Figure 9. Survey questions related to working group members’ understanding of Building Futures

While 60% of respondents stated that other prisoners were aware to some degree, the remaining 15% and 25% of respondents respectively were unsure or less confident. From the outset, a significant aspect of the work conducted as part of Building Futures was to bring together and imbue working group members with the practical skills required to establish themselves as leaders and advocates within their respective prisons. As stated in the *Building Futures Outcomes and Indicators Update for The National Lottery Community Fund, Outcome 1: Creation of Pathways to Policy Impact for Long Term Prisoners* (updated April 2025), ‘The development of 10 or more self-sustaining and representative communities or groups of long-term prisoner policy leaders’ would be a key indicator against which success of the programme would be measured.

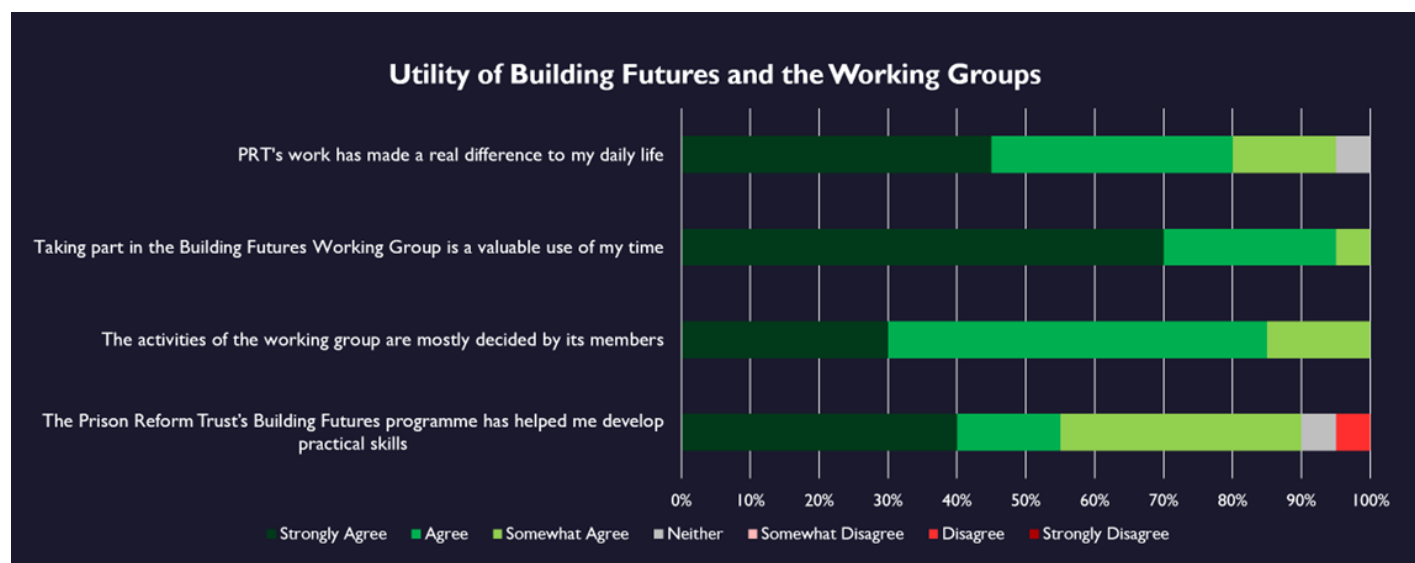


Figure 10. Survey questions related to working group members' assessment of the utility of Building Futures

As **Figure 10** shows, most prisoners appreciated the practical benefits of the programme, but with 45% and 35% of prisoners respectively either 'strongly agreeing' or 'agreeing' that 'PRT's work made a real difference to my daily life', it could be interpreted that the programme was also supporting the prisoners' sense of personal fulfilment and hope. As one working group member at HMP Rye Hill commented,

'These groups need to continue. So much can be done with the skills we have spent years building. Let us keep fighting for better prisons.'

This sentiment was shared by another group member who enjoyed 'being part of this group as it keeps me up to date with what's going on prison-wise. Also, I think it is progressive for me and is a good, positive use of my time. Also, it has made me interested in things I might not have been previously. Plus, as ex-offenders can work for PRT, it could even be a career prospect once I'm free.'

The ultimate success of the programme might be mirrored in the working groups' capacity to continue functioning. With so much time and resources devoted to their creation and their Building Futures-related activities, the ability of the members to retain their unity of purpose remains in the balance; this will also be affected by the support they receive from the prison. Where prisons such as HMP Rye Hill and HMP Send have prison 'buy-in' that is very evident, other groups may struggle to exist beyond 2025.⁸ One working group member surveyed commented that the existent prison environment would stymie the group's capacity to continue after 2025 'due to the chaotic structure of the establishment and there [*sic*] not aware of what PRT is and what work we do.' These doubts are reflected in the mixed responses shown in **Figure 11**, questions 1, 2 and 4.

⁸ Insight from prison leaders at HMP Rye Hill and HMP Send are discussed in parts 7 and 4 respectively.

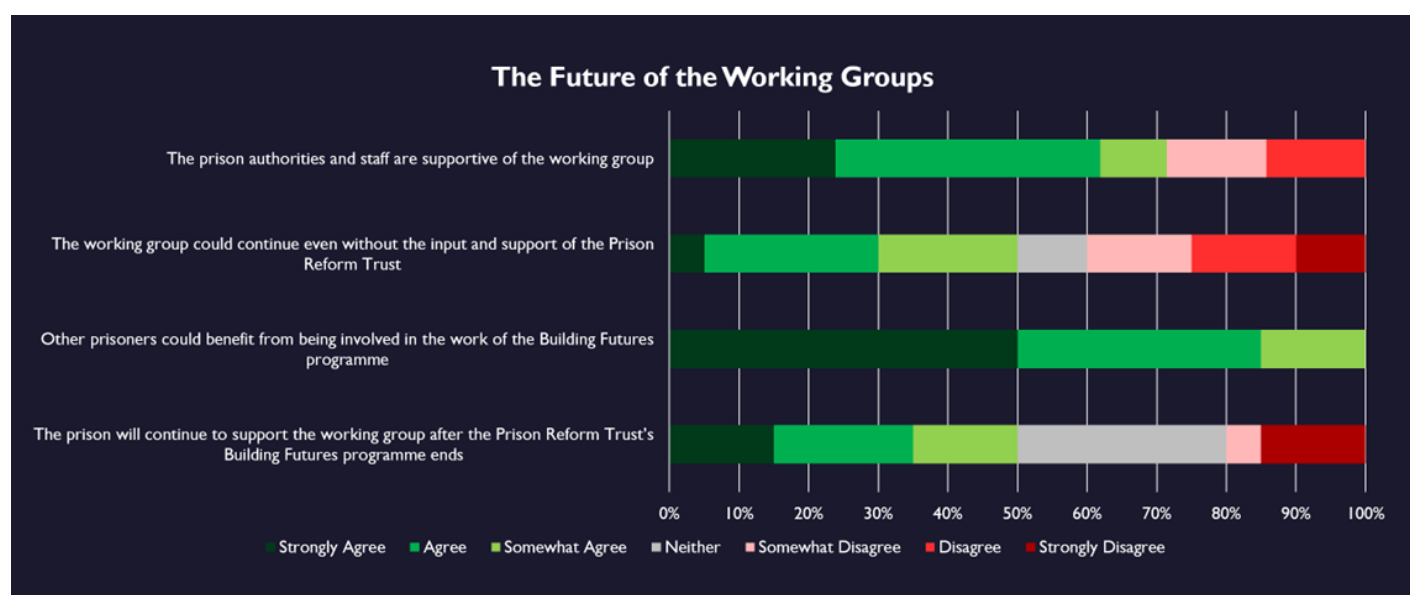


Figure 11. Survey questions related to members' thoughts on the future of the working groups

As one working group member commented in survey feedback, 'Promotion and exposure of what BFWG [Building Futures working group(s)] do and have achieved has not been proactive enough and is a missed opportunity.' Similar comments were iterated by other working group members from the three prisons surveyed:

'Let us keep fighting for better prisons. You risk the loss of a group, a lack of long-term survivability and autonomy, the more the prison takes control.'

One reason to be optimistic about the long-term outlook for many of the working groups is that they have become embedded in a pre-existing communication and liaison framework that sits within the prison hierarchy, one that includes senior staff – a governor/director and his/her deputy – a prison council and related bodies and the prison community writ-large. Although this dynamic has evolved independently in many of the prisons within which the Prison Reform Trust operates, it has not occurred by chance. Building Futures was conceived out of previous work conducted within PRT and, whether intentionally or not, has built on previous research. In the 2004 PRT publication *Having Their Say: The Work of Prisoner Councils*, for example, the authors commented that,

'From first-hand experience, prisoner councils work, not only for all the prisoners they represent, but also for the prison and everyone who works in it. The prisoner council benefits all because it is an interactive forum of communication. It is a voice for the prisoner and a clear demonstration of what is hopefully the positive attitude of senior staff, who are prepared to listen to prisoner concerns.'⁹

⁹ See: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Having_their_say.pdf, Foreword.

The working groups, then, might be seen both as a continuation and enhancement of the councils. Where prison councils' function is to promote positive communication between the management and prisoners and seek to improve both conditions within prison and the behaviour of prisoners, the working groups' remits are more broad and not necessarily reflective of the prison community. That is not to say that the working groups do not communicate with prisoners on the wings – they do – but that they are neither driven by that relationship nor empowered to work on its behalf.

The working groups were further born out of research conducted by PRT in 2011 in partnership with the Ministry of Justice. In *Debating for a Change: Improving Prison Life Through Prisoner/Staff Working Groups*, participatory governance was explored through forums that were held in 17 prisons in the south-east of England, including Category B, C and D establishments made up of eleven male and three female prisons and three Young Offender Institutions.¹⁰ The format of the forum was identical regardless of the type of prison, with prisoners, prison officers and prison leadership combining for up to six hours to discuss all aspects of the prison regime.

The working groups have come to occupy a unique position within this matrix, a position that goes beyond everyday 'local' prison life and for many, including at HMP Rye Hill, have evolved into entities that plan, write, edit and publish reports; design studies aimed at developing policy positions; organise events with PRT that have attracted external delegates; liaise with HMPPS staff at the highest levels; act as focal points for the prison community; and design multimedia products, including in-house videos. Their impact, particularly considering the challenges of Covid-19 and the tragic deaths at HMP Parc, cannot be underestimated.¹¹

¹⁰ See: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/old_files/Documents/DebatingforaChange.PDF

¹¹ See: <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/news/hmp-parc-serious-decline-in-standards-at-previously-high-performing-prison/>

PART 3

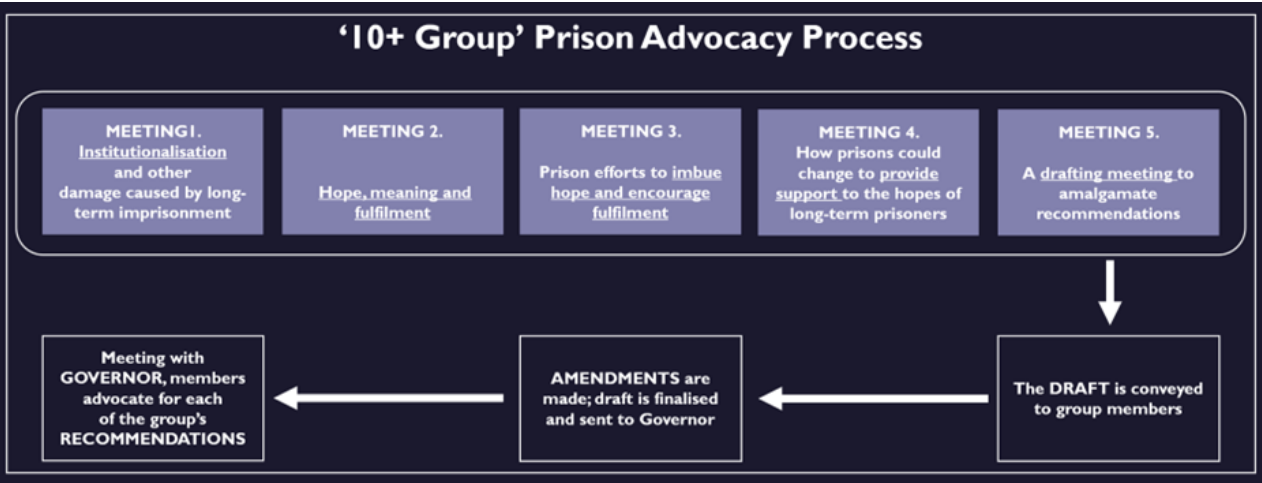
Information provision and training

3.1 Training

As the working groups have developed over the past four years, training and learning exercises have become ever more important to the activities of the groups. Whether it be through PRT-facilitated ‘active citizens research’ or through sessions conducted with external experts and facilitated by PRT, training became a fundamental part of the Building Futures programme. Indeed, the proficiency with which working groups absorbed key elements within training programmes and deployed them effectively to conduct their own consultations, may go some way to acting as an indicator of how likely that group is to become self-sustaining in 2026 and beyond.

3.1.1 The Building Futures ‘10+ study’

Building upon a research study on ‘Institutionalisation and Fulfilment’ that ran during 2021 and 2022, PRT designed the **Building Futures ‘10+ study’**, a strand of work that used an ‘active citizen method’ to explore the impact of institutionalisation on hope, meaning and fulfilment.^{12 13} A highly collaborative process, the 10+ Group study was envisaged to (a) equip prisoners with the necessary skills to conduct independent research; (b) empower prisoners to convene their own study groups to secure prisoner perspectives on the topic of institutionalisation and fulfilment; and (c) compile feedback that would enable core prisoner groups to generate recommendations for their respective prisons; and (d) advocate for this change directly to senior prison staff (**Figure 12**).



¹² The National Research Committee approved the application to conduct the research in six prisons.
¹³ For more on Active Citizen Research, see: Hoskins, B. (2014). Active Citizenship. In: Michalos, A.C. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*. Springer, Dordrecht. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_16

3.1.2 The Building Futures '10+ study': a case study of 'Prison A'

These groups generated 52 recommendations in total, with 5 themes frequently cited, including: taking personal responsibility for one's life and the prison community; building and maintaining relationships; being treated as an individual; giving people greater control of their finances; and self-development.

The membership of the groups and the prisons within which they operated were made anonymous. For the purposes of this evaluation, a study that culminated in a recommendations paper being written and conveyed to a prison governor on 7 August 2023 was named 'Study A'. Similarly, the Building Futures Network Group responsible for the recommendations was referred to as 'Group A' (operating in 'Prison A').

Group A firstly identified six 'institutionalisation-related' themes that dominated the feedback from fellow prisoners. These included: the importance of routine; isolation; deception (the perception that a prisoner is unaware that they are becoming institutionalised); dependency; a sense of being in limbo; and liberation through contextual and situational awareness. The centrality of routine – for better or worse – came across strongly in the prisoner feedback, with negative *and* positive connotations equally apparent:

'You get told when to wake up, when to eat, when to come out of your cell, when to lock up, when to sleep. When you've been told that for 20 years, it gets into you.'

Prisoner 'One', Group A

'Through routine you can develop discipline. When you are aware that institutionalisation happens, you can take the good from the bad.'

Prisoner 'Two', Group A

The second part of the study – focusing on 'hope and fulfilment' – elicited a similarly wide-ranging series of responses. As reported in the study, 'Some people said they maintain hope by accepting that they will remain in prison for the foreseeable future, while others felt a need to focus on future life after release. They were motivated to work on what the prison requires of them to gain release.'

The importance of 'family' was evident both as an element that perpetuated a sense of hope within prison, and as a fundamental in terms of support for the prisoner whilst *serving* their sentence. For example, individuals highlighted the anticipation of 'making new memories with my daughter, mum and loved ones' as a motivation to see out a sentence and return to life on the outside. Another individual cited the sense of support generated by 'incoming calls from family and friends.'

With the aid of Building Futures staff, prisoners also outlined aspects of prison life that had a negative or positive impact on their sense of fulfilment and, crucially, these were refined into a set of recommendations that were conveyed to the Governor. In this instance, PRT staff's training and facilitation, coupled with their access to the prison leadership team, gave a voice and sense of empowerment to those who felt they had none. In terms of the process, prisoners shared their thoughts on the value of taking part in the 10+ Study, all of which were largely positive and, indeed, the process itself was seen as a way of helping kindle hope in prisoners. For example, one prisoner commented that 'literally attending meetings like this [Active Citizens] can give a sense of fulfilment when you feel you are contributing to your community.' Without doubt, the input from PRT, through Building Futures, was evidenced in the working group's own research, surveys and focus groups that culminated in the creation of *What makes a progressive regime? Experiences of progressive regimes and opportunities for improvement?* published in February 2026.¹⁴

3.1.3 Building Futures & training: skills development at HMP Warren Hill

The evaluator travelled with PRT staff to HMP Warren Hill on 7 November 2023 to observe an exercise that focused on developing that working group's facilitation skills. The session took place over a period of two hours and was broken down into two segments. The first part involved a skills-building session that sought to develop the group members' ability to successfully convene research meetings with other prisoners from across all wings. Part one was divided into seven components, each building on the previous in terms of establishing a gradually increasing set of skills to enable the smooth running of a research session (**Figure 13**). The components included:

- First principles (e.g. areas for discussion.)
- Meeting preparation
- Expectations (e.g. adherence to prison policy)
- Confidentiality
- Facilitation techniques
- The practicalities of running a session
- Critiquing a session

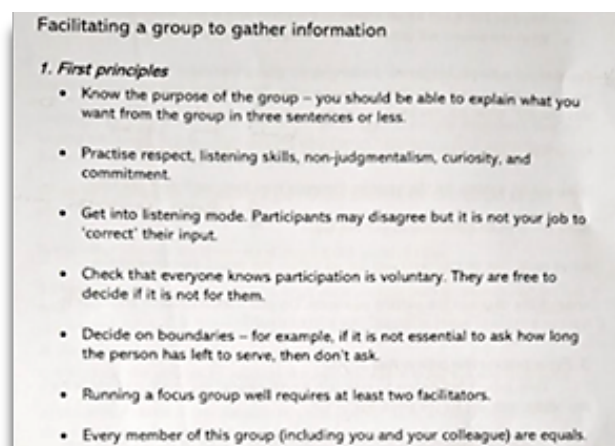


Figure 13. Group training information sheet, excerpt.

Part two involved running a mock exercise. The working group was split into two teams, and each given three tasks: to introduce a session, including developing the topic for discussion; to explain the importance and substance of confidentiality and why it was

¹⁴ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/BF-Warren-Hill-progressive-regimes.pdf>

important when facilitating a group session; and providing a session wrap-up – pulling together all the major points and identifying the key points raised.

The PRT staff member's exceptionally clear approach was reflected in the professional and efficient way the two teams completed their tasks, even when bombarded by 'mock questions' from other group members, PRT staff and the Evaluator. Not only was this sort of training useful for the prisoners, but it could also be considered an important skills-based exercise that could prove useful in sustaining the working groups.

3.1.4 HMP Parc and a 'prisoner manifesto': a missed opportunity?

By every measurement, the training and workshops conducted at HMP Parc during 2023 could be deemed, at best, incomplete. Access to the prison was frequently hampered by lockdowns, by limited numbers of members attending the working groups, and by a change in PRT staff.

When the evaluator visited HMP Parc with Building Futures staff in December 2023, the group had been working for five months on finalising their 'Prisoner Manifesto' – a process that had also been underway at HMP Swinfen Hall – a document that aimed to highlight small ways in which changes might be implemented within prisons, changes that might have significant impact. Sharing aspects of the Active Citizens study, The HMP Parc working group-led Prisoner Manifesto project was due to culminate in internal prison policy recommendations being made available to senior prison staff. The co-created document identified staffing, infrastructure, prison processes and family contact as primary areas for consideration.

During the Manifesto-related meetings with the HMP Parc working group, it was made clear by members that the use of the synthetic drug 'Spice' had grown exponentially and was now creating a very real problem on the wings¹⁵. Spice, a psychoactive synthetic cannabinoid, was allegedly responsible for prisoner deaths at HMP Parc in early 2024.¹⁶

It is startling and concerning when prisoners themselves touch upon something that is occurring in their daily lives – something they witness – and which then, for the wrong reasons, gains national attention. In this case, members of the working group had already provided an insight into the challenges that the prison then faced. This tragedy should draw attention to the fact that prisoners are frequently more aware of the 'live picture' within prisons than the staff who run them are. One working group member predicted that spice-related deaths 'were only a matter of time'. Unfortunately, and tragically, he was correct.

¹⁵For technical information related to the drug 'spice', consult:
https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-reports/mdmb-chmica_en

¹⁶ See: <https://ppo.gov.uk/news/an-urgent-public-plea-from-ombudsman-adrian-usher/>

3.2 The ‘Lifer Manual’

Information provided to long-term prisoners is frequently limited, inconsistent in nature or not fully standardised across the prison estate. Reacting to such a vacuum, NGOs frequently step in to fill the void with their own materials, a measure that paradoxically may lead to further confusion as the online space is flooded by numerous well-meaning documents and publications. As Building Futures Director David Maguire commented,

‘There are different things that are scattered in different kinds of documents, of course, because there’ll be important things around parole and things like that. I think what we are doing here is pulling in expertise, drawing from good information that you won’t have access to when you first get in, and drawing on personal experience of people who have navigated long sentences. What often happens in prison too is staff will give you misinformation, other prisoners will give you misinformation, and what we want to try and do with this lifer information booklet is have a very accessible, easy read for young people, old people, about the early days and the different parts of the life sentence.’¹⁷

Published in March 2023, *the Information Booklet for People Serving a Life Sentence* – referred to by PRT staff colloquially as the ‘Lifer Manual’ – is now available for download from the Prison Reform Trust website (**Figure 14**).¹⁸ The extent to which this publication has been proffered to pertinent prison staff, including directors and governors, is unclear, as is the uptake. However, where it has been made available, it has received positive prisoner feedback on the subject matter. The utility of the manual has been largely positive and has, as intended, provided information for prisoners serving an indeterminate sentence. Although not the first document to have been created with the goal of informing those prisoners serving indeterminate sentences, the Lifer Manual provides much needed practical, *accessible* information. The work has not only been borne out of previous PRT initiatives, including various information booklets, but is linked to other Building Futures studies and publications including, for example, *A Measure of Hope? How purpose, meaning and fulfilment can ease the harms of long-term imprisonment*.¹⁹

¹⁷ Interview conducted with David Maguire, Building Futures Programme Director, Prison Reform Trust. 15 December 2022.

¹⁸ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/46-Lifer-booklet-v1.1-final.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/BF-Hope-Meaning.pdf>



Figure 14. Information Booklet for People Serving a Life Sentence

Whilst various incarnations of the Indeterminate Sentence Manual (PSO 4700) – now largely outdated – sought to provide an overview of sentence progression, most of its sections have now been replaced by various Prison Service Instructions (PSIs).²⁰ Their fragmented organisation makes them inaccessible, whilst the disparate nature of their content makes them difficult to comprehend. As one prisoner stated in *A Long Stretch: The Challenge of Maintaining Relationships for People Serving Long Prison Sentences*,

‘The prison does very little to support close personal relationships...especially for lifers. PSO 4700 [,] which was the lifer manual [,] made it possible for lifers to challenge the prison service if you were told you would be moved miles away from home [-] which would affect your family ties and other close personal relationships [with] others. This was removed.’²¹

Additionally, the PSIs were created primarily for utilisation by prison and probation professionals. Other organisations, including the Prisoners’ Advice Service, provide information sheets and booklets for those serving indeterminate sentences, including information concerning parole.²² However, the Lifer Manual has filled an information void with a single, comprehensive user guide. As one prisoner commented in their feedback to PRT,

²⁰ See: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/prison-service-instructions-psis>

²¹ https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A_Long_Stretch.pdf p. 28

²² For example, see: <https://www.prisonersadvice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Lifers-and-IPPs.pdf>

‘The information guide for lifers is an amazing resource. I am currently preparing for my on-tariff parole and getting ready to be released in licence. The lifer booklet gave me a clear explanation of my rights whilst on licence and how I can go about progressing with my risk reduction. This booklet collates really essential information that I would otherwise not have had access to.’

3.3 HMP Swaleside: ‘Ship Shape’²³

The variety and sophistication of training provided through the Building Futures programme was well exemplified by ‘Ship Shape’, a project deployed by PRT and run by HMP Swaleside prisoners during 2025. With the central aim of creating pastorally supportive material for the HMP Swaleside prison community, the enterprise was also conceived as a vehicle whereby the resident working group would be exposed to twofold training: by PRT in (a) creating the process, and designing the content, for the production of a written resource; and (b) by external graphics specialists in the visual design of materials to best articulate such a written and pictographic resource.

Borne out of a series of workshops that, session by session, incrementally increased the level of direct input from the working group, the final ‘products’ – flyers, booklets and posters – were the culmination of multiple focus group sessions (**Figure 15**). In addition to the production of materials, the HMP Swaleside working group produced a policy paper with recommendations for how the four Ship Shape themes might be supported across the prison estate writ large. As stated in the paper’s conclusion,

‘We urge policymakers, prison authorities, and stakeholders to prioritise these reforms and work collaboratively with those serving long sentences to ensure their voices guide meaningful change. By keeping prisoners in SHIP shape, we uphold the principles of dignity, justice, and rehabilitation.’²⁴

²³ What does S.H.I.P. stand for? ‘Spirit’ (S) refers to: Keeping your inner-self strong; ‘Heart’ (H) – keeping connections alive; ‘Intellect’ (I) – keeping your mind sharp; ‘Physical’ (P) – keeping your body healthy.

²⁴ The policy paper was disseminated across the Long Term and High Security Estate (LTHSE) with the support of the LTHSE Executive Director.

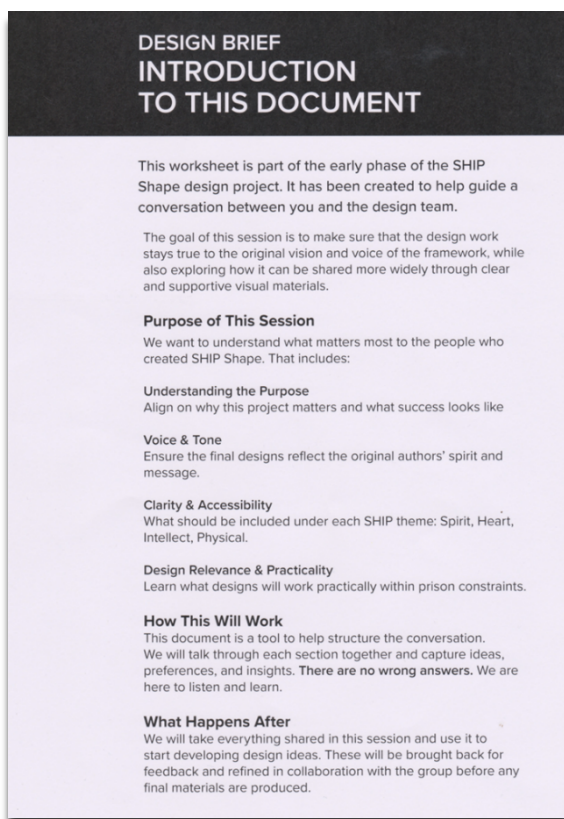


Figure 15. Design brief



Figure 16. 'S.H.I.P.'

The pastoral material was designed, as denoted by the acronym 'SHIP', around four themes: 'spirit', 'heart', 'intellect' and 'physical health'. (Figure 16). As commented upon by the then acting Building Futures programme director Claudia Vince, 'SHIP Shape is built in the belief that those closest to an issue are best placed to improve it.'²⁵ As such, Ship Shape was a further manifestation of one of Building Futures' core themes: 'hope, meaning and fulfilment'. As described in Inside Time, 2 January 2026, 'At a launch event in the prison's visits hall in November [2025], four prisoners who worked on the guide explained how they use the guide in their own lives.'²⁶ Separately, **a member of** the HMP Swaleside working group wrote to PRT in March 2026 to praise the work of Building Futures:

'However [,] the biggest change was joining BFWG in Swaleside in 2021. Since then [,] I fell [sic] that I am involved in something that makes changes to prisoners life. It gaves [sic] us voice[s], avalibility [sic] to engage with something I really believe. Rehabilitation does NOT exist in English prisons (in my humble opinion), and [the] only chance to change this is engagement with PRT's Building Futures group. Here we have a chance to influence some positive changes, give feedback on any

²⁵ See: <https://insidetime.org/newsround/getting-ship-shape-for-years-behind-bars/>

²⁶ Ibid.

possible actions, projects, reports, engagements, consultations, surveys, etc [.]’

When one considers the fact that HM Chief Inspector of Prisons’ issued on 15 December 2025 an ‘Urgent Notification’ to the Secretary of State for Justice regarding conditions at HMP Swaleside, the production of Ship Shape could not have been more relevant, nor timelier.²⁷ As Mark Day, deputy director at the Prison Reform Trust commented two days after the notification, ‘It is shocking that a prison tasked with the care and rehabilitation of men serving some of the longest sentences on the estate has been allowed to descend to such an appalling level. We know from our own work at the prison that the climate of despair and hopelessness amongst prisoners is palpable.’²⁸

3.4 Parole Board video

Continuing the theme of training and information, throughout 2025 the HMP Rye Hill working group liaised closely with PRT, video makers and a director to plan, script, storyboard, shoot and edit a short video – titled ‘Parole: A Journey’ – that deployed, amongst others, Rob McKeon (a member of the Parole Board for England & Wales since 2012). Rob McKeon, along with actors recruited for the initiative, featured in a mock Parole Board interview that was created to shed light on the parole process, an area of concern for many long-serving prisoners approaching the threshold for release. First screened by the HMP Rye Hill working group as part of the ‘Building Futures, Thinking Long-Term: Insights on Collaborating with Those Impacted by Long-Term Imprisonment to Shape Policies That Affect Them’ event in November 2025 and hosted by the University of Manchester, the event acted as a showcase for Building Futures – a culmination of the programme’s work and outputs. As stated by the Prison Reform Trust,

‘The film powerfully portrays the experiences and emotions of those navigating progression and the parole process, offering a deeply human insight into a system that can so often feel impersonal.’²⁹

In May 2026, the film went ‘live’ on *Launchpad*, the first Prisoner-facing Service (PFS) in the UK.³⁰ PRT also plans to make the film available in DVD format and distribute copies to all adult male prisons across Categories A–D during summer 2026. To support this rollout, information was shared with senior prison leaders; as a consequence of this, the

²⁷ <https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2025/12/UN-letter-Swaleside-FINAL.pdf>

²⁸ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/prt-comment-hmp-swaleside-receives-urgent-notification/>

²⁹ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/building-futures-showcase-voices-of-leadership-and-hope-from-inside/>

³⁰ Launchpad is a HMPPS in-cell tech programme that gives prisoners secure laptops with digital services in their cells to support their rehabilitation. As of September 2024, the service was operational in 17 prisons, and to over 13,000 people. See: <https://mojdigital.blog.gov.uk/2024/09/06/launchpad-home-is-live/>

Building Futures team received requests for copies from several Heads of Offender Management Units (OMUs) for use within their respective establishments.³¹

In the aftermath of its completion, The HMP Rye Hill working group wrote a review of 'Parole: The Fate of Prisoners in My Hands and the High stakes Risks of Getting it Wrong', written by the central figure in the video, Parole Board member Rob McKeon. Featured in *insidetime* in December 2025, the working group assessed the author's attempts to break the parole process down, whilst also focusing on ways in which the process could be improved.³² Given the fact that 'each month over 60,000 copies of each issue are distributed free of charge to all prisons and special hospitals, plus many secure units and hostels throughout the UK,' the reach of this article, and its inherent publicity for the HMP Rye Hill working group, cannot be underestimated.³³

³¹ As of May 2026, copies were being distributed to the Heads of each Offender Management Unit and the libraries within each associated institution.

³² <https://insidetime.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Inside-Time-December-25-LOCKED.pdf> p. 29

³³ <https://insidetime.org/about/>

PART 4

Access and Empowerment

An evident strength of Building Futures was to bring prisoners together with external participants – people whom they would not normally have access to. This included, inter alia, academics and students working on issues pertaining to, for example, prison reform, transformative prison rehabilitation and the criminal justice system. In addition, PRT also facilitated meetings between prisoners and former prisoners, HMPPS staff at all levels, senior prison staff and members of professionals from think tanks and advocacy organisations such as the criminal justice watchdog Fair Trials.³⁴ Outside of the prison estate, working groups and their endeavours were still highlighted, frequently showcased and always referenced.

Working groups by their nature were the focal point for PRT's efforts to engage with external partners and involve them with prison activity. Prison governors and directors were the 'key holders' and, resultantly, some prisons were more involved than others; without buy-in from prison leaders, PRT staff would have been unable to facilitate in-prison meetings, workshops and events. Thus, prisons with supportive leaders, such as at HMP Rye Hill, benefitted from a disproportionately large number of Building Futures-related activities that involved external participants. A comprehensive list of events and workshops that took place in either a working group or featuring the outputs of working groups during the lifetime of Building Futures, may be found in **Figure 19**.

4.1 Access to external stakeholders

4.1.1 Facilitating participatory action research

Building Futures, by its nature, promoted 'participatory action research'. Indeed, the Prison Reform Trust's Building Futures team in 2025 supported the Ministry of Justice's own work on participatory action research as an approach to achieve culture change.³⁵ In January 2024, Professor Shadd Maruna, Queen's University Belfast (QUB), conducted a lecture and chaired a questions and answer seminar with the HMP Rye Hill working group. Although his material ranged widely from desistance from crime through to Covid-19, his expert material was presented in a way that was relevant to the attendees,

³⁴ <https://www.fairtrials.org/about-us/where-we-work/>

³⁵ See:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67e3e32b8ca840c1439a72e8/Developing_prison_culture.pdf

particularly when discussing prisoner-led research, something that neatly dovetailed with the PRT's other active citizens research.

4.1.2 Visits by senior PRT staff

Senior PRT staff visited HMP Frankland on numerous occasions throughout 2023 and 2024. In early October 2023, PRT CEO Pia Sinha visited HMP Frankland to learn about the history, activities, and goals of the group. The following week, the working group shared their thoughts with the Building Futures Evaluator on the CEO's visit in terms of her openness and the utility of the interaction. As reflected in **Figure 17**, prisoners responded with appreciation to Pia's honesty and clarity. Another event in early 2024 can be held up as a pivotal moment in the Building Futures programme.

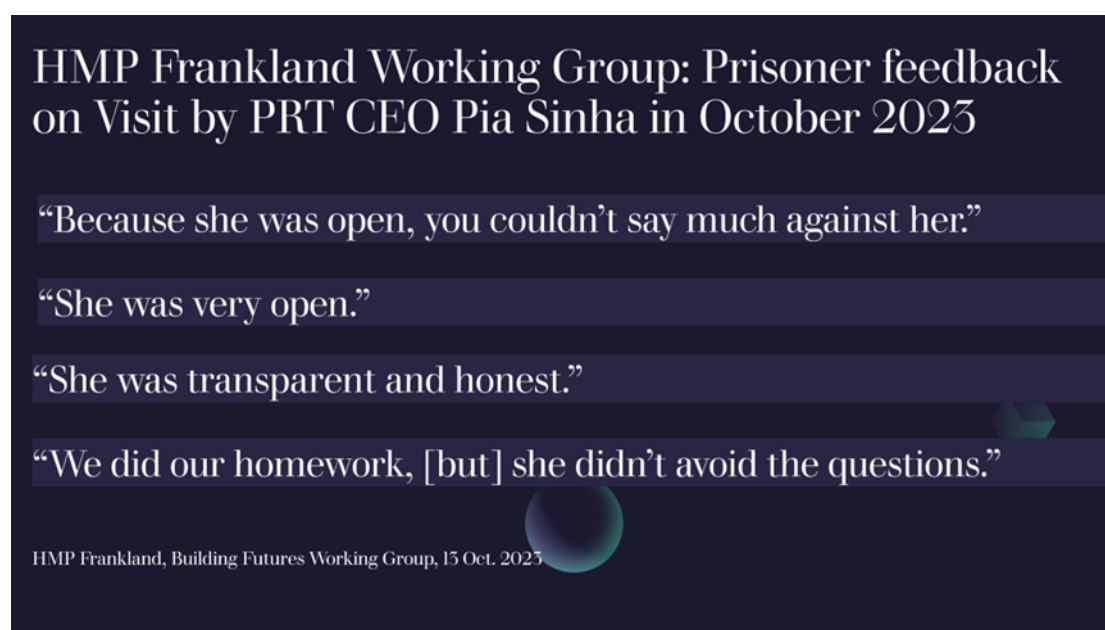


Figure 17. Prisoner feedback on visit by PRT CEO Pia Sinha, 15 October 2023

4.1.3 HMP Frankland meeting with the Director General, HMPPS

On 24 February 2024, the working group at HMP Frankland interacted with HM Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) directly and at the highest level. HMP Frankland is a public, high-security men's prison in Brasside, County Durham (**see Figure 18**). With over 800 prisoners accommodated over eight wings, most prisoners are serving a minimum of 10 years. The prison population includes over 250 prisoners with Category A security status.^{36 37}

As Peter Clarke, then HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, said in 2020: 'The majority had committed the most serious, and often violent, offences and posed very great risks to

³⁶ For more information in relation to prisoner categories, see: <https://www.prisonersadvice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CAT-A-Self-Help-Toolkit.pdf>

³⁷ See: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/media/press-releases/2020/05/hmp-frankland-high-risk-secure-prison-maintaining-strong-standards/#:~:text=Frankland%20has%2050%20men%20classified,serving%20indeterminate%20or%20life%20sentences.>

the public. The security measures applied at Frankland, as well as the depth of custody experienced, reflected fully these risks.³⁸ Access to HMP Frankland thus presented its own challenges to PRT, but challenges that were overcome.

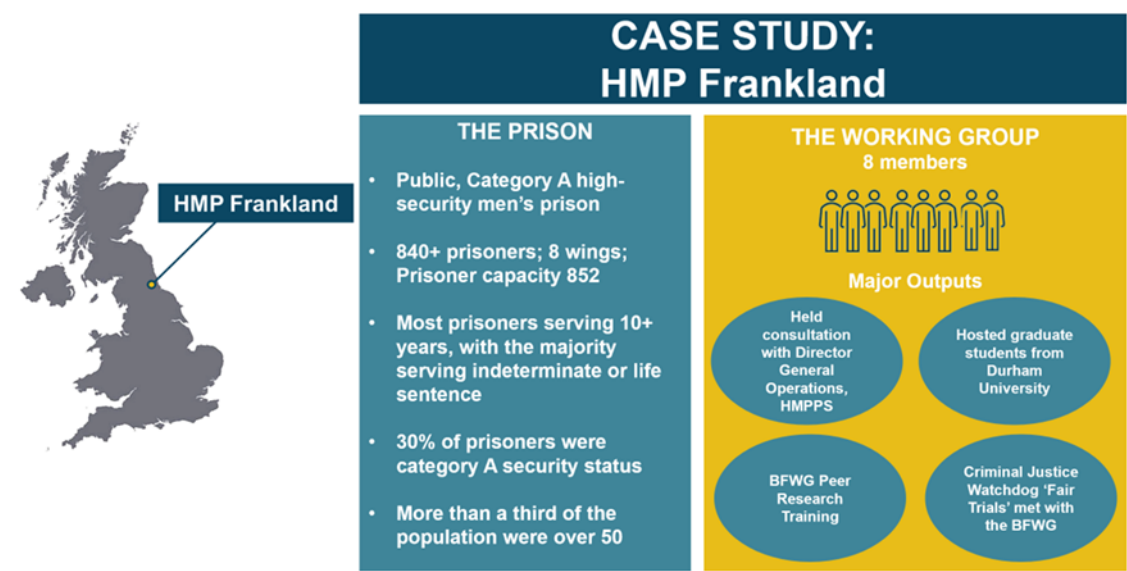


Figure 18. HMP Frankland: key facts

The HMP Frankland Working Group, a group of eight men serving sentences of 10 years or more, with guiding support from PRT staff, drew up 15 detailed questions to put to Phil Copple, Director General, HMPPS, who took part in the consultation. A full list of the questions posed by the Working Group, and the written responses provided by Phil Copple and his HMPPS team, can be provided upon request.

The frank exchange took place over 2 hours, the first part of which involved a presentation by the Director General on the direction of the prison system and its implications for prisoners across the UK, including at HMP Frankland. The second part involved working group members putting the pre-written questions to the Director General (who had not seen the questions in advance). Although many of these were answered verbally, those that required more detailed responses were answered fully in writing and conveyed back to the Working Group in the weeks that followed. An example of a question and answer include the following:

Question from the HMP Frankland working group:

‘Contact with families is vitally important for long-term prisoners. Accumulated visits have been suspended due to population pressures. Nevertheless, it is still important that prisoners get to see their families

³⁸ See: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/media/press-releases/2020/05/hmp-frankland-high-risk-secure-prison-maintaining-strong-standards/#:~:text=Frankland%20has%20250%20men%20classified,serving%20indeterminate%20or%20life%20sentences.>

face-to-face. Are there any plans to become more strategic with accumulated visits again?’

Written answer provided by Phil Copple:

‘There has not been a central direction to suspend accumulated visits, but the current population pressures make it difficult to facilitate [;] but they can go ahead as normal if prisons can arrange. We absolutely recognise that being able to maintain family contact is very important [,] especially for our long-term prisoners [,] and strengthening family ties is an integral aspect of our work. The need to provide accumulated visits is rightly provided for in the visits policy and we hope the scope to arrange them in the future will increase again, subject to Government decisions to ease the population pressures.’

The Group also questioned Phil Copple on a topic of immediate concern to themselves and other prisoners at HMP Frankland: ‘What efforts have you made to stop prisons from continually breaking Subject Access Request policy by charging prisoners for the first copy of business-as-usual documents that are supposed to be free, such as pay sheets for Legal Aid applications, property cards and phone numbers?’ The Director General agreed to carry out enquiries with a view to ensuring compliance with requirements. This was a tangible outcome, one that was of direct importance to the working group.

The prisoners also posed a question regarding increases in inflation and soaring canteen prices: ‘There are arguments that if prisoners earned a more substantial wage, then they could live more effectively and support their families. This could help reduce debt, bullying, which are factors of self-harm and violence. Are there any plans to develop increases in prisoners’ wages or provide production related pay?’ The Director General answered the question with reference to national policy:

‘We have review work underway into prisoner pay, but no decisions made yet and no certainty about future budgets. In September 2022, a national approach to the rising cost of living was agreed and a 10% uplift in private cash allowances was introduced to help mitigate against price increases.

In November 2022, several new ‘Jack’s’ [a Tesco-own brand] value brand product lines were made available through the Prison Retail Service which give prisoners the choice to purchase less expensive, non-premium branded items just as people in the community are doing. Purchases of the value brands are becoming increasingly popular. We keep policies under regular review and will explore whether any changes need to be made to prisoner pay policy.’

To have a HMPPS Director General visit a prison and take questions for almost two hours is a credit to PRT; it is also telling that the Director General himself, by providing detailed written answers post-event, viewed the meeting as a genuinely worthwhile exercise, not something perfunctory or performative. However, it is doubtful whether (a) the exchange could have taken place without the support of PRT; and (b) it is unlikely that an event like this could occur again, or on a regular basis, without dedicated facilitation provided through Building Futures.

4.1.4 Meetings between prisoners and prison governors/directors

During this time, Building Futures also encouraged and facilitated meetings between the working groups and prison leadership. For example, in September 2024, the HMP Send working group met with the prison governor Esther Dainton; she was joined by Rich Williams, Head of Residence. Having worked with PRT to formulate pre-meeting questions, these were delivered by a working group member. Items pinpointed included, inter-alia; the possibility of improved dietary options; tackling self-harm; in-prison education options; and inter-prisoner relationships (including cell-sharing).

Before and after the event, the evaluator was able to speak frankly with prison officers and, importantly, the Head of Residence. A simple question was posed to the latter: ‘what is the value of the working group [at HMP Send]?’ He commented that the working group was ‘well worth having’ and ‘gave prisoners a chance to speak about their concerns’. The Head of Residence also emphasised that there had been very clear improvements in the behaviour of the most troubled and challenging female prisoners ‘in the entire estate’. He commented how certain people in the working group ‘used to eyeball people’ in meetings and ‘there was the potential for conflict’ after meetings had ended. That was no longer the case.

He continued by speaking about how ‘two of the worst’ female prisoners ‘used to in my office every Friday; now their behaviour has improved’. The theme of improving behaviour was supported by the attendant prison officer who stated that members of the group now helped to ‘de-escalate situations’ across the prison and that ‘working group leaders’ help ameliorate situations on the wings. He continued by highlighting that the past eight months had seen awareness of the programme grow across the prison, partly through dissemination of the Lifer Guide and by the working group wearing their PRT-provided t-shirts on the wings.

Again, whilst the session was another example of PRT’s success of bringing together prisoners with prison leaders, it also unfortunately raises the issue of ‘false hope’ – the fact that beyond 2025 such meetings may be unlikely to occur. The Head of Residence discussed how the group members’ advocacy skills had grown during the programme, how the members looked forward to the meetings and how they used the sessions practically. However, he also noted,

‘If PRT stops, the group will stop; they [PRT] are not prison staff.’

Manchester: Building Futures showcase: voices of leadership and hope from inside, 14 November 2025 'Release and the Reality', an event discussing licence conditions, held at HMP Rye Hill, 10 March 2025 A Building Futures Advisory Board meeting (including a presentation by Rachel O'Brian), 9 December 2024 The attendance of members of the Parole Board at a roundtable held at HMP Rye Hill, 6 December 2024 A presentation by Penny Parker (CEO, StandOut charity) at HMP Bronzefield, 6 November 2024 A visit by PRT CEO Pia Sinha, to HMP Swaleside A launch event for A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences, Manchester, 1 October 2024 The attendance of Esther Dainton, Governor at HMP Send, at a bespoke working group meeting, 25 September 2024 Lou Smyth, a released life-sentenced prisoner, travelled to HMP Send in March 2024 to share her experiences with female prisoners.	On 5 December 2023, The HMP Send BFWG presented to Rich Williams (Head of Residence) on issues including wages, incentives, life skills, and communication. December 2023, Criminal Justice Watchdog 'Fair Trials' met with HMP Frankland BFWG to discuss inaccurate data gathering and how this may impact an individual progressing through the system. December 2023, Dr Susie Hully, expert on long-term imprisonment and women convicted under Joint Enterprise, met with HMP Bronzefield BFWG to describe her current work. September 2023, Dr Karen Graham, Expert on Race and Racism: delivered a training session to BFWG members on 'What is Racism?'. September 2023, Dr Alice Levans, expert on people convicted of sexual offences, met the HMP Rye Hill BFWG to discuss her book Stains of Imprisonment: Moral Communication and Men Convicted of Sex Offenses. Zahid Bashir, released life-sentenced prisoner: session for HMP Swinfen Hall young adults on his experiences of transition from prison to parole, September 2023 Theo Wiggins, ex-prisoner: motivational session, HMP Swinfen Hall BFWG, August 2023
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Figure 19. Events and workshops that took place in a working group, or featured the outputs of working groups

PART 5

Research and policy

PRT's work in the policy domain during the lifespan of the programme inevitably bifurcated into 'planned' and 'responsive'. When opportunities arose, including through a change in the national prison reform policy landscape, PRT staff committed time and resources to take advantage of the opportunity; this did not necessarily mean veering away from the programme's parameters. Indeed, it frequently enhanced the work of Building Futures. Of course, there was overlap between work directly focused on policy on one hand, and research and dissemination of publications on the other. After all, who is to say that a Minister reading recommendations outlined in a policy paper is not influenced by even the most cursory reading?

5.1 General research

5.1.1 Setting the foundations

As discussed in previous evaluation reports, several high-quality research outputs were created and disseminated as part of the programme. As a foundation document, *Long Term Prisoners: The Facts* was published in 2021.³⁹ This piece of research served as a baseline for Building Futures as well as an influencing piece; this research provided a quantitative snapshot of the long-term prisoner population in the UK.

The launch of the report ignited discourse on key prison reform subjects and brought into the public domain the context of prisoners serving long-term prison sentences. Public discussion included scrutinization of trends in prison sentencing, offence types, increase in numbers of prison sentences, how changes in automatic release policy affect prisoners, racial inequality in the justice system, and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill on multiple social media and news streams.⁴⁰

The '#EndCJSInequality' campaign, supported by organisations such as Clinks, EQUAL, Criminal Justice Alliance and the Alliance for Youth Justice, used the 2021 report to support their calls for the government to withdraw discriminatory clauses from the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill and reduce racial inequality in the justice system.⁴¹ Overall, media attention of the publication totalled over 181 interchanges (tweets, comments, likes, re-posts) across Twitter.

³⁹ https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Long-term-prisoners_the-facts_2021.pdf

⁴⁰ For example, see: <https://www.russellwebster.com/the-facts-about-long-term-prisoners/>

⁴¹ See: https://twitter.com/clinks_tweets/status/1444992046553608203?s=12.

5.1.2 **The challenge of promoting and facilitating long-term prisoner’s ‘Progression’**

Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences was the first large-scale consultation report of the Prison Reform Trust’s BFP. It followed collaboration with people from around 30 prisons who had served, or were currently serving, a continuous period of at least ten years in custody (**Figure 20**).



Figure 20. Report: *Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences*.

The consultation was launched on 29 June 2021, at a time when the Building Futures Network comprised 200 long-term prisoners. The results of the consultation were published in October 2022. Preliminary questions were sent via ‘emailaprisoner.com’ to 131 BFN members and included, for example, those outlined in **Figure 21**.

Indicative consultation questions sent to 131 Building Futures Network members	How long are you currently serving and what age were you when you received this sentence?
	When you’ve progressed in your sentence, what and who made that possible?
	What do officials making decisions about your progress take into consideration, and what don’t they know about that they should?
	When you develop as a person, do you also progress through your sentence plan and the prison system? Should you?

Figure 21. Example of questions sent to prisoners as part of Progression consultation, 2021.

These elicited 61 separate responses via emailprisoner.com and by letter.⁴² Analysis of the responses drew out themes to follow up on with respondents. Additionally, the PRT team identified issues they wanted to explore with specific individuals. PRT sent out general follow-up questions to those who had responded to the original questions: 41 people were sent follow-up questions; 40 prisoners responded.

The consultation identified themes including the notion of how prisons assess ‘risk’ and how many prisoners felt disillusioned with the expectation that they had to personally manage ‘risk’, a term that was used as an overwhelmingly general concept that failed to countenance the fact that risk was prevalent in various ways and varied from person to person. For example, one prisoner noted that,

‘The trust being [sic] that risk predictions are a mere myth and comes down to nothing other than obedience – ‘tell us what we want to hear, and we will release you.’ [...]. Compliance isn’t indicative of any sort of risk’.⁴³

Assessing the report, Russell Webster discussed some of these key themes, particularly related to prisoners’ frequent disillusionment with the proposition that they are the sole agents for risk reduction within the prison environment:

‘Prisoners tended to understand “progression” to mean something more broad than ‘risk reduction’ and a gradual reclassification into lower-security conditions as they neared the date of their release. The report questions whether ‘risk reduction’ alone can provide a coherent basis for thinking about ‘progression’, given that many sentences are now decades long, meaning that offence-related rehabilitative work may be completed many years before risk can be adequately tested in the community.’⁴⁴

The prisoner responses presented in the *Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences* report described how long-term prisoners felt uncertain about how they were meant to progress and make use of their time. A majority commented that there were few pathways for them to show that they had reduced their risk, except by going through the motions in prison. Equally difficult was the challenge of proving that they – the long-term prisoners – were no longer at risk. As PRT explained to the Evaluator,

‘We did much more investigation of risk management processes. So, a massive chunk of that report is ‘what is risk?’ ‘How can people

⁴² <https://www.emailprisoner.com/> is a service that facilitates correspondence between prisoners and external contacts.

⁴³ Prisoner on life sentence, HMP The Mount. See: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Making_progress.pdf p.30

⁴⁴ See: <https://www.russellwebster.com/long-term-prisoners-not-prepared-for-release/>

progress?’ So, I think we did a lot of digging into what policies there are and trying to produce something that was useful to prisoners in terms of managing risk. Also, it involved numerous discussions in working groups about the report and the findings and progression more generally. It’s surpassed what we envisaged and initiated new areas of work for us - like it’s very closely linked to the Lifer Information Booklet that we are working on, and it’s become a way for us to engage with very senior people in HMPPS because the dissemination of it meant it went to senior civil servants; and it’s initiated wider conversations about the subject matter’.⁴⁵

Indeed, the Parole Board itself continues to update its own guidance and acknowledges the difficulty of defining and measuring risk, particularly when dealing with long-term prisoners:

‘When we consider “risk”, not all problematic custodial behaviour is risk-related, and some is caused or exacerbated by the prison environment itself, which can be challenging for some prisoners, particularly those with underlying mental health issues.’⁴⁶

5.1.3 Progression: prisoners taking the lead: HMP Rye Hill

On 13 February 2023, the growing maturity of the working groups was exemplified by a new report titled *Progression Within a Prison: What Does it Mean and What Does it Look Like?*⁴⁷ Written by members of the HMP Rye Hill Building Futures working group (supported by PRT), this carefully crafted briefing provided a unique insight into the dynamics of long-term imprisonment (**Figure 22**). As stated by the authors:

“Our role is primarily data collection for the Prison Reform Trust, but we have been given the latitude to carry out our own consultancy and generate our own reports. This initial report and the ones that follow have been created solely by the Building Futures Network group members with the support of the Prison Reform Trust and the senior management team at HMP Rye Hill.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Interview conducted with Claudia Vince, Building Futures Programme Coordinator, Prison Reform Trust. 16 November 2022

⁴⁶ See: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66d1b5c08df4724cad1aead3/Risk_Assessment_Guidance_v2.0_-_External_version.pdf p. 21

⁴⁷ See: <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/new-report-led-by-prisoners-at-hmp-rye-hill-published/>

⁴⁸ See: <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/BFNG-Progression-within-a-prison.pdf>



Figure 22. HMP Rye Hill working group publication, February 2023.

In many ways, the report follows on and supports the conclusions outlined in *Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences*. For example, the working group found that three core themes had emerged during the consultation:

- Progression is about personal growth, not just risk reduction.
- For long-term prisoners, progression should not be structured or defined by their release date.
- The present system of progression is discriminatory towards prisoners with disabilities and learning difficulties.

As intimated in the report, interaction between the working group and the prison population was fundamental to the success of the work:

‘Throughout this consultation, prisoners engaged effectively and offered constructive ideas about how the prison system can better support progression. The opportunity for prisoners to engage in this project was positively received. Our participants were mindful that our work has a national agenda and chose not to use the consultation to air and pursue personal grievances. In fact, there were numerous efforts to draw on the positives of their prison experiences, made possible through instances of good practice.’⁴⁹

Even for a ‘flagship’ working group such as that at HMP Rye Hill, the production of such a highly professional and insightful report is indicative of a group of men who are not only motivated and organised, but who have a robust capacity to work as a team. This was something noted by the HMP Rye Hill prison Director:

⁴⁹ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/BFNG-Progression-within-a-prison.pdf> p. 17

‘In terms of knowledge [sic], I would say that every avenue is explored for people to join and the fact you got such a wide range in terms of membership tells you that it's quite a serious group. Then, in terms of responses to surveys and feedback, you find regularly in most prisons that if you get any feedback, that is good. But this group get high returns, get high quality feedback that they then turn [it] into reports.’⁵⁰

Many of the points highlighted in the prisoners’ report mirror, for example, the Association of Prison Lawyers’ summary of why prisoners frequently fail to effectively progress through their prison sentence:

‘Lack of resources, very little progression within custody, becoming institutionalised, and a lack of assistance after many years served within prison. Access to risk reduction, work and mental health support is a continuing challenge. There is only very limited availability of psychology interventions and assessments. These individuals are institutionalised and usually have complex mental health needs [...]. Such people have lost hope and their behaviour has declined to the point that probation will not support release.’⁵¹

Indeed, the core themes that emerged during the consultation closely align with frailties related to long-term prisoner progression as identified by the *House of Commons Justice Committee, Third Report of Session 2022–23, on IPP sentences* (where the Prison Trust is cited 24 times):

‘Our Report finds that the Ministry of Justice (MoJ)’s action plan for reducing the size of the IPP prison population lacks a clear strategic priority and ownership, as well as operational detail and performance measures. We outline the various challenges prisoners face to progression, including access to mental health services and the availability of course places, as well as raising concern about the transparency surrounding programme evaluations. We find the parole process, and the probation service’s involvement in it, to be ineffective and posing a significant barrier to progress for IPP offenders’.⁵²

If positive changes pertaining to ‘progression’ are to be enacted across the prison system, one of the HMP Rye Hill working group report’s concluding recommendations will almost certainly have to be countenanced, namely, ‘Prison governors should seek to utilise the individual skill sets of prisoners where possible. This would empower them and make them feel that they are doing something positive for the prison community, whilst utilising

⁵⁰ Interview with Director of HMP Rye Hill, Pete Small, 8 February 2023

⁵¹ See: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/41072/html/>

⁵² House of Commons Justice Committee Third Report of Session 2022–23, IPP sentences. p. 3. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/28825/documents/173974/default/>

their skills to enhance prison life. This could include organising structured peer-support, learning and development schemes.’⁵³

5.1.4 Progression: prisoners taking the lead: HMP Frankland

Working group members at HMP Frankland too demonstrated their growing confidence by worked closely with, but largely independently of, PRT to conduct a peer-led consultation aimed at reviewing the Category A review process. This was demonstrated from the outset by the group’s clear set of aims and methodological framework. In terms of the latter, the group members’ organisational skills were evidenced through a robust five-point approach that included:

- 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 surveys 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.⁵⁴

The final report – *Understanding and improving the Cat A review process: A peer-led review by the HMP Frankland Building Futures Network Group in partnership with the Building Futures programme* – concluded with a set of recommendations and a call for there to be a ‘Thematic Inspection of the Category A review process by HMIP [HM Inspectorate of Prisons].’⁵⁵

Promoted by various prison reform charities, the report was further discussed in ‘Improving the Category A review process’ on www.russellwebster.com, where the report’s key points were reiterated and recommendations outlined:^{56 57}

‘The report makes a substantial number of recommendations [,] but the principal one is that HMPPS should carry out a root and branch review of the process.’⁵⁸

⁵³ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/BFNG-Progression-within-a-prison.pdf> p. 19

⁵⁴ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/BF-CAT-A-REPORT.pdf> p. 6

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 3

⁵⁶ <https://prisonersadvice.org.uk/wordpress/2026/05/18/new-report-finds-category-a-reviews-opaque-and-inconsistent/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.russellwebster.com/improving-the-category-a-review-process/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.russellwebster.com/improving-the-category-a-review-process/>

The publication received further attention through the Prisoner's Advice Service.⁵⁹

5.2 Policy research

Building Futures has sought to improve understanding of the long-term prisoner population to improve day to day practice and the national policy that guides that practice. PRT utilised relationships and perpetuated an ongoing dialogue with policy makers, in particular:

- Long-Term High Security Prisons Estate at Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)
- Senior civil servants within the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office
- HM Inspectorate of Prisons

National policy has also been a priority for the Building Futures programme, as exemplified by *Locked in? Achieving penal change in the context of crisis and scandal*. (Figure 23). All the publications created through Building Futures feature aspects dedicated to national policy, however Harry Annison, Thomas Guiney and Zoë Rubenstein's 2023 report, published in collaboration with PRT, looked specifically at the idea of 'perpetual crisis' in the UK criminal justice system. Crucially, it explored how policy makers could learn from such challenges and implement policies to ameliorate present issues within the system.



Figure 23.

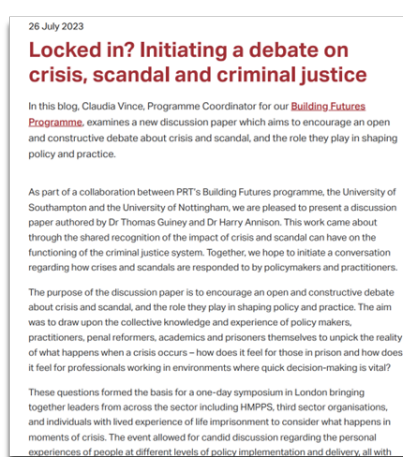


Figure 24.

In July 2023, Claudia Vince, Programme Coordinator for the Building Futures Programme, examined the new discussion paper in a Prison Reform Trust blog (Figure 24). In *Locked in? Initiating a debate on crisis, scandal and criminal justice*, Claudia highlighted how the

⁵⁹ <https://x.com/PrisonersAdvice/status/2056399914007941469/analytics>

report set as its chief aim, the desire to encourage an open and constructive debate about crisis and scandal, and the role they play in shaping policy and practice. Referencing the collaboration with the University of Southampton and the University of Nottingham, Claudia underscored how reactionary policy changes, however small, frequently have a deleterious impact on the everyday processes that direct the work of public institutions such as prisons:

‘Policy decisions made during periods of crisis can directly impact control, safety and legitimacy and shift the balance of government policy in favour of discipline and risk aversion. Taking a more holistic look at what happens in moments of crisis and recognising the importance of collective memory and including prisoners and professionals in these discussions, will help in creating solutions to a more humane, fair, and effective penal system.’⁶⁰

Although the report was aimed at ‘Initiating a debate on crisis, scandal and criminal justice’, and bar being referenced by the charity ‘Intermediaries for Justice’, the report seems to have received limited traction within the public sector.

In September 2024, PRT published *Growing Old And Dying Inside: Improving the Experiences of Older People Serving Long Prison Sentences* (**Figure 25**).⁶¹ Written by Dr Jayne Price, the report attempted to tackle four key issues related to those ageing or dying in prison, namely, how the diverse needs of older male and female prisoners are frequently lost within the prison system and, indeed, how prisons require external support from the social care and health sectors; how older prisoners require a more tailored approach that could involve helping prisoners be productive and by fostering prisoner-led support on the wings; that older, long-term prisoners’ sense of hopelessness is frequently exacerbated by in-prison deprivations and humiliations; and that there is an urgent need for a national strategy for older prisoners.

The publication gained traction within ‘Localgov’ – the UK’s largest dedicated local government news website – which drew particular attention to the recommendation that there should be ‘more appropriate’ placement of older prisoners’ (**Figure 26**).⁶² It was additionally referenced by Lord Carter of Haslemere during a House of Lords debate on 12 September 2024.⁶³

⁶⁰ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/locked-in-initiating-a-debate-on-crisis-scandal-and-criminal-justice/>

⁶¹ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/growing-old-and-dying-inside/>

⁶² <https://www.localgov.co.uk/Call-for-national-strategy-for-older-prisoners/61036>

⁶³ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2024-09-12/debates/C774C022-45A3-4F1B-8A5E-1FFB38BAE285/Debate>



Figure 25.



Figure 26.

The same report was the subject of an article in The Times newspaper on 1 September 2025 and in an article in Scottish Legal News on 2 September 2024 (**Figures 27 and 28** respectively).⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ The Times cited the Prison Reform Trust's work on ageing in prison and how it conducted 'in-depth interviews with 121 men and women aged 50 and serving long sentences in 39 prisons in the UK for the report by its National Lottery-funded Building Futures project.' Furthermore, the Home Affairs Editor pinpointed a key conclusion from the work, namely 'the disconnect these inmates feel undertaking activities aimed at reducing reoffending and preparing for a life after release, while facing the prospect of dying in prison.'⁶⁶



Figure 27.

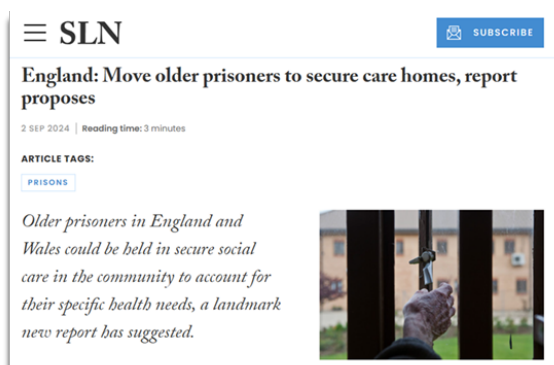


Figure 28.

A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences, was a 2024 report built around a consultation with 133 male and female prisoners aged 18 – 75 years of age, and who were serving their sentences in 38 different

⁶⁴ <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/older-prisoners-care-homes-overcrowding-charity-lord-timpson-qvwwsdhqq>

⁶⁵ <https://www.scottishlegal.com/articles/england-move-older-prisoners-to-secure-care-homes-report-proposes>

⁶⁶ <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/older-prisoners-care-homes-overcrowding-charity-lord-timpson-qvwwsdhqq?msockid=086eae8053b6689e125ebbed52b06919>

prisons (**Figure 29**).⁶⁷ The publication had three central themes: to explore the impact that a range of relationships, or the absence of such relationships, have on the lives of people serving extended sentences; how a variety of factors support or hamper a prisoner's capacity to maintain, rebuild and develop supportive relationships; and to develop ideas that might support policy and practice that would foster a more effective prison system. The work was further discussed in the author's blog of 6 November 2024, where Rachel O'Brien further explored the challenges of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences (**Figure 30**).⁶⁸

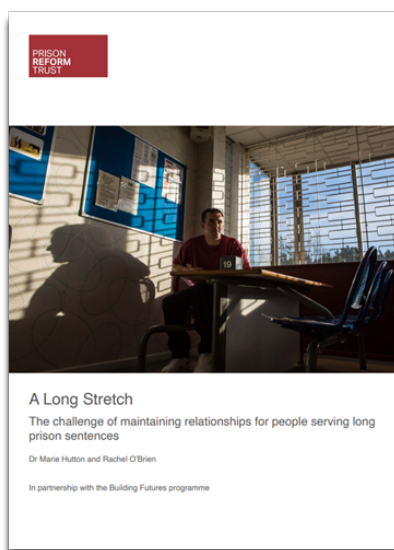


Figure 29.

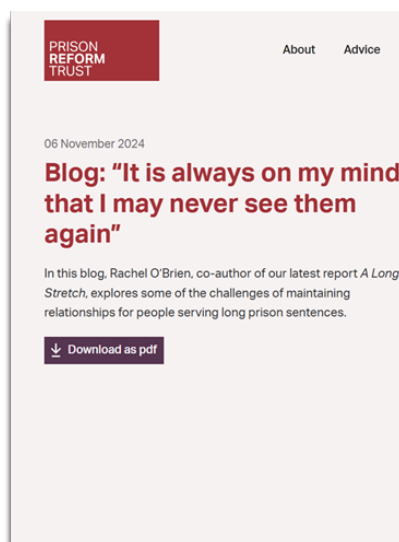


Figure 30.

A Long Stretch: The Challenge of Maintaining Relationships for People Serving Long Prison Sentences featured on Russell Webster's prison commentary site in an article published on 7 November 2024.⁶⁹ Building Futures also gained policy exposure within Scottish Government circles with the report being referred to directly or cited 14 times in a policy review publication created for the Scottish Government in 2025.⁷⁰

'The Prison Reform Trust's report, "A Long Stretch", demonstrates the profound impact of imprisonment on personal relationships within the prison environment. Disruption of external relationships significantly affects inmates' wellbeing, motivation and prospects for parole and reintegration (Prison Reform Trust, 2024).'⁷¹

⁶⁷ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/a-long-stretch/#:~:text=This%20report%2C%20based%20on%20a,of%20people%20serving%20long%20sentences.>

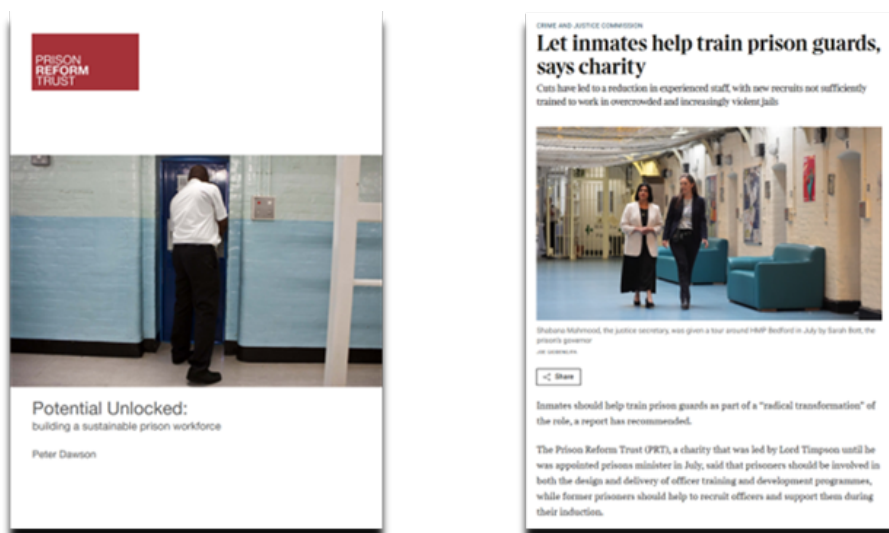
⁶⁸ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/blog-it-is-always-on-my-mind-that-i-may-never-see-them-again/>

⁶⁹ https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A_Long_Stretch.pdf

⁷⁰ See: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/literature-review-understanding-family-support-needs-people-prison-custody/documents/>

⁷¹ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2025/05/literature-review-understanding-family-support-needs-people-prison-custody/documents/literature-review-understanding-family-support-needs->

Potential Unlocked: building a sustainable prison workforce in terms of media exposure, a report written by Peter Dawson in December 2024 for the Prison Reform Trust, featured work carried out as part of Building Futures, including ‘confusion surrounding progression and its consequences’ (**Figure 31**).⁷² The report was the subject of an article in The Times newspaper on 8 December 2024 (**Figure 32**). Additionally, it was commented upon in Inside Time, 20 December 2024, and Morning Star, 9 December 2024.^{73 74}



Figures 31 & 32 (left to right). ‘Potential Unlocked: building a sustainable prison workforce in terms of media exposure; ‘Let inmates help train prison guards, says Charity, The Times, 8 December 2024

Reports continued to be finalised and published in the lead up to, and after, the official end point of Building Futures in December 2025. These are shown in **Figure 33**. For example, specifically in relation to the experience of long-term imprisonment, three reports were released in November 2025: *The Long Stretch 2: The emotional impact of long-term imprisonment on loved ones*;⁷⁵ *‘The Lang Whang’ (The Long Journey): the hidden impact of Scotland’s longest prison sentences*;⁷⁶ and *The long-term prison population in Northern Ireland: a scoping document*.⁷⁷

Providing insight from across three nations, the former two publications featured in ‘The Justice Gap’, 20 November 2025, where the article author, Nashwa Salim, reiterated a motif from all three reports, namely, ‘Practical help for navigating prison bureaucracy is inconsistent, empathy from staff is uncommon, and policies meant to treat families with

people-prison-custody/literature-review-understanding-family-support-needs-people-prison-custody/govscot%3Adocument/literature-review-understanding-family-support-needs-people-prison-custody.pdf p. 37

⁷² https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/prison_workforce_web_FINAL.pdf p. 24

⁷³ <https://insidetime.org/newsround/prison-officers-should-be-registered-like-nurses/>

⁷⁴ <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/prison-reform-campaigners-call-transformation-officer-role>

⁷⁵ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/the-long-stretch-2-the-emotional-impact-of-long-term-imprisonment-on-loved-ones/>

⁷⁶ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/the-lang-whang-the-long-journey-the-hidden-impact-of-scotlands-longest-prison-sentences/>

⁷⁷ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/the-long-term-prison-population-in-northern-ireland-a-scoping-document/>

dignity rarely deliver in everyday experience.’⁷⁸ Additionally, *The Pains of Progression: the pathway through a very long-term sentence in a Scottish prison* by David Cross, developed through a prisoner-led consultation at HMP Glenochil, was discussed in www.russellwebster.com on 6 October 2025.⁷⁹ ⁸⁰ It was also directly cited in the Scottish Sentencing and Penal Policy Commission report *Justice That Works* in February 2026:

‘The Commission notes the recent Prison Reform Trust report on experiences of long-term male prisoners at HM Prison Glenochil who will spend 10 or more years in prison. The report highlights how hope is reduced or destroyed by lengthy waiting and delays and calls for greater transparency about SPS plans to reform progression efforts.’⁸¹

May 2026: <i>Understanding and improving the Category A review process</i> , Building Futures Network Group at HMP Frankland	November 2025: <i>The Long Stretch 2: The emotional impact of long-term imprisonment on loved ones</i> , Ruth Woolsey
April 2026: <i>Being Young Inside: young adult transitions across the long-term prison sentence</i> , Dr Karen Graham and Claudia Vince	November 2025: <i>‘The Lang Whang’ (The Long Journey): the hidden impact of Scotland’s longest prison sentences</i> , Chloe Hampton, Professor Nancy Loucks and Karen Armstrong
February 2026: <i>What makes a progressive regime? Experiences of progressive regimes and opportunities for improvement</i> , Building Futures Working Group at HMP Warren Hill	November 2025: <i>The long-term prison population in Northern Ireland: a scoping document</i> , Dr Marianne Doherty
December 2025: <i>A Measure of Hope? How purpose, meaning and fulfilment can ease the harms of long-term imprisonment</i> , Kimmet Edgar, Claudia Vince and Rachel O’Brien	September 2025: <i>The Pains of Progression</i> , David Cross
	August 2025: <i>Release from long-term imprisonment</i> , Dr Ailie Rennie

Figure 33. Building Futures publications August 2025 – May 2026.

5.3 Targeted policy work

During the lifespan of Building Futures, opportunities arose for the Prison Reform Trust to feed into national policy discussions. PRT produced two policy response papers that spoke to the ‘Independent Sentencing Review 2024 to 2025’ and ‘Change NHS: 10-year health plan consultation’ respectively.⁸² ⁸³ Both responses drew heavily on the work of

⁷⁸ <https://www.thejusticegap.com/research-highlights-living-bereavement-of-increasingly-long-prison-sentences/>
⁷⁹ https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/the_pains_of_progression.pdf
⁸⁰ <https://www.russellwebster.com/the-pathway-through-a-very-long-term-sentence-in-a-scottish-prison/>
⁸¹ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/independent-report/2026/02/justice-works-report-scottish-sentencing-penal-policy-commission/documents/justice-works-report-scottish-sentencing-penal-policy-commission/justice-works-report-scottish-sentencing-penal-policy-commission/govscot%3Adocument/justice-works-report-scottish-sentencing-penal-policy-commission.pdf> p. 78
⁸² <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Prison-Reform-Trust-evidence-to-the-Independent-Sentencing-Review-2024-to-2025.pdf>
⁸³ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/PRT-submission-10-year-health-plan-for-England.pdf>

Building Futures. In the case of the former, the submission focused on seven themes: history and trends of sentencing; the structure guiding sentencing; the use of technology to prevent or replace the use of custody; community sentences as an alternative to short prison sentences; custodial sentences; the progression of custodial sentences; and the individual needs of victims and offenders. Each theme included a set of recommendations aimed at possible ways in which policy could be changed or affected, or what practical steps could be taken to refine and improve sentencing and, ultimately, reoffending.

Working groups also contributed to the Independent Sentencing Review, directly to the review body – as done by the HMP Frankland working group, who consulted prisoners, compiled feedback and submitted the results as evidence – or indirectly through informing PRT’s own submission. This contribution continued a theme of working groups feeding into policy, including, for example, working groups informing, through the Building Futures Programme Director, the work of the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group.⁸⁴

In response to ‘NHS: ‘10-year health plan consultation’, PRT submitted its recommendations for measures to be included in the 10-Year Health Plan. Referencing the Building Futures programme, the submission cited health-related work conducted as part of the ‘Invisible Women’ workstream and referenced the programme’s extensive outputs related to ageing in prison. Building Futures was also drawn upon heavily in PRT’s submission of evidence to the Law Commission’s homicide law review, particularly when referencing Building Futures in-prison groups and publications: ‘For this submission, we have drawn most heavily on three sources... the third source is the substantial body of consultations conducted by PRT’s Building Futures programme, which focuses on men serving custodial sentences of 10 or more years, and women serving eight or more years.’⁸⁵

The work of Building Futures also featured at a meeting of the Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody, 26 November 2024 (**Figure 34**).⁸⁶ Highlighting PRT’s recent work on long sentences in custody, the Chair (Lord Timpson OBE, Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, Ministry of Justice) noted that ‘the Building Futures work was excellent.’⁸⁷ As an ‘action’, PRT was asked to ‘share their Building Futures report, and report on maintaining family contact’ with the Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody members.

⁸⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/reducing-reoffending-third-sector-advisory-group>

⁸⁵ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Law-Commission-homicide-review-PRT-evidence.pdf> p. 3

⁸⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/678f8865f4ff8740d9788690/November_2024_Minutes_FINAL.pdf

⁸⁷ Ibid.



Figure 34. Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody, 26 November 2024

In the Prison Service's Journal issue 270 (January 2024), PRT's Emily Evison and Claudia Vince highlighted the work conducted as part of Invisible Women (discussed further in Part 6).⁸⁸ In *Invisible Women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment*, the authors underlined the ongoing challenges within the prison system related to women serving long-term sentences within a penal apparatus largely designed for men.⁸⁹

The article continued the Invisible Women theme, namely that 'The experiences of women involved in this programme highlight the need for more gender-specific provision for women serving long sentences. The women felt their pains of long-term imprisonment were not fully understood by prison staff, governors, and the wider prison system.'⁹⁰ The piece, published four months ahead of the release of *Invisible Women: Understanding Women's Experiences of Long-Term Imprisonment: Progression*, was a timely and prescient statement piece ahead of, respectively, the Government's announcement of 21 January 2025 of the commencement of the Women's Justice Board and an initiative to reduce the number of vulnerable women being sent to prison.^{91 92} The article was also referenced in a feature published on 9 April 2024 by 5 King's Bench Walk, winners of the UK Bar Awards and Crime Set of the Year, respectively, in 2024.⁹³

⁸⁸ <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/default/files/PSJ%20270%20January%202024.pdf> pp. 30-38

⁸⁹ <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/default/files/PSJ%20270%2C%20Invisible%20women.pdf>

⁹⁰ <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/default/files/PSJ%20270%2C%20Invisible%20women.pdf> p.38

⁹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/womens-justice-board-begins-plans-to-send-fewer-women-to-prison>

⁹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/womens-justice-board>

⁹³ <https://www.5kbw.co.uk/resources/view-article/sentencing-overcrowding-in-womens-prisons>

PART 6

Case studies: prisoners and policy

6.1 Case study one: 'Invisible Women'

A key part of Building Futures was to address the specific challenges associated with the long-term imprisonment of women. PRT's work on these 'Invisible Women', examined how long-term imprisonment specifically impacts the female prison population, particularly given that women in prison 'often have extensive histories of trauma, substance misuse issues and mental health difficulties, and for a large number serving long sentences, the offence was committed within the context of coercive or abusive relationships.'⁹⁴

The necessity of PRT's work related to the frequently ignored long-term female prison population is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that in the 88-page House of Commons Justice Committee Women in Prison First Report of Session 2022–23, reference to women serving *long-term* sentences occurs only twice, and even then only in reference to education provision.⁹⁵ As Building Futures Director David Maguire stated in 2022,

'When we think of long-term prisons, we tend to put them in one lump, and we wanted to try and pull that [female population] out and humanise them. I think that there's a lot of work to do. I think that we've identified really important areas to improve lives within the system. Certainly, around how they are progressing through the system, how a lot of the [prison] sites are spread out and...the specialist [therapeutic] units – there is only one specialist [therapeutic] unit.'⁹⁶

Key challenges in regard to the long-term female prison population were highlighted in three Building Futures Programme publications released between 2021 and 2024:

- ***Invisible Women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment***, November 2021⁹⁷
- ***Invisible Women: Hope, health, and staff-prisoner relationships***,

⁹⁴ https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/invisible_women3_web.pdf p. 2

⁹⁵ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/23269/documents/169738/default/>

⁹⁶ Interview conducted with David Maguire, Building Futures Programme Director, Prison Reform Trust. 15 December 2022.

⁹⁷ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/invisible-women-understanding-womens-experiences-of-long-term-imprisonment/>

February 2023⁹⁸

- **Invisible Women: Progression**, April 2024⁹⁹

The first Invisible Women briefing collated conversations and discussions with women who were members of the Building Futures Network and who were serving a range of prison terms – determinate, extended determinate, life and indeterminate sentences for public protection (IPP)¹⁰⁰ – in seven prisons: HMPs Downview, Drake Hall, Eastwood Park, Foston Hall, Low Newton, New Hall and Send. These women were aged between 25 to 64 years of age and were serving a range of sentence types including IPP, life sentences and long determinate sentences.

The online launch of *Invisible Women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment* (2021) and discussion on BBC *Women's Hour* encouraged discussion across social media into the experiences of women serving such long-term prison sentences (see **Figure 35**). A range of subjects were also discussed on various media channels, predominately on Twitter. As PRT Trustee Julia Killick commented on the BBC Radio 4 programme, 'What this project [Building Futures] is about is speaking to the women to see what they need... in order to turn your life around, to have these bespoke programmes in each prison – trauma informed and [asking] what each individual women needs.'¹⁰¹



Figure 35. BBC WOMEN'S HOUR, via TWITTER, 19 NOVEMBER 2021

Discussion focused on trauma and the need for trauma-informed practice in women's prisons, as well as the difficulties with family contact and the impact on mothers and children. Progression, mental health, self-harm, and trends in imprisonment of women and indeterminate sentencing were also discussed through multiple social media and news streams associated with organisations such as Irish Penal Reform Trust.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/invisible-women-hope-health-and-staff-prisoner-relationships/>

⁹⁹ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/invisible-women-progression/>

¹⁰⁰ For further information, see: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/sentences-of-imprisonment-for-public-protection/>

¹⁰¹ BBC Women's Hour, 19 November 2021. Available at: <https://t.co/33pCLFT9Em>

¹⁰² See: <https://www.iprt.ie/>

The Irish Penal Reform Trust used the Invisible Women report to advocate for women in prison in Ireland and, via Twitter, commented on the lack of open prison spaces for women. Similarly, in Russell Webster's¹⁰³ blog, the same report was hailed as a means to highlight the 'consequences of a lack of specialist, gender-specific, trauma-informed provision for these women'.¹⁰⁴ Across Twitter, the report totalled over 170 interchanges (tweets, comments, likes, re-posts), with media attention on news outlet platforms such as *The Justice Gap*:

'...reform campaigns have focused on efforts to divert those women away from custody. However, their urgency should not lead to the needs of those serving longer sentences for more serious offences being overlooked, PRT says. The lack of visibility of women serving long prison sentences in policy and advocacy debates means their experiences are not fully recognised.'¹⁰⁵

PRT published on 15 February 2023 a second briefing further exploring women's experiences of long-term imprisonment. With relationships having been established with members of Building Futures working groups in three women's prisons – HMPs Low Newton, Bronzefield and Send – PRT sought to identify the issues that mattered most to women serving sentences of eight years or more. The report's focus on the important link between a prisoner's health and sense of hope and support from prison staff mirrors concerns referenced in the Report on an Unannounced Inspection of HMP Send by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 10–21 May 2021. This report stated that 'Prison offender managers had adequate contact with women on their caseload, but staff shortages had led to long gaps in some cases. About a third of the population were serving indeterminate sentences, but they had little targeted support.'¹⁰⁶

A third Invisible Women report, published in 2024, was borne out of interviews and interactions with female prisoners at HMPs Send, Bronzefield and New Hall. Again, focused on the long-term population, the report explored the unique difficulties for facing women progressing through a long sentence and concluded with nine recommendations for reform.¹⁰⁷

The report, widely disseminated, received extensive public traction. Media coverage was evidenced in *The Independent* in April 2024 (**Figure 36**), when the third 'Invisible Women' briefing was discussed in an article titled 'Women Doing

¹⁰³ Russell Webster is a drugs, crime & social media expert. He writes on issues pertaining to probation, rehabilitation and prison reform. See: <https://www.russellwebster.com/russell/publications/>

¹⁰⁴ Russell Webster, 2021. 'Women Serving Long Sentences Are Invisible', *Russell Webster Blog*. Available at: <https://www.russellwebster.com/women-serving-long-sentences-are-invisible/>.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.thejusticegap.com/invisible-women-number-of-women-on-indeterminate-sentences-doubled-in-30-years>

¹⁰⁶ Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Send by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 10–21 May 2021., p 11. Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/08/Send-web-2021.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/invisible_women3_web.pdf p. 11

Long Jail Sentences Failed by System Designed for Men'. The article, which was shared exclusively with the Independent's Women's Correspondent Maya Oppenheim, drew attention to key themes illuminated in the report by Claudia Vince and Emily Evison. Commenting on difficulties faced by women prisoners, including issues to do with mental health, contending with a prison system that has been largely created for men, and an increase in indeterminate sentences, Oppenheim commented,

'Women serving long jail sentences are being treated with programmes designed for violent male offenders and are punished when male prisoners misbehave, a damning new report has suggested. Research by the Prison Reform Trust, shared exclusively with The Independent, discovered that women serving longer terms are being locked up with those serving short stints. They are also struggling to access education and opportunities for employment.'¹⁰⁸

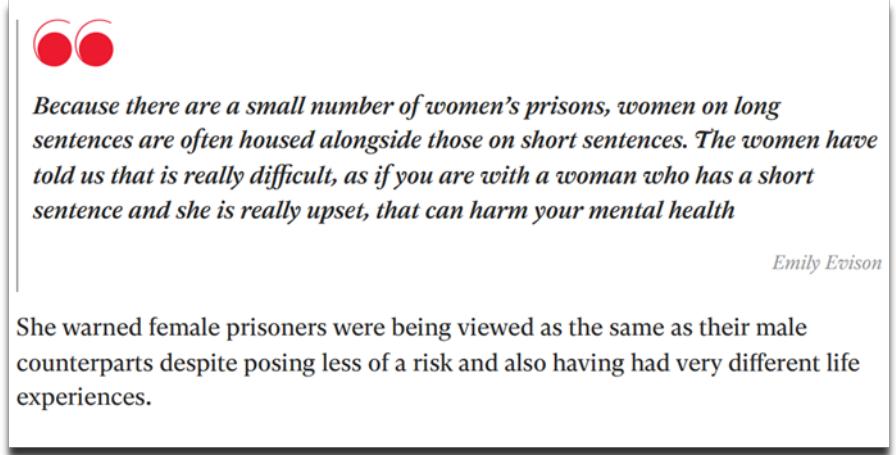


Figure 36. 'Women doing long jail sentences failed by 'system designed for men'. The Independent (online), 19 April 2024.

Did this strand of work fulfill its original aim of giving a voice to female prisoners?

'If the aim is involving women in these conversations, then I think it definitely has. The women often say to us that they don't have means of sharing their opinions or sharing the impact of these sentences, so it can create a space for that to happen. Even in meetings with relevant stakeholders and at PRT, because we have this dialogue with women serving these sentences, I can bring

¹⁰⁸ 'Women doing long jail sentences failed by 'system designed for men'. The Independent (online), 19 April 2024. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/women-prisoners-long-sentences-lifers-b2530819.html>

them out in other meetings, be it with HMPPS...it's like flying the flag for these women...'¹⁰⁹

The third Invisible Women report was cited multiple times across mainstream and social media and in other circles. However, most importantly, the publication was referenced in the Women's Justice Board recommendations for reducing women's imprisonment published by the Ministry of Justice on 16 March 2026. This was specifically in relation to a key focal point from the third Invisible Women report, that of assisting 'sentence progression for individual women'.¹¹⁰

6.2 Case study two: HMP Rye Hill

As examined in Part 2, the working groups evolved to occupy a central position within the Building Futures programme. If one group exemplified this, it was the HMP Rye Hill group (**Figure 37**).

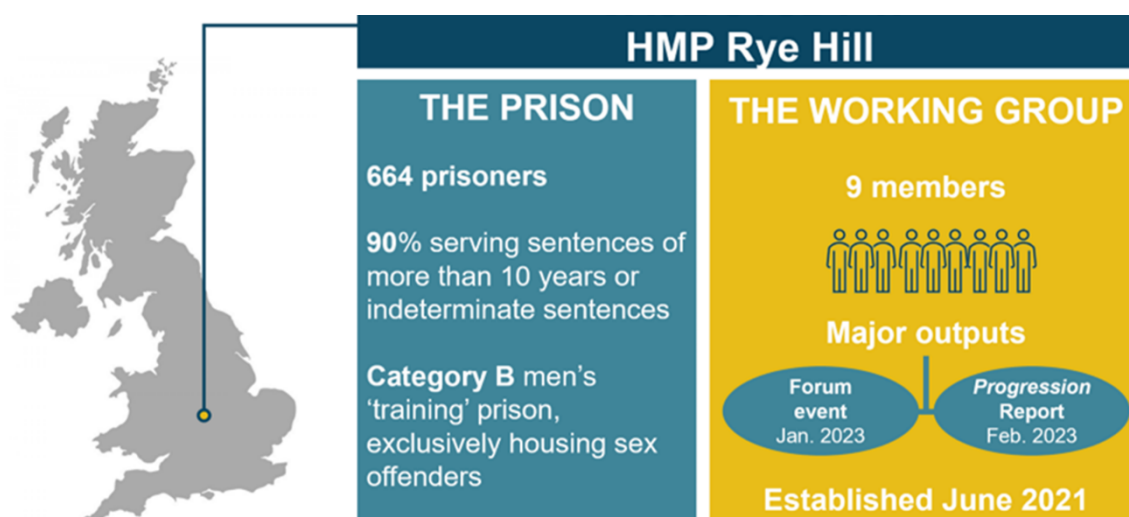


Figure 37. HMP Rye Hill.

Building Futures has tread new ground in terms of the scale of responsibility afforded to the main 'beneficiaries' of the project – the prisoners – and countered the frequently iterated narrative that prisoners cannot be truly productive or proactive within the estate. Indeed, the published Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Rye Hill by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (August and September 2024) demonstrates some of that mindset:

'Prisoner-led initiatives were integral to the success of the jail and peer workers were having a very positive effect in many parts of

¹⁰⁹ Interview conducted with Claudia Vince, Building Futures Programme Coordinator, Prison Reform Trust. 16 November 2022.

¹¹⁰ See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-justice-board-report/womens-justice-board-recommendations-for-reducing-womens-imprisonment#fn:16> Recommendation number 10.

the prison. For example, there was exceptional support for visits, prisoners were heavily involved in the prison's very active reading strategy and there was a lot of help for new arrivals. The prison will need to continue to be careful that the impressive level of trust given to prisoners does not lead to complacency, particularly among the less experienced officers.'¹¹¹

Such complacency was not evident during the Evaluator's visits to the prison in question. The Rye Hill working group became the 'flagship' of Building Futures' 'in-prison' work, as highlighted by PRT's David Maguire: 'Our flagship group, which is Rye Hill...that for me is a group full of men with enough capital to make it work a lot in our absence, and I'm sure it would sustain [itself] if we pulled out.'¹¹² However, the group in its current form was not initially anticipated to be as permanent, autonomous and capable, as highlighted by Maguire:

'Initially it was thought that we would have Building Futures associates at key sites, so we would kind of interview for individuals who would be our liaison – and they would be part of our team – and we went through all kind of manifestations of what that might look like. It actually came about when we went to Rye Hill to interview and talk to the governor about our idea.'¹¹³

PRT spoke with the Director about the possibility of setting up, for example, a single focus group meeting – PRT throughout the programme have sought to strike a balance around what would be ideal, and what would be feasible with finite resources. The HMP Rye Hill Director suggested something more expansive.

After the initial core of the working group was formed, PRT and this unit worked to recruit more members through (a) providing information to the prison population at large about the possible role to be played by the working group; (b) advertising for positions; and (c) interviewing potential members. Subsequently, PRT consulted with the group on its purpose, its composition and, for example, whether prison staff should be members or not.

The HMP Rye Hill prison population is relatively unique as it is a specialist site for men convicted of sexual offences. This cohort come to prison from a wide spectrum of backgrounds and professions. The age ranges too were varied, with 20% of the population in late 2019 being over the age of 60 years.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ <https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2024/11/Rye-Hill-web-2024.pdf> p. 3

¹¹² Interview conducted with David Maguire, Building Futures Programme Director, Prison Reform Trust. 15 December 2022.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/02/Rye-Hill-web-2019.pdf> p. 7

This variety imbues the prison with a complex character, but one that overall has a positive dynamic, as stated in the Report on an Unannounced Inspection of HMP Rye Hill by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2019:

‘The atmosphere in the prison was settled, and most prisoners seemed motivated to engage with the staff and the daily regime.’¹¹⁵

It is important to see the Rye Hill working group within the greater prison context. For example, although the Inspector of Prisons, 2019 report found several frailties within the prison, it did identify peer support as being a particularly strong attribute.¹¹⁶

The working group’s initiative and organisational skills aided the creation of multiple in-house and external publications including *Progression Within a Prison*.¹¹⁷ Launched at HMP Rye Hill on 24 Jan 2023, the event was attended by 40 or more of the general prisoner population, the Director of the prison, multiple PRT staff and other external professionals from academia, think tanks and trusts. Representatives of the Ministry of Justice and prison directors/other prison governors were also in attendance. With the deployment and use of multimedia, the creation of handouts, and copies of the report produced and disseminated, the event was strikingly well-organised. An external speaker specifically addressed the work that had been carried out by the HMP Rye Hill working group, stating that it ‘acted as a corrective compass – a resource I learned to trust’.¹¹⁸ This raises a practical question: can such a resource perpetuate itself indefinitely, and without the support of PRT?

‘I think we could, I think we could now because...there is a confidence amongst the group, particularly having produced their own report, and given the level of strategy in terms of thinking, I think that they would be [capable]...They can always benefit from PRT definitely – no two ways about it – and external thinking. There is a definite value to it, but I think it would survive.’¹¹⁹

The working group at HMP Rye Hill has shown, in a relatively short period of time, and in the aftermath of Covid-19, that it has utility and contributes in a pragmatic

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 5

¹¹⁶ See: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/02/Rye-Hill-web-2019.pdf>

¹¹⁷ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/progression-within-a-prison-a-report-by-hmp-rye-hill-building-futures-working-group/>

¹¹⁸ External speaker, HMP Rye Hill Prisoner Forum, 24 January 2023.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Director of HMP Rye Hill, Pete Small, 8 February 2023.

way to the life of the prison. The Evaluator pressed the Director on what prison staff saw as the practical benefit of the working group:

‘I think...what they are doing is providing a focal point and a platform for a whole range of initiatives that we are trying to get together, and they are providing a hub for all of those things. So, to give you an example about Building Futures: two thirds of prisoners for one reason or another don't get, don't have domestic visits. What we've got is an environment now...where prisoners can book a visit with another prisoner, which we [have] start[ed] doing and it has proved very successful. Now the Building Futures network on the back of that are interested in the next step of that development, about not just prisoners who don't have visit[s], [but] about the socialisation for all prisoners – to think about that concept. Sometimes they are pulling ideas together and driving them onto the next level.’¹²⁰

The working group made clear to the evaluator that, although the group's autonomy was not in doubt, they appreciated the currency that PRT brought in terms of prestige and the capacity to, for example, bring in external speakers and support the publication of reports such as 'Progression'. As one member commented, 'The only reason it began is because of the relationship between Rye Hill and PRT'. Further group outputs included the creation of the 'Parole video' discussed in section 3.4, and *Who cares? A consultation on ageing and lost milestones in prison*. In collaboration with PRT, the HMP Rye Hill working group surveyed 32 long-term prisoners on the impact of 'ageing in prison'. The consultation was based around five questions:

- How old were you when sentenced, and how old are you likely to be at your earliest point of release?
- What are your concerns about ageing in custody?
- Are there any positives about ageing in custody?
- How do you feel ageing in custody will affect: family life; milestones; health; outlook on life?
- Should older people be given an alternative to prison? If not, should they be treated differently in prison?

Having assessed the feedback, the group formulated 11 recommendations for HMPPS. These were subsequently published on the PRT website.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

PART 7

Reflections

The symbolic culmination of the work conducted as part of Building Futures was perhaps best reflected in the showcase event ‘Voices of leadership and hope from inside’ which took place at the University of Manchester on 6 November 2025. ‘A powerful celebration of the achievements, learning, and impact of the Building Futures programme,’ the event involved stakeholders from across government, academia, think-tanks and the prison and parole service.¹²¹

Although not present, ‘representation’ from the working groups was achieved through the sharing of written material and recorded messaging. As commented upon by PRT, ‘The Building Futures showcase was a moment to celebrate the achievements of the programme, reflect on its lasting legacy, and ensure that meaningful, collaborative advocacy opportunities remain central to reform efforts.’¹²²

Legacy is impossible to measure until a requisite amount of time has passed, however the relative success (and failures) of a programme of work may be gauged by existent material and feedback from across a spectrum of stakeholders. Many of those stakeholders were present in Manchester, and it is their voices that may be used as a primer for assessing the success of the National Lottery Community Fund-supported programme that began over six years ago. The following quotations have been taken directly, and verbatim, from the November 2025 event.

7.1 Assessing Success: the working groups

‘I never thought I would co-author a report, film and be the producers of a film whilst serving a sentence. I thank

¹²¹ <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/building-futures-showcase-voices-of-leadership-and-hope-from-inside/>

¹²² Ibid.

all of PRT BF [Building Futures] both past and present for giving me a chance. We have learnt amazing and different skills. Ones I never thought I would.'

Feedback from working group member

The achievement of establishing working groups within prisons across the UK cannot be understated, particularly in the midst, and in the aftermath of, a pandemic. PRT staff had to 'sell' the idea to prison governors and directors, many of whom were already stretched in terms of resources and staff. PRT's Prisoner Policy Network (PPN – launched in July 2018) undoubtedly aided the foundation of such groups, particularly in the first stage: to establish a Building Futures Associate within each site – a dedicated serving prisoner to act as lead liaison assisting the formation of a core group. This approach, paralleled with diplomatic approaches to prison leaders, was the beginning of a process that eventually led to prisoners meeting with HMPPS leaders, senior Parole Board members and being able to create written materials of the highest quality.

HMPs Rye Hill, Frankland and Warren Hill conducted their own consultations which, in turn, led to publications and policy recommendations. These were admirable contributions to prison reform literature. However, the degree to which these were disseminated or found traction is difficult to discern. This concern aside, undoubtedly the working group members at these three prison sites learned new skills that may well enhance their experience or 'progression' through their stay in prison. Coupled with continued motivation and purpose, such progression through respective sentences may also perpetuate another aim of Building Futures: a sense of 'hope'. As one working group member commented at the HMP Rye Hill Prisoner Forum, 24 January 2023, 'Transformative progression requires institutional hope.'

7.2 Changes within prisons

'I am extremely proud to champion the work of the Building Futures Network group. I have observed many of our local initiatives derive from some of the investigatory work completed by the group.'

Lee Davies, HMP Rye Hill Director

Building Futures has further opened lines of communication between prisoners and prison authorities, and it has done so in a way that has shone a spotlight on the variations in individual prisons' regimes. The 'buy-in' for Building Futures from

individual prison governors and directors between 2020 and 2025 largely dictated the degree to which a working group was successful. Sadly, where traction with a prison was limited, it was frequently due to that site having few resources or too few staff. HMP Rye Hill, along with, for example, HMP Send, HMP Warren Hill and HMP Frankland were arguably the stand-out examples of institutions that embraced Building Futures.

During his talk in Manchester, Lee Davies outlined the policy alterations enacted because of investing time in the Building Futures project:

- ‘On the back of recommendations made in the group’s first report “Progression in prison” we launched a new PLI [**Prisoner Led Initiative**], which now is an instrumental part in helping prisoners make sense of a long sentence.’
- ‘We have also improved staff training in relation to **incorporate knowledge around sentence progression**.’
- ‘On the back of the group’s second report “Ageing in prison” **we rolled out palliative care cells** which have helped prisoners who want to stay in familiar surroundings as they approach end of life, in the company of people they know, both staff and prisoners, which is testimony to the community that we have created.’

Davies also discussed the fact the ‘duty to be able to assist prisoners in demonstrating fundamental change and a consistency in behaviour.’ The extent to which Building Futures has played a role in encouraging better behaviour beyond the working groups is difficult to quantify. As discussed in section 4.1.3, the Head of Residence at HMP Send (2024) was able to describe specific instances of behavioural improvements, indeed these were supported by an attending prison officer. However, to what degree this truly shows potential, beyond limited examples and anecdotal testimony, is impossible to state.

7.3 Parole

‘The importance of relationship-centred practice between a probation officer and prisoner, which the [HMP Rye Hill Parole] film highlights, is prescient as the government introduces the sentencing bill, which will lead to more people currently managed in custody, being managed in the community.’

Faith Geary, Director, Parole Board for England and Wales

Commenting on the ‘parole film’ produced by the HMP Rye Hill working group, Faith Geary touched upon a key aspect of Building Futures as promoted through its work on ‘Progression’: the fact that the road to parole, and post-release, is an ongoing process that is reinforced by day-to-day prison life. As discussed earlier, one of PRT’s original goals, outlined in project ‘Outcome three’ – ‘an improvement in the rates at which indeterminate prisoners achieve release on parole at the first opportunity and go on to live successfully in the community without being recalled to prison’ – may have been overly-ambitious, but that does not mean that the project was unsuccessful in that regard. With the production and ongoing enhancement of the Lifer Manual, the involvement of members of the Parole Board in so many facets of Building Futures, and the publication of *A Long Stretch: The Challenge of Maintaining Relationships for People Serving Long Prison Sentences*, the issue was at the heart of the work from the beginning. Most importantly, the video resonated with professionals working at the highest levels of the Parole system:

‘Parole had been my life for a decade, yet I watched the film and learnt something new. I got new insight into how sentence planning and parole impacts people not just during their immediate parole review but over the course of their whole sentence, which can be decades. The film educated me on how preparation for parole works in custody, outside an active parole review.’¹²³

A journey that began with *Making Progress? What Progression Means for People Serving the Longest Sentences* (2022), the first large-scale consultation report of the Prison Reform Trust’s project, came full circle in Manchester at the end of 2025. The extent that this type of workstream may (a) be continued by the working groups and (b) have a direct impact on the parole process writ large, is harder to discern.

7.4 Progression through the system: hope

‘The level of cooperation between the Prison Reform Trust, the Building Futures group, the project partners and the staff at HMP Rye Hill was exemplary. Projects like this just do not happen in the prison system and I think it is testament to the PRT, and Vicki Kerr in particular, that you have built and maintained these

¹²³ Faith Geary, Director, Parole Board for England and Wales, University of Manchester, 6 November 2025

relationships. It requires trust, a shared vision and a great deal of resilience to make it work.'

Tom Guiney, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nottingham

Tom Guiney discussed the 'energy, commitment, resilience and enthusiasm of the Building Futures group [at HMP Rye Hill]'. His assessment of the group is accurate, but the use of words 'commitment' and 'enthusiasm' raises a question that overshadows all the exceptional work carried out since 2020/21: can the working groups become self-perpetuating? The short answer is that HMP Rye Hill will almost certainly survive, indeed, prosper in 2026 and beyond. It has the support of an enthusiastic prison leader, and the diverse group has shown itself to be multi-talented. However, could it survive a change in prison leadership? Would the group's morale diminish if, because of the absence of PRT, external parties were no longer 'made available' to encourage debate and act as an interesting focal point?

As discussed in section 2.3, half of all respondents from across the working groups were inclined to be 'unclear' or pessimistic as to whether, respectively, 'the working group could continue without the input and support of PRT' or whether the prison would 'continue to support the working group after PRT's Building Futures programme ends.' Without a follow-up study in the second half of 2026, or the first half of 2027, it will be impossible to say.

If Building Futures working groups *were* to collapse because of the absence of PRT and, furthermore, if such a collapse were to cause a drop in prisoner morale or sense of purpose, would that raise an ethical question around fostering 'false hope'? Perhaps Joseph Hale's¹²⁴ comments subtly encapsulate this conundrum:

'There's an important message in this project about the rewards of taking risks. For the men who stepped into this project, there was risk: the risk of being visible; the risk of investing time and energy into something that might never have got off the ground; the risk of revisiting potentially painful parts of their own journey. For staff and leaders, there was institutional risk: risk in devoting staff time and resource; risk in inviting external scrutiny; risk in trying something "first of its kind" in a risk-averse system. But look at the rewards: a nationally relevant

¹²⁴ Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Nottingham Trent University

training tool that can sit within Rye Hill and, hopefully, on the HMPPS learning hub, in key work sessions; and in staff training rooms.'