

It doesn't have to be like this...

Too much 'bang up' - not good for anyone, says reform chief



Peter Dawson

The prison service has big decisions to make about what prisons will be like after Covid. We always say "consult prisoners", but we can't control whether or how they do. So, we decided to ask the Prisoner Policy Network (PPN) for its views on the future of regimes. We don't claim that the PPN represents the whole prisoner population, but in various ways we heard from around 650 people in 50 different prisons.

Everywhere the suffering of prolonged isolation was obvious. But people still gave us huge insight about what the future ought to include.

Many started from the principle that life inside the walls needs to be as close as possible to life outside.

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

Normality means going to work, eating and sleeping at normal times, being able to choose who you spend time with and what you are doing, still being a parent to your children, and to be social again:

"I can't help thinking that all this time spent on my own or with the same few people is just going to make it harder when I'm out. It's the encounters you have with new and different people, in different situations, and how you respond to them that make you grow and develop as a person."

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A lot of responses focused on how prisoners could contribute to their prison community: *"Creating opportunities to influence how a prison is run, what is on the menu, what activities are put on, charity events to raise money for causes people care about, being spoken to in a respectful way."*

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

People spoke about the potential of technology, but didn't want it to replace human interaction. They also wanted safety, but very few thought more bang up was the answer: *"If someone feels so unsafe outside of their tiny, oppressive living quarters that they would rather spend 23 hours a day there than live something approaching a dignified human life then that speaks to broader issues with that prison."*

Perhaps most of all, people wanted to know what the authorities think prison is for. They weren't short of suggestions:

"If the men could work through the reasons they are here, deal with trauma, see some role models and how it doesn't have to be like this, then I think the prison system could be proud of how it is protecting the public."

The full report, which we'll send to all Governors and all PPN members, has a vast amount more to say. We will make sure the prison service hears it.

If you want to join the PPN write to us at Freepost ND6125 or email ppn@prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Peter Dawson is Director of the Prison Reform Trust

Keeping Safe

A kinder year ahead



Juliet Lyon

After a difficult year, the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAPDC) is grateful for this opportunity to thank Inside Time readers for your views and recommendations which inform our independent advice to ministers and officials in the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and the Department for Health and Social Care. Mostly, this has led to changes in policy and practice.

To be honest I struggled when, early in the pandemic, our consistent, evidence-based advice on vaccinations for everyone in closed institutions, staff and detainees, was rejected along with clinical advice from Public Health England and scientific advice from Sage.

Thankfully now most people have been vaccinated and vaccines are still on offer to those of you who needed more time to think. Vaccines have made people and prisons safer. In many, but by no means all prisons, restrictions are being eased, key work restarted, families reconnected. There is a powerful new emphasis on skills training for jobs, treatment for drug and alcohol misuse and preparation for release into safe housing.

The year was not entirely bleak. We celebrated with The Samaritans 50 years since the Listener scheme first started in HMP Swansea.

I looked back over readers' letters to our Keeping Safe consultation on how to prevent suicide and self-harm in prison. One from a Listener stood out: 'Firstly I wanted to tell you a little about me. I am 19 years old and have been sentenced to 12 years in prison. During my first six months in prison I took three overdoses which required hospital admission and one which saw me remain in hospital for three days. I was fighting the system, the more I fought the worse I was treated, the more I had suicidal thoughts. It genuinely felt to me like nobody cared. Fast forward to the past six months and I feel better in myself. I have a job in the prison that puts lots of trust in me, and I help other prisoners going through the kind of things I faced.'

So whether you decide to apply to train as a Samaritan Listener (we understand they are recruiting) or if you plan just to listen and talk a bit more to other people in prison or if you need to ask for help yourself, we send warm wishes to you all for a good Christmas and a kinder year ahead.

Juliet Lyon CBE is Chair of the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP)

The IAP would welcome your views on how to prevent drug and alcohol-related deaths. Please write to us at FREEPOST IAP - that's all you need to put on the envelope, nothing else. We look forward to hearing from you!

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