

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

March 2022 No 259



**Special edition:
Recovering from the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Prisoners' experiences of recovering after the pandemic

Paula Harriott is Head of Prisoner Engagement at the Prison Reform Trust. She is interviewed by Christopher Stacey, Director of Support and Development at Clinks.

Paula Harriott is Head of Prisoner Engagement at the Prison Reform Trust (PRT). PRT is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. Paula's focus is to ensure organisations across the criminal justice sector are committed to the involvement of people with lived experience. Her role at PRT is to ensure that the charity fully involves serving and former prisoners in its strategic direction and the work it undertakes.

Paula leads the Prisoner Policy Network (PPN), which is a network of people who are currently in prison and those that have been in the past, and those with lived experience in connected organisations who want to share their experiences and ideas with policy makers. The PPN aims to share the views of people with experience of living in prison with those involved in prison policy development nationally through research, consultation and reports. They launched the CAPPTIVE series (Covid-19 Action Prisons Project: Tracking Innovation, Valuing Experience), which is charting the experiences of prisoners during the pandemic.

The interview took place in November 2021.

CS: How did the coronavirus pandemic have an impact upon your organisation?

PH: The first couple of weeks were a shock, people were disorientated, and it felt very scary. We went to work from home, and then some members of the team were furloughed. I was phoning our Director during that first month saying we have to come back to work, this feels uncomfortable. This came from a personal perspective — if my work is related to trustworthiness, abandonment is failure of trustworthiness. The engagement work at PRT with prisoners is built on consistency and trustworthiness. If we abandon prisoners now, we will breach that trust, and engagement will suffer, and if engagement suffers, so does our authenticity and credibility. Not just with prisoners, but with our messages back to government and the public. Our authenticity and credibility as an organisation rests on our ability to respond to what's actually going on in prisons, and not what HMPPS says is going on. That gap of what is being said, and what

the actual experience is, is where we need to focus our work. We already had a pre-existing network of people in prison we were corresponding with through 'email a prisoner' and letter writing, augmented by visits to prison. The visits couldn't continue, but the emails and letter writing could. Solidarity with prisoners was really important, this was not the moment to leave. It was a crisis for the community, it was a crisis for prisoners, so we needed to respond to that crisis with strength.

CS: How did you change your service in order to continue during the pandemic? Was there anything that you lost during that time that was particularly valuable?

PH: When we came back, other work was suspended, and we came back with a 100 per cent team approach to listening to prisoners. Whereas before the team that listened was my team, the four members of the engagement team, it became a PRT-wide listening exercise that drove the development of the CAPPTIVE project. We called it that because people felt captive in their cells, the acronym spoke to prisoners.

The key thing that changed was that we cemented the centrality of listening to prisoners. It wasn't that it hadn't been done before, it had always been done, but we understood that we could continue to do this at a time when other activities were suspended. What we could do, as an organisation, in this moment was listening to and supporting prisoners, as well as capturing this historic moment in a series of reports. These reports were published and used to strengthen our advocacy work.

Engagement has always been a central part of PRT's work — the fact that my role is part of the senior management teams shows this was never peripheral. However, the fact that we redistributed staff resources to augment that work, has set a template for the future. Everyone was contributing to the same project, and this strengthened relationships, understanding, and it brought people closer to the real-life experiences of prisoners. We built an interdisciplinary way of working that has continued post-lockdown, and it has strengthened relationships between teams.

Some members of PRT would say they lost the interpersonal connection of being in the office. Working from home, in isolation, was a difficult transition, especially for some of the younger people because they were living in shared houses where working remotely was difficult, and work was part of their social life. The loss was the communal sharing space of physical connection. For me, the losses have been outweighed by the gains and I don't think the work suffered. We totally built our membership during Covid. We lost the in-person visits, but we doubled down on the other ways to reach prisoners, such as taking adverts in Inside Time and Converse and really bumping up our use of 'email a prisoner' and paying for reply sheets and freepost addresses for letters. We already had a freephone advice line, and we sent out freepost envelopes, we put out freepost address on our 'email a prisoner' so people could write to us for free. So, our work in engagement, our membership, grew under Covid, and the quality of our interaction developed too, because everyone was writing to prisoners and capturing the experiences.

CS: How are you planning for the future? Who is involved in this?

PH: We've integrated ways of working for engaging with prisoners, listening to prisoners, doing something with what we've heard, moving from listening to action. We've learnt how to do that in an effective way. It's broadened our understanding of how to do this across the team. It's made it feel like it works with more synergy, because you can sometimes work in an office and assume that people understand your work, but sometimes it takes you to work with that team to understand it. I feel a lot of inter-team relationships have been strengthened and inter-team understanding of how best to utilise one another's strengths.

CS: How has the pandemic changed the way that staff work and how have they been affected? How are working practices changing? How are you helping colleagues to adapt to change?

PH: There are more opportunities to coordinate and join up work. There's something about sharing passion and interests that helps to cement work and understanding. For example, we've always had team

meetings, but these happen more now. Upping the frequency and opportunities for connectivity and the strengthening of relationships have been important in moving out of the pandemic. We always used to have a meeting on a Monday called 'press and planning' that was infrequently attended (by me) but we've now kept it as a virtual meeting because it's better attended.

So, understanding that there's a balance to be struck between office working and home working has been a learning. Some people are more effective at home, so that's a lesson. Equally, some people aren't that effective at home, and they prefer the support of colleagues and managers in an office to really do good work. So, we did an audit of what staff wanted their

working patterns to look like, creating bespoke solutions according to people's needs and also the organisational needs. Each individual team has found its own rhythm around work, according to the personalities and needs of the staff. So there was a recognition that you do need to balance the needs of staff members with the organisational business needs to try and find a happy medium.

We did a team away day in the summer, as we were coming out of Covid after a year. That was an offer to every team to take their team away. This helped to create a sense of connection with each other, building trust and a sense of purpose. Ultimately, the degree to which you care about the work does manifest in the quality of what is delivered.

CS: How has the staff culture changed and what effects do you expect from altered ways of working?

PH: Bizarrely, I feel like we're closer as a team. It's the antithesis of what I thought would have happened. I personally feel people are happier at work. Those people who found commuting into the office stressful, now have a better work-life balance. Having the office open for people who work better in a more structured environment has also been really helpful for them. So we have this hybrid way of working. We've invested in the tech, both in the office and for people to work from home. We bought printers for people who didn't have printers, chairs and desks for people who didn't have chairs and desks, organised paper and printer cartridges to make sure people are effective from home. That's all

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been really important to make people intuitively feel like they're in a cared for environment. We invested in an anonymous support service, being clear that people should reach out to managers and this service if they were struggling. So, for me, my experience was of staff being cared for. There was no rush back to the office, we were clear that yes, organisational need is important, but actually if you're struggling, that's okay and you can take your time.

CS: What changes will be made to the services prisoners receive? Do you expect changes to the amount or type of activities available to people in prison? Will the model for prison regimes change?

PH: Well, it ought to. What do I expect? Digitalisation, a form of digital visit, that will stay. In my work, 'email a prisoner' is now available to every prisoner, where that was slow to rollout before. Telemedicine, where you have appointments by video with your doctor, I think we're going to see an expansion of that, that started during Covid, and it'd be a shame if we didn't see that continue at pace. The rapid expansion of digitalisation of health in the community is going to further exacerbate the health inequalities gap to people in prison unless prisons catch up really quickly. Stepping up digital contact with prisoners is most important. Things like 'email a prisoner', I think that should be free personally, we need to see text messaging, Skype calls, we need to have all of those things expanded beyond what is currently available.

The most recent consultation we've conducted is on prison regimes, with 651 prisoners contributing. This highlights how prisons need to change. They've said that prisons have been warehousing individuals, there's been serious disruption to education, work, visits, so prisoners are now saying, as we come out of Covid, this is a moment to reflect on the principles of imprisonment, what are we doing, prisons are punishment but where is justice? Why aren't prisons places of purpose? Prisoners want to experience places of purpose. That means addressing issues that they've come in with and preparing them for release. They don't want another two years behind a cell door. They want a return to relationships with staff, they want time well spent, they don't want time sitting on the bed.

So, a reframing and understanding of purpose. Whatever purpose there was to it before has dropped

off under Covid and what's being exposed is the failure of the institution to deliver rehabilitative activity. Even right now as we're doing this slow unlock. Prisoners have experienced being warehoused. And in that moment they've reflected on what they want, and they want a life that has purpose, they want a life in prisons that reflects the principles of normality. What they're saying is that during lockdown and prior to lockdown, prison is not based on the principles of normality. For example, you don't get allocated a job in the community, you apply for job. Prison is not equipping you to live, because it's abnormal, it doesn't equip you outside, it institutionalises you so rapidly and it deepens the problems you come in rather than fixing them. We want rehabilitative interventions, we want opportunities, we want normality, we want normal relationships, we want you to support us to keep our families together, we want healing, we want restoration, and access to services you need to enable that healing to take place. All of that is what should be part of the prison regime from a prisoner's perspective. We want to feel like we're building community. Community is a big thing that's come out of it, we don't know how to live in communities outside, show us how to live in communities here and let us take away skills that we can use when we come out.

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CS: What have been the effects on prisoners of prolonged public health measures? How are you helping them to recover from their experiences?

PH: The effects for most prisoners is that they've been absolutely tortured. People have survived these long periods of isolation, but they're damaged by them. Family relationships are seriously fragmented. I met a guy in a prison the other day, I've known him for years, he's always had a visit from his wife twice a month while he's been in prison for the last eight years. He said 'I haven't seen her for nearly 18 months, the weird thing is I've started to not miss the visit, and that's really frightening. I've got used to not seeing her'. I fear that's true of many relationships in prison, and short telephone calls for those that don't have in-cell telephony, they're not sufficient to maintain relationships with your kids and partners, so there's big risks there. I think the other real risk here is the heightened understanding in the community of Black

Lives Matter under Covid, and the lack of responsiveness operationally that prisoners from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds can see visibly happening, that's also a risk. Prisoners from Black communities in prison were a part of that, even though they weren't taking part in protests, that is from speaking to them. How is the Prison Service responding to them? Do prisoners know how the Prison Service is responding to the issues around discrimination and racism, where and how is that being communicated to prisoners? We're looking at doing a consultation in 2022, which will shine a light on these issues.

The other thing prisoners are saying is that they've had no real relationship with staff for a long time. There's a lot of new staff, a lot of young staff, and are we ever going to have relationships with staff again? Are prison officers equipped to have relationships with us? They've also been inducted into a prison system where it's not a requirement to have a relationship with a prisoner, it's very cursory contact, but actually prisoners are craving contact and relationships.

CS: How have relationships between prisoners and their families been affected? What was put in place to help? What has been learned from this?

PH: The deficit of relationships, the breakdown in these relationships, is a problem for the future. If anything, it's endorsed even more the necessity to listen to Lord Farmer's recommendations. The need for in-person visits is really clear. Digital connectivity alone is not sufficient. People need touch, hugs, love, support. Children of parents need opportunity to see their parents. A visit is not just about serving the purpose of the prisoner, it's about serving the purpose of the family, for their wellbeing. I feel like that dimension has been neglected. Prisons haven't done anything robust enough under Covid to respond to the needs of families. They've prioritised the need of the safety of the prisoner in the prison over the need of the family in the long term and that's very worrying.

Digital calls, through Purple Visits, is a great development and it should be augmented. But there's a risk that we might just go for the easy option. We need to be really careful that it's known as a call and not a visit. It's a better telephone call, rather than a visit. Using the right language is really important so that we don't replace physical contact with digital contact, because that doesn't work for everybody. Children can't grow by seeing a picture of their dad on a telephone call. That's not the same as a hug. That's ignoring

people's emotional connectivity and rights. The rights of children to see their parents needs to be central to any future regime design. Children's rights should be primary. We should experiment with children having the right to call their parent, whenever they want. If we have in-cell technology, we could have incoming calls from children to their parent. There's no reason to think we couldn't do that.

CS: There have been concerns about the period of the pandemic intensifying social inequality, including based upon race, sex and economic inequality. Have you seen this in prisons? How might this shape the future?

PH: It has to shape the future. Failure to respond would be an abject moral and ethical failure. You can't ignore that. Those tensions — the disproportionality in the criminal justice system— were evident before the pandemic, but we chose to somehow ignore it. There's been a cultural shift in consciousness in the community, and the prisons need to respond to that. There's some urgent work to be done in the community, to prevent and disrupt the pipeline to prison, that's a responsibility of government and society in general, and there's work in prisons to do something effective in the diversification of the prison workforce across the country. As prisoners of colour move around

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the system, and the further they go north the less diverse the staff group becomes. That's disengaging, frightening, and it doesn't speak to care. This adage that prisoners are 'in the care' of HMPPS, as a person of colour, if you turn up at certain prisons north of London, I think you're worried, because you don't see another Black face in the staff team that you can relate to.

Then there's a look at the necessity to improve the complaints and accountability mechanisms that make people of colour feel confident in addressing issues of racism and highlighting them. For example, giving more powers to the Prison and Probation Ombudsman to not just make recommendations but to monitor the implementation of such recommendations. We need to see more visible and tangible evidence that when complaints are upheld, that something has happened, to build trustworthiness in the system.

CS: How might prison be physically designed for a post-pandemic world?

PH: Before we get to the design of the prison, what we need through our political leaders, and in our

communities, is a consensus about the purpose of imprisonment. We need to design for the future, but we're designing from the past understanding. We're designing from the notions of the effect of punishment as a means of curbing undesirable criminal behaviours. We need to do some questioning of purpose, the values and principles of our approach to justice in this country. We need that thought leadership. This future regime design work we've just done with prisoners talked really clearly about what prisoners need in order to move to justice, and that's not reflected in their current experience. So, designing nicer prisons, is that the way forward? Or is it redesigning a system that works for everybody, including victims, before we start design and build the ergonomics of a prison.

I can talk to you about trauma-informed design but actually if we all agree on the purpose and principles of the approach, then the design of the pathways and the systems would emerge. What we've got is fragmentation because punishment fights with rehabilitation for priority. We don't have a cohesive understanding about how the process of desistance and change is built into that system. How is community responsibility built into that system? Where's the responsibility to fix the social drivers of the pathways to prison? Sometimes the discussion is focused on the prison, when it needs to be focused on the understanding of the why.

Prisoners want prisons designed around purpose and time well spent. They accept punishment, they can accept responsibility, they want more contact with restorative work with victims, they want more restoration, making amends, learning from what you've done rather than overcome with guilt and hopelessness. They want inspiration and hope. The community needs to agree what it wants from the prison system so that politicians are ready to make the decisions about resource allocation that can fulfil that purpose, and drive the outcomes that we all want, building safer communities. Until we've done the work of reframing and understanding what purpose our prisons serve, we've always got this tension of 'lock 'em up harder' as a solution to the societal problems that create the need for prisons in the first place.

CS: Do you have any sense that public views about imprisonment have altered as a result of the pandemic and the widespread experience of confinement?

PH: I think that's a really liberal view and I don't think that's played out in reality. I've not felt an outpouring of sympathy for prisoners. I've not seen a shift in politics or in the narratives about prisons, otherwise we'd have seen pressure around testing,

vaccinations and prioritisation. I think they've been very clearly left out of the conversation around prioritisation for better treatment and that speaks to the wider sense of the 'undesirables' that don't get a mention. The only chink I can see is around the employment of former prisoners — there's a growing understanding, but that's maybe driven not by humanity but by post-Brexit employment vacancies. We now don't have cheap agricultural workers from Europe, so the view is that prisoners can fix that. It's a pragmatic view rather than a principled one. So, if I see a shift, it's not about the state of prisons and the pain and trauma they're going through, it's about their utility post release.

CS: What have you personally learned over the pandemic? How have you changed the way you do your work?

PH: I learnt that creating a better work-life balance is good for your soul, it's good for your mental wellbeing, it strengthens your ability to do this work, to be grounded in your homelife in a way that you feel less tired, less stressed, and that's because I'm not commuting so much.

I feel proud we supported prisoners at a deeply painful time in their life by doubling down on listening to them and pouring resources at PRT into that work. I know prisoners are grateful for that, but that's not what's important, I know it's the right thing to do for a charity that seeks to represent and support people, that in moments of need you to do that. We should be proud of ourselves that we did that and that we continue to do so and that we haven't lost the trust of prisoners. In fact, calls to our advice and information service have gone through the roof, our engagement with prisoners is building and our impact is growing. The closeness of our team has increased, we've bonded during Covid. That gives strength to the organisation; it's not fragmented, it's stronger and more unified.

In terms of the funding landscape, what Black Lives Matter did was create an awareness of the necessity to listen to the people in the community at the frontline. Funders are responding to that. The contribution of lived experience involvement has become more in demand. Everybody is looking at lived experience leadership as well. I'm pleased to see that call for broader diversification in the range of voices that are listened to, whether that be from communities of colour, people with lived experience of prison, women, people with protected characteristics. There's been a bit of a shift, a bit more audacity around the demand to be heard, rather than the gratitude of being given an audience. That's a step change we should welcome. It's challenging but it will take us to new places.