

Editorial: The Future of Prisons

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The future of prisons in England and Wales has never felt more urgent or contested than it does today. Amid record levels of overcrowding, spiralling costs, and rising concerns about safety and rehabilitation, the question of what prisons are for and whether they can deliver on those purposes has returned to the centre of public and political debate. Recent government announcements of emergency measures, coupled with calls from practitioners, campaigners, and international bodies for systemic reform, underline the sense of a system at breaking point. At the same time, shifting social attitudes toward punishment and justice, alongside innovations in technology and community-based alternatives, open up the possibility of reimagining the prison estate for the coming decades.

This special edition of the Prison Service Journal delves into these critical issues and opportunities, drawing opinions, reflections and insights, from interviews with key figures in the field. By focusing specifically on the future of prisons, we aim not only to highlight the immediate crises demanding attention, but also to situate them within broader debates about justice, human rights, and social responsibility. The moment is ripe for reflection and for bold thinking: the choices made today will shape not only the conditions of incarceration, but also the wider health of our justice system and society for generations to come.

The first interview by **Dr Jamie Bennett** with **Nicola Padfield**, an Emeritus Professor of Criminal and Penal Justice at the University of Cambridge, and **Michael Spurr**, a former Chief Executive of HM Prison and Probation Service, explores the future of sentencing in England and Wales. Both Padfield and Spurr were members of the Independent Panel advising the Independent Sentencing Review, commissioned by the Government in October 2024. Their interview highlights the need for a balanced approach to sentencing that considers both public safety and the rehabilitative potential of people convicted of crime, proposing a culture shift to support people who are leaving prison and on community sentences, with the Probation Service given greater investment.

Brendan Doyle, COO of User Voice, and **Paula Harriott**, CEO of Unlock are interviewed by **Martin Kettle**. They share their insights on how prisons can be improved. Both have served prison sentences and now hold senior roles in national organisations that support and empower those who are, or have been, in prison. They emphasise the importance of prisoner councils as powerful instruments for change and advocate for more people with lived experience of the prison system to work within it. They propose ideas such as smaller units, increased contact with the outside community, and better use of digital technology. Harriott calls for a more transformative and restorative approach to rehabilitation, and both challenge the effectiveness of prison compared to community sentences, which they believe are more beneficial for helping people move forward positively with their lives.

Dr Munazzah Choudhary's interview with **Professor Faye S. Taxman** from the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University, explores the future of prison rehabilitation and care service delivery. The interview also explores comparisons with other prison systems, such as Norway, and the differences in their approach to training prison staff. Taxman emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to rehabilitation that considers the overall well-being of individuals within the justice system.

The experience of prison staff and the pressure to adapt to changes often takes place out of sight. **Professor Karen Harrison's** interview with **Steve Gillan**, General Secretary of the Prison Officers Association, and **Tom Wheatley**, President of the Prison Governors' Association, sheds light on the evolving challenges and future prospects for prison staff in the UK. Both leaders express deep concern over the current state of the prison workforce, highlighting issues such as under-resourcing, high turnover, lack of training, and diminished managerial structures. Both Gillan and Wheatley stress the importance of meaningful line management relationships and bespoke continuing professional development to retain and empower staff. The interview concludes with a unified message to

policymakers: the Prison Service must be adequately funded and respected to ensure it can fulfil its rehabilitative mission.

Leveraging technology to modernise the criminal justice system is paramount for the innovation of rehabilitation practices. In this interview **Pia Puolakka**, a consultant to the Prison and Probation Service of Finland in Prison Digitalisation, Digital Rehabilitation, and Artificial Intelligence for Corrections and Forensic Psychology, shares her insights with **Prof (Hon.) Helen Wakeling**. Puolakka discusses her involvement in the Smart Prison project in Finland, which introduced personal terminals to prisoners in their rooms in three prisons. She highlights the benefits, challenges, and risks associated with this development. Puolakka envisions a future where technology plays a transformative role in modernising the criminal justice system, creating safer custodial environments, and improving prison cultures. However, she stresses that technology should support, not replace, face-to-face interactions, enabling staff to have more meaningful engagements in rehabilitation.

This special edition concludes with an insightful interview conducted by **Dr Lewis Simpson**, featuring **Pia Sinha** from the Prison Reform Trust and **Richard Garside** from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. In this interview, they delve into the future challenges and relationships in prison reform, exploring themes of evidence, voices, policy solutions, and decarceration. They also discuss how their respective organisations can influence, support, and encourage the government, prison managers, and staff, while also providing essential advocacy for individuals in prison and on probation.