

The cover of the Prison Service Journal features a photograph of a sunset or sunrise seen through the dark, vertical bars of a prison cell. The sun is a bright, glowing orb on the horizon, partially obscured by a layer of clouds. The sky is filled with soft, golden light and wispy clouds. The bars of the cell are in the foreground, creating a grid-like pattern that frames the view of the sky. The overall mood is one of hope and freedom, contrasting with the confinement of the prison.

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**Special edition:
Care Leavers and the Criminal Justice System**

Good Practice in Prisons

Jackie Ristic was previously the Care Experienced People Lead at HMP/YOI Lincoln. *Alecia Johnstone* is a Free Church Chaplain at HMP Preston. They are interviewed by *Debbie McKay*, the Operational Lead for Care Experienced People in Custody.

Jackie Ristic is a hub manager at HMP/YOI Lincoln following time spent in operational roles and as a Prison Offender Manager. Jackie is also Probation Services Officer trained and is passionate about providing a rehabilitative culture for those in custody. She was the lead for Care Experienced People at Lincoln for two and a half years and has been nominated for a Butler Trust award and Prison Officer of the Year. After her father passed away unexpectedly and experiencing the trauma and grief of a loss of a parent she wanted to support young people through their own experiences of trauma particularly after finding out that 27 per cent of the prison population nationally had experienced being in care as children.

Reverend Alecia Johnstone is an ordained Pentecostal minister and has been a Free Church Chaplain in HMP Preston for the last five years. During her time at Preston she has received a Butler trust award for establishing an outstanding service for care experienced individuals. Alecia's start in life was less than ideal, her father has acute paranoid schizophrenia and her mother was a lifelong alcoholic with severe mental health issues. Due to the chaos that shortly followed with her father being sectioned repeatedly and her mother having severe post natal depression, then one siblings having passed away through a road traffic accident and another through suicide. At age 4 she was taken into care with her paternal grandmother. During her teens, she was fostered by a friends family and by this stage the trauma, loss and abandonment issues suffered could have easily defined her but instead they created a women who is tenacious, resilient and determined to redeem her story and make her experiences count.

DM: Please tell me a little bit about your role as Care Experienced People Lead for your establishments?

JR: I carried out my role as care experienced lead alongside my job as a prison offender manager.¹ Initially it involved a lot of work however now it's established

it's much easier to maintain and offer support to the people in prison that need it.

AJ: I established a service for young male adults aged 18-25 who are care experienced. In custody, these individuals are often unidentified and consequently unsupported, alienated and incredibly isolated. The service and system I implemented resulted in these young people being identified, signposted and supported to a brighter future.

DM: How did you come to be involved in this work?

JR: I started as a prison offender manager in 2018 and, as part of that, I also gained the title of 'care experienced lead'. At the time I knew very little about the subject and there wasn't a huge amount of tailored support in the prison I was working in so it was very much a learning curve!

AJ: My manager asked if I would be willing to attend the care leavers / experienced conference. He knew of my professional background in working for the local authority as a procurement and commissioning professional for children's services as well as my work experience within various children's residential homes and educational establishments. More recently I had been involved in private fostering.

DM: What would you say are the most important parts of this role? Did you have any previous experience in this area?

JR: I was lucky to be able to try various different ideas to support care experienced men — some more successful than others! My manager was open to suggestions I put forward and we very much had the attitude of 'if it doesn't work, at least we learn'! For me however the most important part of the role is to get care experienced prisoners in touch with their personal advisors and encourage a working relationship between them to ensure they are as supported as possible both in custody and on release.

Now I have a lot more knowledge on the subject, for me, there is one fundamental thing to remember when working with care experienced prisoners — they

1. A Prison Offender Manager is responsible for the management of a person whilst they are in prison, including sentence planning and reviews.

did not choose to be put into care. People in prison that are care experienced had no control over where they were put as children, when they were at their most vulnerable. They did not choose a care experienced life.

AJ: Crucially you need strong leadership abilities, be an effective and ideally enthusiastic communicator and have a willingness to genuinely engage with these individuals' stories and lives and bring about the necessary changes to enable them to engage more effectively with support services whilst in custody and on release.

I had an advantage in that both my personal and professional background had involved me working closely with children's social services. I had been an inspector for my local authority some time ago, this involved me visiting children's homes across the county and seeing the struggles and difficulties first hand of the young people, and of those trying to care for them. My own story involved foster care, this experience shaped me into an individual who has an insatiable desire to come alongside others whose journey has been difficult and somewhat of a challenge!

DM: Tell me what is in place for care experienced people in your prison. What would you consider is best practice?

JR: I keep a record of all our care experienced prisoners, who their personal advisors are and contact details and ensure this is shared with all relevant parties including resettlement teams and offender management so we can take a collaborative approach with our support. I highlight care experienced people through the alert process on NOMIS (prison IT database) and record all contact information in the comments. This means that if someone is released and returns to custody or is transferred all the information is easily accessible for anyone that needs it and reduces work long term. We also offer peer support, prisoner forums and specialist keyworkers to really tailor the support in place at HMP/YOI Lincoln.

AJ: Working alongside Community Rehabilitation Companies (also known as CRC's)² we utilise the existing induction process and implement the necessary changes to ensure care leavers had multiple opportunities to self-disclose; most do within 48 hours

of arriving in custody. We ensured the new systems established were incorporated and embedded into operational practice, and all the relevant policies and strategies were updated to reflect these changes. On a regular basis we run awareness training for officers, governors and chaplains and we have trained a team of specialist officers to become keyworkers for these individuals. We encourage peer to peer by recruiting, training and appointing wing representatives who will assist in identification, promote events such as care experienced forums, family and significant others days, competitions and be a voice for those who are less able or confident to communicate issues, problems or needs.

We also run forums and invite guest speakers in to share their story of being an ex — offender and being in care. These forums also provide the safe space to explore life issues such as identity, self-esteem, power of speech — your confession and self-belief. It is so important to ensure that your family days are inclusive, we renamed ours to include significant others with this in mind recognising that not everybody has a 'family' as such.

Networking is crucial — find out who all your surrounding local authorities care leaver team managers are, invite them into prison environment and educate them regarding their young person's journey into prison, their

likely experiences, routines, opportunities (or the lack of!...especially during covid!), inform them of how much impact their positive support can bring to a very isolated vulnerable young person. Help them to understand how regular monthly financial support can assist them to keep in contact with the family, friends or their support network on the out. It is so important they understand how this money shouldn't be dependent upon their engagement in work or education as the YP isn't always capable to engage in these activities due to mental health or social issues. Secondly the Prison Service can't always guarantee enough places in education or employment so it is important the personal advisors understand this.

We provide materials and factsheets which empower the young person to understand their rights and the responsibilities of the statutory workers in their life's including social workers, personal advisors (the

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2. Community Rehabilitation Companies are suppliers of rehabilitation services.

person who provides support from the local authority), probation officers and the support they can expect from the local authority, prison and probation.

Prior to release, arranging for joint release planning meetings with the PA (personal advisor), probation, young person and the keyworker can really assist the young person as often they can be told by the PA that they have arranged for them to go to one premises whilst probation have arranged another, both need to communicate together and ensure they are aware of the risks and needs associated with their particular young person.

On a much lighter note, one of our officers would always visit each young person on their birthday, this for some meant a lot; they were not forgotten; overlooked; it created a sense of belonging.

DM: We know identifying those with care experience can be difficult? Why do you think that is and have you found ways to overcome that?

JR: We have a great system in place with the support of Lincolnshire Action Trust (LAT) where people are interviewed immediately on arrival into custody and, by working so closely together, we have lots of prisoners being highlighted as care experienced within the first few hours of arriving which is great. As I have got the word out there of the work I'm doing the amount of care experienced prisoners in the prison has increased due to increased reporting which is great.

However, it still remains a struggle and is something we will continue to work on. Firstly, we have really encouraged and educated staff, both HMPPS and agencies, to use the right type of questions to gain the information we need and also on what support can be accessed for the prisoner — as they say knowledge is power! We have particularly focused on staff briefings and educating our young offender keyworkers to ensure they have the information to hand.

Secondly, the other challenge is getting prisoners to admit to being care experienced. A lot feel it makes them more vulnerable, gives them an unwanted label or just don't understand why we ask them! So we have prisoners as care experienced representatives on each wing who can be clearly identified by wearing lanyards and issue a bi-monthly newsletter to promote the support available.

AJ: It can be difficult but doesn't have to be. For some, they are very aware of the stigma attached to being in care, they may want to forget and distance themselves from the past often due to the abuse they suffered prior to care and unfortunately often whilst in care.

The ways we overcame this resistance was by proactively making the necessary changes to first day interviews and induction processes, appoint wing reps who will help identify those whom maybe more reluctant to disclose to a professional, also utilising chaplaincy teams which can be a good source of support and can often identify at their reception visits these vulnerable individuals.

DM: You have both mentioned raising awareness. Do you think other staff in your prison understand what we mean by care experienced people? To what extent do you think that it's important that prison staff understand those experiences? How can we improve this awareness?

JR: I think we can all learn a bit more about what it means to be care experienced. My perception of someone that had been in care and was now in prison was that they probably came from a family of drug users or repeat offenders. The reality is very different. I remember speaking to one 19-year-old who

had been the carer for his mum who had cancer up to the age of 11. She passed away and he was put into a children's home as there was no other family members to take him in. The only thing he wanted support with was getting his property from the children's home to the prison as it had his mum's blanket in — the only possession he had of hers.

I worked really hard to create a strong partnership between the prison and the local authority and here at HMP/YOI Lincoln we have been lucky to have amazing support from Andy Morris in particular who is the corporate parenting manager in Lincoln Local Authority. He has given presentations to staff on what defines someone that is care experienced and the type of support they can be offered as well as joined me to hold prisoner forums. I have also been invited to stakeholder events that the local authority have held to increase awareness of care experienced young people in prison.

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Working with care experienced people has really opened my eyes to some horrific experiences of trauma and I hope I have made a difference to some of the people I've worked with.

AJ: Yes absolutely, they do now. It is absolutely vital that all officers at all grades are educated regarding the common experiences and issues those in care face. Training on subjects such as attachment theory should I believe be included in prison officer training as that would help them see and understand why many of these individuals are socially awkward, often found in segregation, struggle to trust anyone and establish and maintain long term healthy relationships.

DM: How can we best support care experienced people whilst they are in prison?

JR: The priority has to be getting them in touch with their personal advisor (PA) from the local authority if they are still eligible for that support.³ I ensure details are provided to both the PA and the prisoner on how to write, email, call, visit or send money in so they can choose the best option for them. The feedback since starting is that those that are care experienced feel lonely so I've tried to help this by holding prisoner forums and invited agencies to support these including the local authority and internal agencies. Above all listen to their stories and support them in their rehabilitation — a little bit of confidence in someone's ability can really inspire them to achieve more.

AJ: By going the extra mile! They have been adversely treated and suffered huge losses in their lives. They haven't been given the basic building blocks which we may take for granted of love, security, affection, acceptance, warmth and belonging. They find identity a real issue, having moved around and often been passed from pillar to post they often struggle to feel any sort of belonging, rootedness or sense of home. Their self-esteem is shattered and their hearts broken, they have little hope and are desperate to be seen, heard and valued. We need to draw alongside them, listen well, empower and bring about some changes and challenge their attitudes in a positive manner. Build a relationship with them of respect and

teach them new ways to approach situations and circumstances, with dignity, diplomacy and resilience.

DM: What challenges have there been for you in your role? How have you overcome them?

JR: Getting external agencies on board with what we are trying to do. As a cat B local we get people from all over the country and the service offer from different local authorities varies dramatically particularly for the 21-25 year old age group. It's been really important to know exactly what care experienced people are entitled to ensure that's what they are offered as a minimum and, if not, for me to be confident enough to be the prisoners ally and challenge local authorities to ensure they provide the basics. This has been getting better as good practice has become embedded but there's still a long way to go.

AJ: I had one day a week and no other official team members. Limited time and no funding were the biggest challenges. I have a supportive chaplaincy team and manager who enabled me to run with something I am passionate about. My energy and desire to make a difference for these young men is a large part of what got me through. Initially many operational colleagues were cynical, negative and quite apathetic. I didn't let that deter

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me but used those opportunities to educate and gently challenge inappropriate attitudes. Communicating clearly, concisely and passionately enabled me to influence and begin the culture change required to bring about change and positive outcomes. Being able to negotiate and influence colleagues at all levels was tricky but essential as they needed to be on board. Working with other departments over whom we have no management responsibility can be difficult but as long as the governors and senior managers are on board and are able and willing to support you then the resistance to change is limited.

DM: What sort of things have enabled you to carry out your role?

JR: The support of my manager and the Senior Management Team here at HMP/YOI Lincoln has been amazing. They have backed my ideas and asked

3. The local authority is under a statutory duty to provide the support of a personal advisor for all 'care leavers' until the age of 25 years old. The personal advisor is not the allocated social worker, but is appointed to perform a range of roles, including offering advice and co-ordinating the provision of services.

4. The ACCT process is designed to support people during periods of crisis, but particularly when they self-harm, attempt suicide, express thoughts of suicide ideation or thoughts of self-harming. The process includes regular review meetings to which an individual's next of kin can be invited.

questions to ensure they can promote the work I'm doing across the whole prison. I will always be grateful for their belief in the work I was doing and the passion I had for wanting to support care experienced people.

AJ: My past experience of working with children and young people in care and personal experience have really helped. Also, clear direction, vision and communication from the national and regional leads. Specific allocated time weekly to dedicate to the role. An understanding chaplaincy team and a Governor's and senior managers who got it!

DM: What are the most important things we need to address going forward for our care experienced people? How do we do this?

JR: From a prison perspective we need to address the support we can offer over 25-year-old care experienced people in custody. At 25 the support from a local authority just stops however the trauma doesn't go away. I have always held my forums for all those that have experienced being in care and will carry on being inclusive where possible. We also need to be better at our communication with local authorities and ensure they are on board with supporting prisons and the changes we are making to improve our care experienced strategies.

AJ: We can provide a platform to voice concerns, challenge the existing services and see their suggestions implemented locally. They no longer need to feel overlooked, silenced and isolated. They can be empowered to make a difference to their peer group. Prison services including family days for example can become inclusive. We have to ensure they can access their social care files and with the right support mechanisms in place, enable them to read their own life story. Facilitate events where inspirational guest speakers who had similar experiences can share their story and bring hope to prisoners who could begin to imagine a brighter future for themselves and those around them. Hold forums and explore issues such as identity, self-esteem and the future. Explain and cover topics such as the importance of our confession, self-fulfilling prophecy and the words we speak, self-belief and the need to dream again. Ensure staff are educated regarding specific issues care experienced individuals face such as attachment issues. Ensure we are inclusive when advertising events or programmes in the language we use being aware that not everybody has a 'family'. Most of all, be empathic, authentic and compassionate in dealing with these young people.

DM: Tell me about a time when you think you have made a difference to someone and why that was?

JR: One of the first people I worked with as part of my role as care experienced lead was Mr W. He was a prolific self-harmer and serving an extensive sentence for a 23-year-old and had been put into care after being abused by his father. I explained what my role was and we managed to re-gain contact with his personal advisor (PA) in Birmingham.

His PA supported the prison with the ACCT (Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork) process⁴ as 'next of kin' and eventually we managed to arrange for him to visit Mr W. I remember going to the visits hall and they told me stories of driving to get fried chicken — it all seemed so 'normal' and relaxed — exactly how you would expect someone to be with their family.

When it came to Mr W's release he was due to go into an approved premise but with support of his PA and other agencies it was agreed he should return to live with his mum. I have no doubt he would have been recalled within days of release if he had gone to an Approved Premises but the support of his mum really helped him and his rehabilitation.

The best thing about the story? He made a difference to how we worked too. He was my care experienced lead which gave him responsibility — something he had never been trusted with before and with that came some much needed confidence in his own abilities. He put forward ideas that we continue to use today and I hope he realises how he has made a difference to his peers with what we have been able to implement.

AJ: One young man had ongoing issues with staff, periodically he would have a short fuse and mouth off his anger and frustration at officers who were often trying to assist. Coming alongside regularly to listen and understand his perspective, listen to his story and begin to help him unravel why certain behaviours and coping strategies were his default and help him recognise and realise that he had the potential to change and learn new skills, new attitudes and new behaviours which would be much more effective in helping him achieve his desired outcome. He went on to be a respected orderly on a wing with other care experienced individuals for who he also became a buddy and wing rep. He obtained his social care file too whilst here and I was able to ensure appropriate support was in place to help him in the process. When he eventually moved on from here, he sent his thanks to me for all the support given and stated he would be eternally grateful. It was a pleasure to journey alongside him and draw on my various experiences to help him go from strength to strength.