Prisoners reforming prisons

Active citizens panels' suggestions for improving their prison
About the Prison Reform Trust
The Prison Reform Trust is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. The Prison Reform Trust provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Penal Affairs Group and has an advice and information service for people in prison.

Our two main objectives are: reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime, and improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families. For further information http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/

The Prison Reform Trust has facilitated active citizens panels since 2015. Panels bring together groups of prisoners (and sometimes staff) to study a specific problem and propose solutions for the governor to consider. The aims of the programme are to:

- Draw on the perspectives of people in prison on selected themes
- Give residents a chance to exercise responsibility inside prison
- Provide suggestions to governors/directors for making improvements in prisons.

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But the greatest debt is to the unnamed men and women who contributed their time, insights, and hopes by participating in a panel. They consistently showed their commitment to improving prisons by their willingness to grapple with difficult topics, and by the effort they made to raise constructive solutions.
Executive Summary

This report is the second in a series under the Prison Reform Trust’s active citizen programme. Active citizen panels provide a structure for consulting people in prison about specific areas of concern. Prisoners Reforming Prisons is intended to contribute to making prisons safer places where personal growth is nurtured. Ruth Mann and colleagues have written:

*The aim is for everyone to feel safe from physical and verbal violence and abuse, for prisons to be places of decency, where everyone treats each other with respect, and people’s basic needs are understood and met.*

Reforming prisons, so that they serve these purposes, will require a blueprint informed by experience. Planning can be all the more effective when it takes full account of prisoners’ insights. This report focuses on three important areas of prison life: safety, respectful relationships, and the responsible use of time in prison.

The panels recognised the impact that an unsafe environment has on prisoners’ lives. They highlighted the importance of consistent treatment. They advocated ways that managers could hold staff accountable at all grades to ensure the consistent delivery of the regime.

The panels agreed that officers help to maintain safety when they engage with prisoners, are respectful, and are vigilant in challenging exploitation, intimidation, and other harmful behaviour. When staff earn the trust of prisoners, communication improves and officers learn about problems before they escalate into violence. Managers should consider an annual safety survey to pick up on prisoners’ views of the causes of violence. Panels also suggested that selected prisoners could contribute to staff training.

On relationships between staff and prisoners, the panels agreed that relationships are reciprocal: when managers, staff and prisoners treat each other with respect, the environment is more likely to be respectful. One panel described a continuum in officers from those who are ineffective and absent, through others who abuse their powers, to those who are professional and carry authority.

Officers who get the balance right know and abide by the rules, show respect, build relationships, solve problems when they can (and let prisoners know when they can’t), keep people informed, and support their hopes. The recommendations for improving staff-prisoner relationships followed five themes: consistency (fairness), communication, accountability and support, training, and incentives.

A few panels suggested there was a need for each wing to have a stable team of officers: “If an officer got to know you, that would build trust.” One group suggested that the governor appoint a working group, comprised of officers and prisoners, to discuss staff-prisoner relationships and produce a report.
Another group identified a lack of support for officers when they experience trauma in their work. One recommendation was that prisoners should be offered ways to reward officers who were respectful, helpful, and professional. Prison staff should also be proactive in recognising prisoners’ achievements and contributions to the prison community.

On the responsible use of time in prison, rehabilitation is often focused on training and preparing for release through housing and employment schemes. The panels’ views on what is needed to prepare for release go well beyond these practical needs. They described foundations based on treating them as persons, recognising their needs for being trusted and exercising responsibility, supporting their hopes, and listening to their concerns.

More could be done to make use of the resources people in prison can provide, for example, by facilitating peer-led classes in education. A practical suggestion was a new role of ‘communication orderly’, whose functions would include answering questions about how the prison works, sharing information among managers, staff and prisoners, and speaking to staff about concerns raised by their peers. Businesses could be approached to provide a wider choice of employment opportunities inside prison.

To support people’s mental health, the panels advocated therapeutic job opportunities which would provide support to enable people with mental health needs to hold down a job. At induction, all prisons should try to learn what people are good at, and then provide relevant opportunities that build on those skills. The groups also recognised the importance of family ties and they recommended that all prisons provide access to Skype / Facetime.

At a time when prisons are uniting around the concept of a rehabilitative culture, this report contributes insights from prisoners about practical changes and reforms to advance that vision.
Foreword

I am delighted to write this foreword because I believe deeply in the benefits of active citizenship in our prisons.

In 2011, the Prison Reform Trust published ‘Time Well Spent: A practical guide to active citizenship and volunteering in prison’. The report described five types of active citizenship: peer support, charity work, restorative justice, prisoner representative duties, and arts and media. Juliet Lyon, then Director of the Prison Reform Trust, commented on the report saying, “this report shows that prisoners are capable of doing good for others, contributing to society, making amends, and taking responsibility.” My interest in active citizenship was born and I have enabled prisoners to participate in do-good opportunities ever since.

However, Time Well Spent also highlighted that volunteering opportunities were open to very few people in prison and this meant that most of their skills and strengths were a huge untapped resource. Thankfully, this is no longer the case.

Today, prisoners widely do good in their prisons, making them safer, more decent, more hopeful and supportive of positive change. ‘Prisoners Reforming Prisons’ wonderfully captures some of this and is the latest in a series of reports from the Prison Reform Trust about how people in custody can influence positive outcomes using an active citizenship approach. The report highlights the benefits of active citizen panels which provide a structure for consulting people about how to address specific areas of concern.

An active citizen is aware of and understands their place in their prison. They work with others to do good for their community, other individuals, the environment and, of course, themselves. It is also about prisoners developing the knowledge, skills and values they need to engage with the wider world on release. Active citizens are not people who take from their community, rather they are people who give to it. This generates a more positive persona which research tells us supports desistance.

I passionately believe that active citizenship should be part of the learning framework in prisons to build a safer, respectful and more secure environment. The benefits would be felt across our prisons and in our outside communities. This would excite and enable prisoners to see that they can act to influence outcomes both inside and outside prison using new learning and skills.

For anyone who remains unconvinced, I urge you to read the case examples in this report. I congratulate the authors on an outstanding piece of work.

PJ Butler
Governor
HMPPS
If you listen hard enough, everybody’s got a sacred story, an organising story of who they are and what their place in the world is. And they’re willing to share it with you if they feel as if you actually care about it. And that ends up being the glue around which relationships are formed, and communities are formed. . . . What this form of story sharing and empathy and listening does is it creates the conditions around which we can then have a meaningful conversation and sort through our differences and our challenges and arrive at better decisions because we’ve been able to hear everybody. Everybody’s been heard so that even if a decision’s made that they don’t completely agree with, then at least they feel like, ‘OK, I was part of this. This wasn’t just dumped on me.’

Barack Obama

Prisons need to be places where those in custody are safe and secure, where they are provided with opportunities for personal growth and are treated as individuals, where we encourage hope and the belief in the potential to change, along with developing the tools and skills they need to build a better future. None of this is easy but it is the right thing to do.²

Michael Spurr

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1. Introduction

The life-affirming vision of time in prison espoused by Michael Spurr is difficult to achieve when conditions in prison are degrading, treatment undermines personal responsibility, and social stigma evokes cynicism in staff and hopelessness among prisoners. Prisons are justifiably criticised for their failures, such as failures to maintain safety, to provide rehabilitative activity and to prepare people for release.

A more inspiring vision of what a prison can be is gaining traction: a rehabilitative culture, as described by Ruth Mann and her colleagues:

*A rehabilitative culture is one where all the aspects of our culture support rehabilitation; they contribute to the prison being safe, decent, hopeful and supportive of change, progression and to helping someone desist from crime. The aim is for everyone to feel safe from physical and verbal violence and abuse, for prisons to be places of decency, where everyone treats each other with respect, and people’s basic needs are understood and met.*

This vision of prisons shaped by hope and the possibility of change requires a detailed process of reforms, with workable next steps, guided by experience. Key areas for a rehabilitative culture are safer prisons, respectful relationships, and activities that foster responsibility and prepare people for release. In planning, it makes sense to take on board the insights of prisoners, drawn from their lived experience on the wings. Active citizen panels provide a structured way of doing that.

The first report on the active citizens programme, A Different Lens, described how active citizen panels worked and their impact on the people directly involved. Since that report, the Prison Reform Trust has conducted further panels, bringing the total to 19.

Briefly, active citizen panels draw on the expertise of people who live behind the prison walls. The process builds over a series of meetings, as people in prison analyse a particular problem, gather information about that problem as it affects that prison, and use that analysis as the basis for solutions.

The panels’ recommendations to governors/directors are grounded in the evidence which the group discussed, prior to proposing reforms. Viewing prisoners as experts opens the possibility that members of the panels begin to undertake responsibility for helping to shape the prison in which they are confined.

Each group was asked to report back on a specific aspect of that prison which caused concern. The governor/director or senior managers (“senior management team” or “senior leadership team”) chose the topic. A number of panels addressed the same problems – notably preventing fights and assaults, staff-prisoner relationships and the responsible use of time. This report, Prisoners Reforming Prisons, brings the input of different panels together, to summarise the learning thus far on these three topics.
Some of the recommendations from the active citizen panels were detailed suggestions, others required structural changes, or policy changes. The former reflected the situation at a specific prison at that time. This report focuses on the latter, as constructive reforms which might be relevant to all prisons.

Caution is needed in interpreting the recommendations. The panels did not constitute research – their evidence is primarily their personal experience, with some input from their peers on the wings.

Each panel established a dialogue between prisoners’ experience and governors/directors, who interpreted the recommendations from their experience in running prisons. The fact that, to date, senior managers have made a commitment to act on about three in five of the recommendations suggests that they have found the panels’ input constructive. This report aims to inspire a similar dialogue by drawing on prisoners’ experience and reaching out to governors/directors with their ideas about reform.

Section two discusses safety from fights and assaults; section three, relationships between staff and prisoners; and section four, the responsible use of time.
2. Safety

No single factor can provide a full explanation for a violent incident in prison. A fight or assault occurs in a social context (which influences both the prevalence and the nature of the violence), and arises out of conflicts which are shaped by:

- Relationships (primarily between those directly involved but third parties can play a role)
- Interests (what each person is trying to achieve, including the purposes of using physical force)
- Tactics in response to conflict (aggressive, avoidance, assertive, compromise)
- Values and emotions.

It follows that the causes and effects can be interpreted very differently in different prisons. For example, one panel analysed the problems leading to violence as a matter of relationships; a second focused on systems and process. A third panel saw the basic problem in terms of harmful behaviour.

The format of this section will follow the national safety framework, promoted by the prison service. This is organised under five themes: people, physical, population, partnerships, and procedure. The five themes are further elaborated in a prison service briefing, ‘Keeping People Safe’. For each theme, we will present the framework, report on problems identified by the panels, and then turn to the panels’ recommendations.

People – respectful relationships

The first theme of the national safety framework, people, is about relationships. Staff, in working with people in prison, should set the right balance between supervision, authority and support.

Officers who establish positive relationships with a wide range of prisoners are more likely to become aware of problems that can drive violent outcomes. This role, ‘dynamic security’, has been described by the Justice Committee in these terms:

*The main foundation of a safe prison is dynamic security, established through consistent personal contact between officers and prisoners, enabling staff to understand individual prisoners and therefore anticipate risky situations and prevent violence.*

The panels explored the impact that relationships among prisoners has on safety. Although there was a great deal of mutual support among people in prison, others showed a lack of respect, often expressed through abusive or threatening language (which directly aggravated disputes). Altercations from the outside could be imported on to the wings. Harmful behaviour, which included lending at extortionate rates, intimidation, and other forms of bullying also fuelled violent reactions.
The active citizens panels understood that prison officers are central to the challenge of preventing fights and assaults. They raised problems with staffing, including inconsistent treatment ("You don't know where you stand") and new staff ("New officers don’t know how to run a wing").

Some members also perceived a lack of respect from staff and a failure to meet people’s needs (these dimensions are more fully discussed under relationships, in section three).

A number of panels expressed sympathy for officers who feel unsafe. One member said, “Officers don’t know individuals well enough to know how or when to intervene.” Another said, “Staff don’t feel safe, so they depend on prisoners to intervene when two prisoners have a row.” These comments indicate that a consequence of reductions in the number and consistent presence of officers on wings was that dynamic security was seriously undermined – reducing the ability of staff to prevent violence through their familiarity with those in their care.

**Preventing violence by improving relationships**

The duty to ensure a safe prison gives a clear focus to the officers’ role: when officers are effective in protecting all prisoners from intimidation, exploitation, and other anti-social behaviour, prisoners can be confident that they do not have to resort to violence to defend themselves. When officers consistently challenge victimisation among prisoners, anti-social behaviour is less likely to escalate into violence, and the landings will be safer.5

The active citizen panels believed that officers can make a huge contribution to safety when they readily engage with prisoners and are respectful, professional and consistent. They advocated policies to ensure that officers remain vigilant in challenging exploitation, intimidation and other harmful behaviour. For example, officers should intervene to stop ‘taxing’.

‘Keeping people safe’ recognised that training needs to build confidence in staff:

> That staff feel and are supported, particularly in the aftermath of traumatic events (violence, self-harm or suicide) and that we build capability and confidence through learning and development.6

The panels commented that officers should be trained and supervised to enhance their skills in preventing violence:

- Officers should receive regular training in conflict resolution
- Officers should receive additional instruction in mental health awareness
- Selected prisoners should contribute to staff training, presenting topics such as cultural awareness and reading body language.
Physical – an environment and structure that supports safety

Unsafe environment

*Violent incidents interfere with the regime. People make plans based on how the regime is meant to go and are let down.*

(Panel member)

One of the panels described the feelings evoked by a wing which people knew to be unsafe, stating that they felt ‘scared’, ‘paranoid’, ‘anxious’ and that they expected something to ‘go off’ at any time. One added, “You don’t want to leave your cell.”

Processes and systems could also undermine safety. For example, one group described ways that induction created problems on the wings: “The induction pack puts you in debt before you get to the wing.”

Widespread unemployment also contributed to violence (also discussed in section four, below). As one member explained, “Lack of activity is a major problem underlying fights.” Another said, “When bang-up is extended, frustration grows.”

A panel that focused on systemic contributors to violence pointed out that conflicts were inevitable when canteen prices went up without a corresponding rise in pay. “Prison pay doesn’t cover basic needs, so people look to exploit others.” In similar terms, the Prison Reform Trust’s Prisoner Policy Network first report, What incentives work in prison? quoted one prisoner: “The amount of money received at enhanced level has stayed the same for a decade while canteen prices have gone up by 17%.”

A final factor was inconsistent treatment. Some group members not only believed that officers focused on negatives, they also perceived that disruptive prisoners sometimes received special treatment. For example, one person claimed, “Make trouble and you get a ship-out to a better prison.”

Decent conditions

The physical conditions in which people live inevitably have an impact on how they interact with others. The national safety framework acknowledges that a clean and decent environment promotes well-being:

*Light, sounds, fresh air, colour, privacy, views of or access to nature, broken things getting fixed, signage, access to kit and the things you need, opportunities to organise your own day.*

Similarly, ‘Keeping people safe’ calls for decent conditions that provide:

*A protective and supportive environment that give a sense of safety for those that live and work in them.*
The active citizens panels discussed the potential of meeting people’s basic needs to reduce frustration and prevent disputes from escalating. Their recommendations covered themes of:

- ensuring on entry to prison that the person learns how to stay safe
- maintaining stability (predictability) and meeting expectations
- structural and physical improvements that promote peace.

Induction should provide information, specific to that prison, on links between harmful behaviour and violence. Induction should also make clear what behaviour will not be tolerated, and emphasise the risks of getting into debt. In October, 2018, the prison service safety team produced a framework to give governors, staff and prisoners tools for identifying drivers of debt. This is a useful resource for improving information on induction.

On meeting expectations, panels suggested that efforts be made to keep regimes reliable. Managers should follow through on commitments to improve the environment. Each Governor/Director should consider appointing a monitoring group, comprised of prisoners, to maintain a register charting the implementation of policies.

Finally, the prison should look at structural changes that can resolve conflicts, including matching pay and spending limits to canteen prices, preventing drugs coming in, and providing all safer prison reps with mediation training.

**Population – using time well**

Using time well means offering chances to employ pro-social skills, to engage in purposeful activities, and to contribute to the quality of life inside.

Under the theme of ‘population’ the national safety framework focused on opportunities to use one’s time productively:

> People in prison resort to violence less when their days are full of purposeful activity, their basic needs are well met, and the rules and processes around them make sense and are implemented fairly by staff.

We will discuss the panels’ discussions about activities in section four. Under the theme of violence prevention, panels echoed these findings, explaining how extended periods of bang-up lead to frustration and provide opportunities for harmful behaviour such as drug misuse and taunting other prisoners: “One comment can trigger off a fight”.

**Positive use of time**

The HMPPS safety team promotes the concept of rehabilitative culture. Rehabilitative culture aims to engage people in prison, instil hope, offer caring and supportive relationships, practise active listening, and maintain a caring and supportive environment with safety, decency and respect.
Active citizen panels’ recommendations about positive use of their time should be cross-referenced with section four, on the responsible use of time. In the context of violence prevention, panels looked for ways of offering a greater range of voluntary activities and rewarding effort.

Recommendations that came from panels specifically exploring violence prevention included finance reps, based on wings, to advise people struggling with debt; a named governor/manager holding responsibility for expanding the voluntary roles available to prisoners; and a prison newsletter, produced by prisoners with regular information about the priority given to safety.

**Partnerships – social ties**

‘Partnerships’ means looking outward to links with the community. Foremost is the importance of maintaining the person’s supportive links with their family. The Prisoner Policy Network report summed up the importance of family ties:

> Prisoners from all over the country commented on a wish for longer or more relaxed visits, visits outside of the visits hall and more physical contact with visitors. . . . Having increased physical contact with family and possibly some family therapy within these sessions would help to build healthy relationships in preparation for release.

The PPN quoted a family member who wrote a response:

> My suggestion would be family days for all prisoners, not just prisoners with children. We would’ve liked to spend time on a longer, more informal visit with our relative, maybe having a meal together or doing some activity together, as this is something you miss when a relative is in prison. The importance of family relationships in helping prisoners’ rehabilitation is well documented and this is an area which could be built upon.

Active citizen panels also focused on proposals that could inform developments of better links with the community outside. They suggested bringing in outside contractors to run workshops that increase work opportunities (also discussed in section four). They also recommended that positive behaviour should consistently result in better chances of gaining ROTL.

**Procedural justice – treating people as individuals and fairly**

People prosper in prisons where fairness is the number one priority, where processes inspire confidence and are seen as legitimate. The four principles that define procedural justice are: Voice, Trustworthiness, Neutrality, and Respect.

Many of the panels’ recommendations echoed these fundamental principles of procedural justice.

‘Voice’ means that in all decisions and policy-making, the managers and staff take into account the perspectives of prisoners. Consultation with prisoners is pro-active and their input is influential.
The prisons inspectorate describes voice in these terms:

*Prisoners are able to take an active role in influencing decisions about services, routines and facilities in the prison and in managing their own day-to-day life.*

The relevant recommendations from the panels (intended to reduce levels of violence) were that: prisons regularly conduct a safety survey to identify problems and needs within that prison. On every wing, there should be a suggestion box to feed ideas to senior managers. Custodial managers should strive to improve communication with prisoners and reps.

One way that consulting prisoners builds a sense of community is by providing a space in which conflicts can be brought to light and so solutions can be found. Promoting prisoners’ ‘voice’ works best when it:

- focuses on the problem (breaking barriers between staff and prisoners)
- is inclusive (open to the views of everyone affected)
- meets the interests of all stakeholders
- shares responsibility for implementing decisions; and
- re-visits the situation to monitor progress.

‘Trustworthiness’ includes accountability and transparency. As we have discussed above, when staff have the confidence of most prisoners, officers hear vital information without which they cannot prevent violence. Trust has a reciprocal quality (also discussed in section three, relationships). If officers show that they are suspicious of every prisoner, prisoners are less likely to extend trust to officers.

As Ian Brunton-Smith and Daniel McCarthy summed it up in a recent paper:

*Trust is important as it has wider implications not only for prison legitimacy, but also for inmate compliance with rules and the reduction of conflict.*

The PPN report stated that trust was raised as a powerful incentive. One poignant statement came from a prisoner in HMP Wandsworth:

*When you come to prison you are immediately in a position where you have broken trust in some way. Rebuilding that, and demonstrating a reduced risk in the process, is extremely difficult. I believe if trust was weaved into the IEP scheme in some way, prisoners would in general respond positively.*

The active citizen panels offered ideas about how prison managers and staff can enhance their trustworthiness:

- Senior management’s objectives are understood and implemented fully by officers.
- Staff at all grades and roles are accountable for the consistent delivery of the regime.
- Managers are present on the wings to supervise officers’ performance.
‘Neutrality’ means that the person in authority exercises that power without favour. People in prison depend on consistency to provide a stable environment in which they make choices and determine how to behave.

One example of perceived favouritism was the incentives and earned privileges scheme. Panels recommended that incentives to reward people who stay out of trouble for longer periods need to have real value to that person.

The PPN responses from people in prison also indicated that the IEP levels were not different enough. As a man wrote in to the PPN:

\[
\text{What’s the point of being enhanced if there are no real differences offered? Rewards must be tangible.}
\]

Panels suggested that prison staff and managers can demonstrate neutrality when:

- Rules and awards are applied on a fair basis
- People on adjudications have the consequences of their actions fully explained to them
- Managers scrutinise a sample of complaints to ensure the process is fair and that responses resolve problems
- There is a clear structure for dealing with debt. One panel suggested, “For serious levels of debt, the prison provides help the first time; any subsequent debt problem is handled as an offence against prison rules.”

‘Respect’ is one of the prisons inspectorate’s four tests of a healthy prison. It means that people are consistently treated in ways that maintain their dignity. The prison service had a set of principles, known as its decency agenda, that demonstrated how respect permeates all aspects of prisons: physical conditions, language, the ways all staff respond, incentives, and discipline.

Panels recognised that governors/directors and custodial managers can have a significant impact on procedural justice. Decisions by SMT/SLTs should be widely publicised in clear language. Managers should monitor complaints, discrimination reports and use of force reports to identify officers who frequently abuse their authority. Governors/Directors should examine the prison’s policies to ensure that those policies treat people as responsible adults.

**Main recommendations to promote safer environments**

**Reducing conflict**

- Officers consistently challenge victimisation among prisoners. Officers are vigilant in challenging exploitation, intimidation and other harmful behaviour.
- Officers receive regular training in conflict resolution.
- Officers receive additional instruction in mental health awareness.
- Selected prisoners contribute to staff training, presenting topics such as cultural
awareness and reading body language. Each prison examines structural changes to reduce conflict, including matching pay and spending limits to canteen prices and preventing drugs coming in. Safer prison reps receive mediation training. Wings provide a ‘time-out’, safe space to enable people to resolve arguments. Each wing has a standing committee of prisoners and officers who work together to identify and discuss areas of concern and agree on solutions. Dialogue with prisoners (e.g. five-minute interventions) have a problem-solving focus so that residents’ concerns are resolved early. Finance reps, based on wings, advise people struggling with debt.

Communication (Voice)

Induction provides information, specific to that prison, on links between harmful behaviour and violence. Induction makes clear what behaviour will not be tolerated and the risks of getting into debt. The prison regularly conducts a safety survey to identify problems and needs within that prison. There is a suggestion box on every wing to feed ideas to senior managers. Custodial managers strive to improve communication with prisoners and reps. A working group of officers and prisoners on staff-prisoner relationships reports regularly to SMT/SLT. Decisions by SMT/SLTs are widely publicised in clear language.

Trustworthiness

Senior management’s objectives are understood and implemented fully by officers. Staff at all grades and roles are accountable for the consistent delivery of the regime. Managers are present on the wings to supervise officers’ performance. Managers monitor complaints, discrimination reports and use of force reports. Managers monitor and supervise officers who frequently abuse their authority. Neutrality – Rules and awards are applied on a fair basis. People on adjudications have the consequences of their actions fully explained to them. There is a clear structure for dealing with debt. Managers scrutinise a sample of complaints to ensure the process is fair and that responses resolve problems. Respect – Officers engage with prisoners and are respectful, professional and consistent. Wings run a monthly award for the officer nominated by prisoners as being most helpful and respectful. The prison provides sensitive support for people who have been victimised.
3. Improving relationships between staff and prisoners

Prisoners are treated with humanity and respect for their human dignity. Relationships between prisoners and staff are positive and courteous.
Expectation: HM Inspectorate of Prisons

Ben Crewe characterised styles of the prison officer role on two axes, depending on whether they were coercive or permissive, and engaged or distant. 13

- Heavy – staff were antagonistic in applying their punitive powers
- Light – staff allowed prisoners space, were relaxed and approachable
- Absent – staff were largely unavailable or weak
- Present – staff were authoritative and visible.

Prisons inspectors measure respect by looking for (paraphrased):

- Officers making an effort to get to know prisoners personally
- Officers treating prisoners’ property respectfully
- Staff and prisoners addressing each other using their preferred name or title
- When rules are breached, officers taking time to discuss the situation with the prisoner concerned.

Other research supports these expressions of the positive role of officers. Susie Hulley conducted a study intended to draw out what respect means to prisoners.

Prisoners’ interpretations of respect were located in two aspects of prison life: interpersonal relationships with staff and the meeting of prisoners’ needs, or ‘getting things done’. Both reflect the notion of respect as ‘taking the needs of others seriously’. . . To feel respected, prisoners need their emotional and interpersonal needs to be recognized by staff. They also need to feel that staff take their practical needs seriously.14

The authority of staff: problems and proposed solutions

The active citizens programme gathered ideas on this topic from three different panels (two of which officers participated in). In addition, we convened a group of officers to discuss their needs. Finally, panels that covered other topics – for example, building a caring community – also contributed ideas about the role of staff in maintaining healthy relationships.

An insight that emerged from the panels was that relationships are influenced by managers, officers and prisoners. The quality of relationships is reciprocal. This was illustrated in NOMS’ Race Review, 2008:
A White prison officer with few other relationships with Black people is likely unconsciously to be less comfortable and confident around Black prisoners. Moreover, encountering disproportionate numbers of Black people in the prison context may well reinforce any prejudices that the officer holds. Noticing this lack of comfort, a Black prisoner could respond by becoming wary of and avoiding the officer, feeling that the officer is likely to behave in the same discriminatory way as others in authority over him in the education and criminal justice systems have done. The predictable outcome of this is that the officer sees this behaviour as suspicious and uses discretionary power not to reward the prisoner, despite his behaviour being as good as that of other prisoners.  

One panel explored the impact of trust. They described how being trusted or not trusted affects a person.

Distrust reduces you to a child.

Feeling responsible makes you feel confident in yourself.

When I am trusted, I feel good about myself.

When someone trusts you (like an officer) you don’t want to let her down.

Active citizen panels also described how poor relationships affects the prison community:

- Lack of trust leads to a lack of communication
- Friction – resentment
- Frustration – loss of motivation to raise issues
- Low self-esteem / feelings of negativity
- Poor mental wellbeing which can be life-threatening
- Fear
- A lack of mutual respect
- Withdrawal – some residents prefer very little contact with staff
- Nothing gets resolved or changed.

Recalling Ben Crewe’s officer role styles of heavy/light and present/absent, one active citizen panel described staff roles as ineffective, professional, or abusive:

- Ineffective – unreliable, stays in office, uncertain in engaging with prisoners
- Professional – respectful, meet your needs, build relationships
- Abusive – over-use their powers, disrespectful, make up their own rules.

One panel characterised ideal prison officers as those who:

- Get the basics right.
- Know and abide by their own rules
- Show respect, e.g. they say ‘Good morning’ when they unlock you
- Support your hopes
- Don’t undermine you to make you feel like a prisoner
- Demonstrate interpersonal skills and build relationships.
Keep you informed about your apps
Do the things that can be done – don’t fob you off
Apologise if they can’t do something they promised
Make proper use of peer support (Listeners).

Combining the learning from the three active citizen panels that focused on relationships, four themes emerged:

- Consistency
- Communication
- Accountability and support
- Training and incentives.

**Consistency**

*Order and legitimacy within prison depend heavily upon both the consistency of interactions between staff and prisoners, and the perceived sincerity of attempts to listen to and support prisoners.*

The panels were held during a time when there were well-known pressures on staffing levels. This had consequences for delivering regimes; for stability in staff presence on wings; and led to a loss of confidence in officers about confronting anti-social behaviour.

The staff group identified three problems that contributed to inconsistent treatment: poor communication about policies; managers over-ruling officers’ decisions; and a lack of stability in officers’ presence.

The turnover of officers was destabilising. Staff shift patterns hampered their authority, as constant moves between wings, visits, and other duties meant that an individual officer could not know the prisoners he or she was working with or be certain of how a particular wing functioned. As one member of the officer group observed, when she was told to report to a wing she had not been on before, her lack of knowledge weakened her authority.

One panel (of prisoners) mentioned that officers have such limited time to spend with prisoners that they were unable to complete accurate reports about the people they supervised.

Ineffective officers contribute to the lack of consistency, in that they are not confident about when to enforce rules, or which ones to enforce. These officers might avoid getting involved in situations when staff are needed. And they fail to resolve prisoners’ requests – often without letting the person know.

Abuses of authority (the equivalent of heavy presence in Ben Crewe’s styles) include the illegitimate use of informal punishments; a lack of respect for property or one’s cell; and disrespect in speaking to prisoners.
Although it is inevitable that officers will work in individual ways, for some prisoners, that could produce an unacceptable degree of inconsistency. An officer who does not follow through to resolve a prisoner’s request not only leaves more work for their colleague, but also causes frustration and undermines trust. The panels also mentioned some officers making use of informal punishments as a source of inconsistency.

Residents also contribute to inconsistent treatment. One group observed that some prisoners are told ‘no’ by one officer, so they go from one to another until they find an officer who says ‘yes’.

The most common recommendation related to consistency was that each wing should have a stable team of officers. Staff are not impersonal units who can be shifted from one location to the other. When this happens, the quality of relationship suffers. The panels clearly valued opportunities to get to know officers and wanted officers to get to know them: “If an officer got to know you, that would build trust.”

Some panels suggested that when officers get to know the people on the wing, they can recognise changes of mood, or signs of trouble (which links to the violence prevention role, described in section two).

Panels said that officers should have a good understanding of prisoners’ entitlements. Officers should also know the rules that govern their duties.

A panel identified the important role staff play in making the regime work to schedule. Finally, one group proposed that officers should return to the practice of carrying notepads so that they can write down requests, as this could reduce the problems of promised actions being forgotten.

Senior management (or leadership) teams also have a contribution to maintaining consistency. One group proposed that regular inter-departmental meetings give time to ensure that their policy decisions are co-ordinated, so that prisoners receive a consistent service. Another panel felt that the SMT should welcome feedback from prisoners and work to provide a consistent response to complaints.

**Communication**

Problems with communication are ubiquitous in prisons and not limited to how well staff and prisoners communicate with each other. However, gaps in information frustrate prisoners and can affect how they relate to staff.

Concerns about communication arose in response to different topics for active citizen panels. For example, one group claimed that information about visits was not announced until just before visits began – a source of anxiety that would lead some residents to deluge officers with requests for information that officers did not have. When officers have not been given the information, or when the information they have is out of date, prisoners’ needs are not met, and officers are obliged to face the objections of prisoners.
Feedback on communication specific to staff-prisoner relationships suggested greater roles for prisoner peer reps. One group suggested that the governor appoint a working group, comprised of officers and prisoners, to discuss staff-prisoner relationships and produce a report. Another panel proposed a team of staff and prisoners could be established to visit each wing and gather evidence about problems which cause frustration.

A third proposal aimed at improving staff-prisoner communications was to increase the opportunities for informal meetings – for example, a monthly coffee morning. Finally, the panels felt that officers could be asked to do more to publicise peer roles, such as induction ‘buddies’ or Listeners.

**Accountability and support**

The panels argued that staff-prisoner relationships are undermined where there is a lack of supervision (and accountability) of staff. This could mean that ineffective officers who choose not to engage with prisoners are not challenged. Or, that officers who make up their own rules, causing inconsistent treatment, are not monitored by managers. On the other hand, some staff expressed a need for more consistent support from managers, in backing up their decisions regarding prisoners.

On the balance of support and accountability, the officer group suggested that when officers fear getting into trouble with their managers, it reduces their confidence and detracts from their authority. The officers were also sensitive to the fact that poor behaviour by any of their colleagues reflected badly on everyone’s professionalism.

The staff group reflected a sense that there is still too little support for officers who experience trauma in their work. They recommended more empathetic support in these circumstances.

Panels suggested that senior managers could do more to monitor staff conduct on the wings, as well as to recognise and reward good practice. To ensure that officers are both supported in their role and properly supervised, the panels made suggestions about making use of prisoners’ feedback and an increased presence of senior managers on the landings.

A panel recommended that the prison establish a complaints tracking system, so that any prisoner could check on the progress of a complaint without having to request updates from an officer. Each prison could also create a system whereby prisoner reps are assigned a checklist of reforms and policies set by the governor/SMT, the prisoner team would monitor implementation and report to the governor. In addition, two or more prisoners could be appointed to represent prisoners’ views at meetings of the SMT/SLT.

**Training and incentives**

At the time of reduced staff numbers, the panels described wings where experienced officers were absent. “You see new officers training even newer officers”. One group felt that officers’ training needed better insights into what it is like being a prisoner.
One group specified the kind of information that would be useful to include in training staff in mental health awareness, including: learning disabilities and learning difficulties, autism and Asperger syndrome, and working with people who have mental health needs. Another group said that in women’s prisons, male officers should always be sensitive to the possibility that a woman has experienced violence from men.

There was a widespread feeling that officers were more inclined to recognise negative aspects of a prisoner than to make positive comments. Some thought staff were too quick to use negative IEP warnings, and too slow to recognise achievement. The panels suggested that prison staff needed more encouragement to be pro-active in rewarding prisoners by recognising their achievements and contributions to the prison community. Conversely, the panels felt that prisoners should be offered ways to recognise officers who are respectful, professional and helpful.

**Main recommendations on maintaining positive relationships**

**Consistency**
- Each wing has a stable team of officers.
- Officers make an effort to get to know the people on the wing.
- Officers know (and follow) the rules that govern their conduct.

**Communication**
- The SMT welcomes feedback from prisoners.
- The SMT ensures that there is a consistent response to complaints.
- The governor appoints a working group, comprised of officers and prisoners, to discuss staff-prisoner relationships and report back to the governor.
- Opportunities for informal meetings are established, for example, a monthly coffee morning.

**Support and accountability**
- Senior managers monitor staff conduct on the wings and recognise and reward good practice.
- In each prison, a team of prisoner reps monitors implementation against a checklist of reforms and policies set by the governor/SMT and reports to the governor.
- Two or more prisoners represent prisoners’ views at SMT / SLT meetings.
- A complaints tracking system enables prisoners to check on the progress of a complaint without having to request updates from an officer.
- Officers who experience trauma in their work are offered empathetic support.

**Incentives**
- Prisoners have a say in a system that recognises officers who are respectful, professional and helpful.
- Prison staff are proactive in rewarding prisoners by recognising their achievements and contributions to the prison community.
4. Promoting the responsible use of time

‘Purposeful’ or ‘meaningful’ activities?

The prison service policy on activities in prison (PSI 38 – 2010) describes the desired outcomes as follows. They:

...should be constructive and contribute to one or more of the following: positive social interaction between prisoners or between prisoners and others; offering prisoners the opportunity to make constructive use of their time; development of interpersonal skills, e.g. communication skills; the prisoner's physical, mental or emotional well-being; pro-social behaviour; maintenance or rebuilding of family ties.

The rehabilitative culture framework places purposeful activities in prison in the context of preparing for the future:

Activities should . . . promote wellbeing and stopping offending; and facilitate . . . the possibility of hope and change.

Measuring purposeful activity is notoriously difficult. Time out of cell is unlikely to provide a reliable proxy. In a cell, a woman can pursue education, copy out sketches by Leonardo da Vinci, write a letter to her offender manager or local housing association, or undertake many other purposeful activities. Too often, however, measurements of activity reflect a low threshold. Simply filling time does not prove that the tasks have any real meaning.

Ken Robinson’s The Element describes activities which are so important to individuals that they define who they are. For many people, doing what they are best at is also what gives them most satisfaction. Robinson describes the challenges of focusing on passion as much as skills and tapping into the interests and capabilities that reveal individual personality. In similar terms, Liebling et al describe activities that are not just time-filling but are commitments that are embedded in the person’s identity.

‘Meaningful’ activities differ from the time-filling chores provided in many prisons in that the former have personal significance. A person will prosper if the options for how they spend their day fits their personal interests and motivations. Activities that carry such deep personal meaning promote:

- Hope, as the person looks forward to the activity
- Absorption – being completely focused on the task
- Confidence in meeting the challenges
- The feeling that one’s best skills are being put to use.
The foundation for meaningful activity is described by the prison inspectorate’s expectations. “Prisoners are encouraged and supported to take responsibility for their rehabilitation and to contribute positively to the prison community.” Indicators that reflect this expectation include the following (paraphrased):

- A peer support scheme encourages ‘active citizenship’ within the prison community
- Peer workers’ roles are clearly defined; peer workers receive appropriate training, support and supervision; and are involved in consultation activities
- Prison policies and regime activities reflect the diverse needs of the prisoner population.
- Staff make reasonable adjustments to ensure that prisoners with protected characteristics can participate in activities which meet their needs.

Liebling et al. described a prison community which promoted positive, self-fulfilling activity:

> [The prison] excelled in offering a suite of unique programmes and activities to prisoners. Staff were committed to identifying prisoners’ strengths and talents, and were skilled at tapping into personal interests. Many prisoners described a process whereby they had suggested ideas for projects, and received enthusiastic institutional support to help implement them. Some managers were personally involved and invested in these different initiatives. This created an environment that promoted imagination and individuality, and encouraged residents to forge their own paths. (page 15)

Erwin James suggested that for people to find socially productive roles after release, prisons need to ensure that they are:

> ...able and motivated to take a positively active role in society. Part of that should be to provide more widespread opportunities [in prison] for those so inclined to demonstrate their desire to do good.19

The sense of meaningful activity described in this literature echoes desistance theory:

1) Drawing on people’s strengths and passions boosts self-confidence and inspires hope for the future. Shadd Maruna found that, “Individuals who desist from crime usually are very motivated to change their lives and feel confident that they can turn things around.”

2) Meaningful activities also demonstrate that the person can make a valuable contribution to society. “Offenders who find ways to contribute to society, their community, or their families, appear to be more successful at giving up crime.”

This suggests that the focus of prisons, in designing opportunities and activities, should be on enabling residents to exercise responsibility and make informed decisions about their future. Activities in prison should promote well-being; respond to and build up human dignity; and help boost self-esteem. In this way, time spent constructively inside prison can help prepare the person for the responsibilities they will face after release.

3) Maruna also concluded that: “Individuals who feel like they are a welcomed part of society are less likely to offend than those who feel stigmatised.”20
A resettlement study published by PRT and Clinks found that earning acceptance and belonging were at least as important to people leaving prison as the more practical needs of housing and employment. One person interviewed as part of that study described a systematic denial of his humanity:

*They don't resettle you. They don't give you a personality to say, 'I am a human being and I believe in community as anyone else in society.'*

Another respondent described, “feelings of being unfit to be in society.”

A third person said:

*I think that integrating someone back into society somehow – I haven’t got the answers but trying to slowly integrate the people back into society would be a good way forward. Especially for a lot of the long-terms.*

Thus, the perspective of people in prison on what needs to be done to prepare people for release includes education, training, employment, and housing, but goes well beyond these practical needs. The members of the active citizen panels described foundations based on treating them as persons, recognising their needs for being trusted and exercising responsibility, supporting their hopes, and listening to their concerns.

Active citizen panels were convened to respond to a variety of themes around meaningful activity. These included:

- How can this prison do better at promoting resettlement?
- What can be done to help women here get ready for release?
- Taking responsibility for rehabilitation
- How this prison can treat people more like adults than children?

The panels commented on:

- Effects of inactivity on the person in custody
- The loss of responsibility
- Reasons why a prison might not provide sufficient activities.

**Inactivity or meaningful use of time?**

**Effects of inactivity**

A lack of opportunities often means people spend more empty time inside a cell. The panels discussed the effects of inactivity on prisoners. A panel in a women’s prison linked inactivity to a loss of hope. One member said:

*Women are used to people and the system failing them, so they eventually give up on themselves.*
Another panel suggested that not having a job contributes to violence by depriving people of a means to make a living.

On low pay it is impossible to save for release. Low pay can reduce your ability to meet basic needs, e.g. hygiene.

Another consequence of inactivity is a perverse incentive to misuse drugs:

> There is a knock-on effect: no activities mean too much time in your cell. People do drugs because there is nothing else to do and boredom does their head in.

Panels also drew a link between hours of enforced inactivity and mental health problems. They observed that when people’s mental health suffered, the mental health services were overwhelmed.

> People with severe mental health problems are locked up for 23 hours each day and are not prescribed what they have been getting on the outside.

**Promoting meaningful use of time**

The active citizen panels produced a range of suggestions for activities that give prisoners a degree of responsibility. The prisoner information desk (or community hub) was one example. Another suggested a role of ‘communication orderly’, whose functions would include answering questions about how the prison works, sharing information among managers, staff and prisoners, and speaking to staff about concerns raised by their peers.

There was also a range of recommendations about what could be done to support people’s mental health. For example, they advocated therapeutic job opportunities which would provide support to enable people with mental health needs to hold down a job. This would allow them to get a sense of pride from the contribution they make. Another group observed that mental health in-reach should include sufficient trauma-informed staff so that all residents who have experienced trauma can be helped. The panels also proposed improving information made available to front-line officers so that they understand the reasons people become dependent on drugs and the processes of recovery.

More broadly, prisons should re-examine their approaches to decision-making and processes to increase transparency and accountability. This would aid communication and reduce the frustrations of not having explanations for periods of inactivity.

**Encouraging people to take responsibility**

**Loss of responsibility**

Members from different groups linked a loss of meaningful activities to life after release:

> Our perception of what is ‘normal’ changes. Time stops in here, you lose hope, people on the outside move on, whereas the way I came in will be the same way I will go out.
It stops progression; makes it hard to prove you’ve changed. It undermines motivation. You need to do things for yourself, and if you are not trusted you are treated like a child. It can stop work opportunities; can hinder family connections.

There used to be a core day – work all day, association in the evening, visits on weekends. Now, three days a week you sleep in till eleven. You get into a pattern and then when you’re released, you can’t adjust to a working week.

One panel listed the effects of a loss of responsibility:

- Anger
- Frustration
- Temptation to use drugs
- Becoming unable to solve your own problems
- Holding back from talking to officers
- Increased tension on family visits.

A panel member said simply, “Prison breaks people.”

People on the panels were very aware that being offered opportunities in prison was very dependent on being trusted. One panel explored why trust was so rare in prisons. They listed public attitudes and perceptions, and governors being risk averse due to accountability. Some felt that a lack of trust meant that when something goes wrong, everyone gets treated the same (collective punishment).

Even in prison, having a job or voluntary role can provide a sense of being relied on and being reliable. Prison work also confers a degree of independence (better income) and time spent focused on the task.

**How to encourage people to take responsibility**

Treating people as responsible begins in reception. One panel asked that induction assessments be improved, so that information provided is better targeted at specific needs (such as housing, debt or trauma). They proposed that the register of these needs should be updated regularly.

Still in induction, groups suggested that all prisons should try to learn what people are good at, and then provide relevant opportunities that build on those skills. One panel observed that prison jobs would be distributed more fairly if they were consistently based on people’s qualifications and references.

Key workers should be allocated to an individual on a semi-permanent basis, so that they can establish trust – unless the person indicates that they wish to change their key worker.

Responsibility is linked to a person’s relationships and among those, families are one of the most important. Thus the panels recommended that all prisons provide access to Skype / Facetime in order to expand the options for people to maintain family contact. Visiting arrangements should prioritise the time people can spend as parents and/or partners as these relationships can support a more positive sense of self.
The panels expressed approval of the ‘kiosk’ system – a computer system (either on the landings or in cells) that enables people to manage their personal finances, select their weekly menu, apply for jobs, courses or other education, and submit applications. These can encourage people to take responsibility, because they provide a means of meeting needs without asking an officer. Kiosks should not lead to reduced time out of cell.

The panels agreed that prisons should expand opportunities for active citizenship. For example, a committee should be formed on each wing, comprised of prisoners and officers, to work together to identify and discuss areas of concern and agree on solutions.

The provision of activities

Obstacles to a full working day
The panels discussed obstacles that prevented prisons from providing a full range of activities. These included:

- “Working with officers can be difficult: some are decent and helpful; others are disrespectful. It is hard to work with a disrespectful officer”
- A lack of different workshops limits interest
- There is not enough communication (for example about what’s available)
- Too few people benefit from sentence planning
- Education is set at a low level
- Fights and assaults affect the regime: with better control, they could offer more.

Providing a wide choice of activities
The panels agreed that a consistent and reliable regime was needed so that prisoners could plan their time and make adult decisions as to when to attend to important needs. More could be done to make use of the resources people in prison can provide, for example, by facilitating peer-led classes in education. Businesses could be approached to provide a wider choice of employment opportunities inside prison.

Preparation for release is another area in which personal responsibility should be encouraged. Offender managers should be expected to visit people prior to their release, to agree on the plans for resettlement. Prisons should maintain good contact with GP surgeries outside, so that arrangements can be made for post-release care (including, for example, mental health support, drug treatment and maintenance, as well as physical health).

Every prison should provide practical and ongoing guidance, advice and training to better prepare people for changes that may have occurred during a sentence, including technological advances. In particular, outside housing agencies should be invited to run regular surgeries inside prison.
Checklist for promoting responsible use of time

✓ Induction assessments enable the prison to target support at specific needs (such as housing, debt or trauma). The register of what each person needs is updated regularly.
✓ The prison identifies what people are good at and provides opportunities that build on those skills.
✓ A peer-run information desk runs on each wing, providing prisoners with information about how the prison runs and other services.
✓ Communication orderlies ensure that information is shared among managers, staff and prisoners. They are available to speak to staff about concerns raised by peers.
✓ Therapeutic job opportunities make reasonable adjustments to support people with mental health needs, to enable them to hold down a job.
✓ The mental health in-reach team includes sufficient trauma-informed staff.
✓ Prisoners have access to Skype / Facetime to maintain family ties.
✓ Managers and staff see consistency as a priority. People receive their full regime reliably, are treated fairly by discipline and IEP, and prison policies are followed.
✓ The ‘kiosk’ system enables people to exercise responsibility, but kiosks should not lead to reduced time out of cell.
✓ The education provision includes peer-led courses.
✓ Businesses from outside provide a wider choice of prison jobs.
✓ The prison maintains good contact with GP surgeries outside, so that arrangements can be made for post-release care (including, for example, mental health support, drug treatment and maintenance, as well as physical health).
✓ Pre-release provides guidance, advice and training to better prepare people for changes, such as technological advances, that may have occurred during a sentence.
Endnotes

5 “The fact that prisoners trusted public sector officers to use their authority effectively, and were willing to ‘draw the line’, made it less likely that prisoners pushed boundaries or sought to assault or exploit their peers.” Ben Crewe and Alison Liebling (2015) Staff culture, authority and prison violence, Prison Service Journal, page 11).
9 Keeping people safe, page 6.
13 Crewe, Ben, Liebling Alison and Hulley, Susie (2014) Heavy-light, absent-present: re-thinking the ‘weight’ of imprisonment, British Journal of Sociology; online: https://www.academia.edu/32397543/Heavy-light_absent-present_rethinking_the_weight_of_imprisonment
22 Double Trouble?, page 21.
23 Double Trouble?, page 21.
This report is the second in a series under the Prison Reform Trust’s active citizen programme. Active citizen panels provide a structure for consulting people in prison about specific areas of concern. Prisoners Reforming Prisons is intended to contribute to making prisons safer places where personal growth is nurtured.

The panels recognised the impact that an unsafe environment has on prisoners’ lives. They highlighted the importance of consistent treatment. They advocated ways that managers could hold staff accountable at all grades to ensure the consistent delivery of the regime.

At a time when prisons are uniting around the concept of a rehabilitative culture, this report contributes insights from prisoners about practical changes and reforms to advance that vision.