

Interview with Pia Sinha, CEO of Prison Reform Trust

Pia Sinha is CEO of the Prison Reform Trust. She is interviewed by Dr Susie Hulley, Senior Research Associate at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge.

Pia Sinha started her career as a psychologist in HMP Holloway and spent 24 years working in HMPPS. During that time, she occupied a variety of roles across a range of establishments, including those holding men, women, and young people, and as Governor of HMP Liverpool Pia was recognised for turning the prison around after a damning HM Inspectorate report. Pia moved to HMPPS headquarters in 2020 to become Acting Deputy Director of the Probation Reform Programme and then Director of Women, before taking up the post of CEO of the Prison Reform Trust in 2023.

SH: So, you worked in HMPPS for a long time. I was interested in what attracted you to the role of CEO at the Prison Reform Trust.

PS: In my previous role as Director of Women, the stuff that really interested me was bringing about operational transformation and changing the lives of women that were coming into contact with the justice system. But I felt that I was getting further and further removed from that and doing much more of the managing upwards, senior civil servant role, which made me feel quite disempowered.

I think that if I am really honest with myself after 24 years of working within the system, I was becoming a bit disenfranchised with my belief in the system, and whether I was able to actually bring about change in the way that I wanted. I think that a really important role of the leader is to hold optimism for your team, for the system, to be the one that is plugging away towards change. And I could do that in a very, very limited way in the operational delivery, but not really in the wider systemic way that I wanted. And then I heard that Peter (Dawson – previous CEO of PRT) was retiring, and I had secretly always coveted that role. I guess it came a bit sooner than I would have liked it, I would have liked to have spent a bit longer doing my role as Director of Women, but it was an opportunity that I could not pass by. And so, I thought, 'OK, well, this is your chance now Pia, you have been saying that you have been within the system, you have been frustrated within the system, and now when you are outside of the system, perhaps you will be able to renew your energy and your optimism and be able to bring that direction of travel within this sector'. I guess that was probably what was going on in my mind when I decided to make the leap. And it is a scary leap, because having been a civil servant

for 24 years and having the safety that brings, to then go into the charity sector was a bit scary, but I am really glad I made the move.

SH: That is great, thank you. And what do you personally bring to this role?

PS: It is very interesting, now being on the outside, realising that people within the system actually have very little idea of how many people are doing a lot of work on the outside. They know of charities like Prison Reform Trust, of course, but they do not really know what we do and equally, for the charity sector, they have an idea based on their experiences of officials and the system, what might be the sort of burning platforms, but they do not necessarily know operationally what's realistic, what's possible, what are the pressures of that system. In order to push and pull the right levers, it is really important that you know someone who deeply understands the system in order to know how to influence it to best effect. So, I guess what I bring to the role is that deep understanding of how the system works and if we want to really influence change in a meaningful way, then it is really important that you know how to influence in a strategic and tactical way.

SH: Do you feel like you will have more opportunities to influence in this role than you did when you were working within the system?

PS: Well, you know, the proof will be in the pudding, I guess. But I do believe that. And one of the most liberating things of being on the outside is I can speak my truth to power. So pretty much every kind of right-thinking Governor that I have worked with, every senior civil servant, are not misaligned with the priorities that PRT might have, but they are frustrated with the system because they have to operate within the confines of that system, and they bring about change but it is very, very slow. Whereas from the outside, I am able to shine a light on some of the things and give voice to some of those individuals who want to do the right thing but are unable to do it in the same meaningful way from the inside.

SH: Do you think the timing is relevant, in terms of where the system is at the moment?

PS: Yeah, I think that there is a lot going on within the sector at the moment. We have got a new Secretary of State who seems to be giving fresh optimism to the system in terms of how he perceives the system, his own qualities,

which are about listening. And we have got a good combination between Alex Chalk and Damian Hinds, which I think might mean that some of those really tough, wicked problems that have been stuck might show some green shoots – there might be light at the end of the tunnel. And I think that it is a really great opportunity to capitalise on those changes. We are also at that place where we have got a general election in a years' time and possibly a different Government. What are their priorities? How do we influence them? Nobody knows what's going to happen, but it is a great time to position yourself in the right way. And PRT is excellent at doing that. It does feel like an opportune time to be at the right tables and giving voice to some of the things that PRT have stood for, for such a long time.

SH: I imagine the culture at HMPPS and PRT are quite different. How do they compare and have you had to adapt your leadership style and expertise in your new role?

PS: One hundred percent. Some of it is easier and some of it is far more challenging. I think that what rank and hierarchy give you is the ability to bring your influence to bear very directly and people, whether they agree with you or not, they are very action oriented. So, you are just given authority, just because of how it is structured. Whereas in the charity sector there is a lot more influencing that you have to do. When you come up with a crazy idea, you have to do a lot more to try and persuade and influence people to follow you on that idea. You have to intellectually really raise your game, because people are not just going to be satisfied with: 'I think this is a great idea, let's do it'. It is a bit more like 'convince me that this is a good idea'. But they also have a lot of knowledge around why something might not work. They have spent a lot of time really researching those issues, so you have to have a much more open mind to learning about those other ways of working.

And I feel like I am learning a lot in this role. I have come in as a CEO, and I am probably the least informed of everyone here and I have to do a lot, I have got to work harder. But the subject matter is just so gripping and there are so many different angles to it as well: how you influence parliamentarians and ministers is very different to how you might want to let prisoners and prison staff know that you are also working as an agent for them. They take very different approaches. One is a very direct, humble, immediate, and transparent approach to saying, 'hey, we are doing all of this to improve your lives and to bring about reform in the system'. But the approach that you need to take with parliamentarians and ministers is much more subtle and nuanced. You have got to understand that you have a lot of very versatile tools in your toolkit in order to be able to do that. So, leadership wise, it is a place of growth.

SH: And, is there anything you miss about governing prisons and working in HMPPS?

PS: Oh, I miss a lot of it. I miss the people. There is something about being in a prison environment, although it is really heavy, there is a lightness to it which comes about through the relationships you have with people. There is a camaraderie to it and it is more fun in a weird way. You know I cannot explain it in any other way, apart from there is a buzz to it because you are in the trenches and bad stuff is going on and you are managing crisis, and at the seat of your pants you are making decisions. It is a fast-moving environment, where you have got your people around you and you get really deeply connected with them because you are fighting those fires together and that suits my personality and suits my style. So, I miss that bit of the cut and thrust. Here...it is the difference between being much more physical in your leadership and this is being much more intellectual in your leadership.

SH: Yes, that is interesting. And what do you think the main challenges facing prisoners and prison staff at the moment?

PS: I think that we are battling a really long-standing legacy of seeing the criminal justice system as a bit of an experiment, through the various justice secretaries that we have had, through austerity, through just chopping and changing the justice system just because it was the preference of whoever was in power at the time. So now we are hugely overcrowded, we have a catastrophic staff retention problem, you have got a prison system that has come out of COVID, and there is real despair and hopelessness within the system. Also, we are using longer sentences as a way of signalling the 'tough on crime' narrative. It is become really populist. And at the end of the day, these are human beings who are literally killing themselves. You have to take your ideology right to the kind of end point of the person who's within the system and, unless you see the human being that is attached to the end of it, you are not really going to realise the implications of it. I think that the prison system is in a new phase of despair and hopelessness, and I think that one of the reasons why it is important that you have governors and leaders within the system that are values driven is that they realise that there is a human cost to all of this and, therefore, they try and minimise and mitigate against all of the policies that have that impact. But it becomes very easy in prisons to forget the human impact, especially if the system is sort of overwhelmingly telling you that the lives of prisoners do not matter. So, I remember when I was Governor, if you weren't holding the moral compass for the prison, it would deteriorate really quickly because what you are signalling to people is that it doesn't matter if you do not care about these individuals. Whether it is about cleanliness or whether it is about procedural legitimacy, they unravel really quickly. So, part of your role, part of

your mission as a leader is really to hold the line as far as those things are concerned. But when you have got a system above that, a political system which is putting on a huge amount of pressure to say 'do not care', that actually it is OK that you have people locked up for 22 hours a day and legitimising that process, it is OK to use weapons like PAVA to subdue them and to initiate order and control, then they will very happily default to that and it becomes very hard for leaders to fight the pressure of that system. And that is where we are right now. You know, so it is even more important that we have got someone holding a mirror to that and saying, let's not just sleepwalk into the kind of catastrophe that is unravelling for us.

SH: Yes, and so for you, what are the key areas of policy that PRT will prioritise under your leadership?

PS: So PRT have got a very strong foundation and that is the work that they do around long sentences, people who are deep in the system, so I want to maintain our pressure around the system's love affair with sentencing people to long sentences. We have done so much work around the IPP sentence and I want to keep that. I want to maintain the excellent relationship that PRT have with various people of influence, including parliamentarians and ministers, and how we lobby for change around various Bills and policies and carry on the influence of that. So, the way I see it is that this is the foundation of what PRT does, and I want to maintain that. I do not want to mess with it. It is good. It works. It needs to be protected.

But I find that at this moment, especially post COVID, governors have become uninspired, they have become really fed up and hopeless because of the stuff that they have to deal with day in, day out. The cycle is just coming back up again and how do you keep your energy levels and how do you keep imagining different ways of dealing with the same problems? And I think that the work that I want to do for PRT is that I want to be able to dock the amazing work, the information that we get, the research that we undertake, and take it to leaders to inspire them to say, 'this is what's happening in the world outside, get interested in it. Get some ideas from it so that when you are facing the kind of same old operational challenges to deal with, it gives you a new idea to try, to do things slightly differently, so that you feel that you are getting hope back. You are feeling inspired by what the possibilities are rather than what the limitations are'. So that is the kind of area that I want to focus our energies on and partly it is because I come from an operational background, I like doing things. So, I want to get PRT slightly oriented towards being able to deliver stuff to the operational frontline with the aim of changing the way that they interact with prisoners in the system so that it brings about change to their lives in prison.

SH: You have said that there is a strong foundation around long sentences. Are there other policy areas that you are particularly focused on? Areas that you want to channel the information that you have back through to the front line?

PS: Sorry, I remember that is what your original question was! So, I want to go back and start doing work with women again. I think we have been saying for a long time that fewer women need to be in prison. And that is just 100% true. It is trying to understand - why is the system not making the change happen? You know it worked for the Youth Custody Service. They managed to reduce their population and I want to learn from that. I want to take a more solution-oriented approach to say, 'what is happening in the system that is not making this vision, that everyone literally buys into, into a reality?'

And the other is, I want to create a leadership programme for prison, probation, and policy leaders. I am calling it Next Gen Leadership. So, using all the knowledge base that we have at PRT and through the sector to speak to governors and probation practitioners about what could be some innovative ways that they could bring about change to either their probation region or their prison or their policy area.

Also, through our 'Advice and Information Line', Building Futures programme and our prisoner engagement network we are hearing a lot about how the cost of living crisis is really impacting prisoners. The fact that canteen prices have gone up hugely. The fact that prisoners are not being able to access work and education, which earns them money. Prisoners are just getting incredibly poor, they are not being able to afford to buy stuff that helps them keep their well-being intact, but more importantly it potentially creates a debt culture within prisons that is leading to violence and self-harm. So, I want to look at the policy around prisoner wages and how the system is responding.

And the other is - any learning theory says you are more likely to bring change about through positive reinforcement than you are through punishment. But we do not recognise prisoners who are going above and beyond in becoming good citizens. Who are learning, who are using the arts in a way to enhance their lives and make the best of the situation that they find themselves in. I want to develop a prisoner reward and recognition programme, which is looking at some of the good stuff that prisoners are doing.

And again, I want to use our platform, our briefing papers to have a slightly different approach, so it is not just about what is wrong with the system, which is important and valid, but where is it working really well? To bring hope and optimism into the system, both from the way that practitioners might engage with us, but also how prisoners might engage. Sometimes when you are given a really long sentence, you have to almost have a radical

acceptance of that, but whilst you are in that system, whilst you are deep in that system, what are the things that make you feel hopeful and inspired to carry on regardless? You cannot wave the magic wand and suddenly say that your sentence is finished and off you go. You still have to help prisoners survive it and that is also a really big purpose of reform, is to help people to stay in that kind of place where they are optimistic about themselves. And I think that is something that we need to lean into a bit more.

SH: And so, what are the main challenges you face, in terms of your policy areas, but also in terms of getting your information to prison governors and probation leaders?

PS: I think the challenge will be funding. Prison Reform Trust pride themselves on not taking any government funding and that is good, that needs to be maintained. So, in producing this kind of course I need to persuade funders to give us some money to be able to do that. And I think that reading the tide, funders are much more interested in outcomes, and so they should be, you know, where is my money going? How is what you are doing actually making a difference to your objectives? And I think that this is a really good programme that will allow funders to see the end outcome and how it benefits prisoners and the system. But it is a challenge.

The other challenge with all of this is the sector. You know it has got comfortable in the position that it takes, it is quite easy to stand on the sidelines and point the finger and say, 'you are not doing this well', but to interact with the system and say, 'actually I want to help you and here are some solutions.' Some people will say 'well, are you sleeping with the enemy? Are you too close to the system?' and those are the challenges that you have got to try and face up to because part of coming in as someone new, with a different set of experiences and priorities and values, is that you have to try and change the system too. Because it can get very comfortable in the way that it is, which is 'let's just do what we have always done'. But if you are trying to do something different, you will meet resistance, you will meet challenge and you have got to be able to be strong enough in your belief system to say, 'actually let's try a different approach'. And that might be a challenge from within the charity sector. So, let's wait and see what resistance there will be, because I am anticipating that any change will bring about resistance.

SH: Thanks Pia. And so just moving on to the last few questions, which are mainly about your achievements and legacy. During your career, what are you proudest of and why?

PS: You know, I still have to go back to my Liverpool achievement, and I keep saying to people I cannot dine out on this forever. I am going to need something bigger than that to top it, but so far I have not been able to top it. I

think it was a lot of things that made me proud about it. But the thing that made me the proudest is that Liverpool was reinspected I think a year ago or 18 months ago and the progress that it has continued to make, because of its leadership there, it has sustained the changes that were made earlier on, and I think that is the legacy. That is something to be really proud of because you know, it is not falling on its arse just because you have left and so it is not just about you, it is actually about the fact that people believed in it. And that makes me really proud.

SH: So, it is about embedding change?

PS: Embedding change is the tough bit, especially in prisons, because you could get a new Governor who has a really different set of values and principles, and it goes a different way. But you know, the fact that it has not suggests that something of what has happened during those two and a half years while I was there has seeped into the DNA of that prison, which means that the culture has taken hold. And that feels like a really important thing to happen.

SH: Is there anyone who has particularly inspired you over the years? Also, who inspires you now and why?

PS: You know, when I was Governor and I found myself just stuck in my office, having to do just mundane bureaucratic stuff, the thing that inspired me was when I would just switch off the computer and go and walk on the landings and talk to prisoners and staff. The people who inspired me most were prisoners who, against all odds, were really trying to push themselves to educate themselves to keep learning new things. And despite all of their horrendous traumatic background, they managed to find that strength in them. And I think seeing that resolve in people who have probably come from the most devastating backgrounds, seeing people show that courage; the bravery of individuals, that is what inspires me.

SH: And so, finally, what is the one thing you would most like to achieve during your role here?

PS: I think that what I would be really happy with is that the PRT becomes a bit more of a household name, amongst governors and practitioners. So that they are using the intelligence PRT have as their go to place when they are thinking 'oh I want to do something different here. Let me just see what PRT has written about it'. So that the membrane between the external and internal becomes a lot more permeable, and so it is not just the charity sector doing its own thing and the prison sector doing its own thing. I want it to become a lot more integrated. That is what I would like to see.

SH: That is great, thank you so much for your time, Pia.