

'It's all meant to be about resettlement': Deconstructing the function of women's open prisons in England & Wales

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Open prisons are establishments for individuals whose risk is low enough to be managed in a minimum-security environment. Their primary aim is to gradually facilitate resettlement and reintegration into the community. Until recently, open prisons have received limited attention from researchers or policy-makers in England & Wales. Empirical studies of women's open prisons in particular have been largely absent in the UK; exceptions have included Dr Sarah Waite's study of staff-prisoner relationships and my PhD research, on which this article draws.¹ One important consequence of this inattention has been the apparent taking-for-granted of open prisons' function as places of (a particular kind of) transition and resettlement. However, recent changes to the process of progressing to open conditions, which have emerged largely in response to population pressures within the closed prison estate, deserve further exploration. Drawing on data from a study of women's open prisons in England & Wales, this paper explores the impact of these developments on women's open prisons and their resettlement function. In particular, it foregrounds the perspectives of women held in open prisons, and of those working there, on transitions *into* and *through* open prisons, and how this affects the dynamics and function of these establishments.

The Study

Between 2023-24, I conducted a qualitative study of the nature, purpose, and experience of women's open prisons in England & Wales. A key focus of the study included exploring the purpose and function of open prisons, and how this was perceived by

incarcerated women. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Cambridge Institute of Criminology's Ethics Committee where I am currently based and by the HMPPS NRC National Research Committee. Fieldwork took place at HMPs Askham Grange and East Sutton Park – the only open prisons for women in England & Wales. I collected data over a period of six months through ethnographic observation, informal conversations with staff and managers, and semi-structured interviews with 42 incarcerated women across the two establishments. All interviewees provided written informed consent after we discussed the nature, objectives, and potential outcomes and outputs of the study. I also spent extended periods of unstructured time in the prisons, 'hanging out', having informal conversations, and observing and participating in daily activities. This was not only essential for building rapport, but also for witnessing first-hand the individual and organisational impact of the population pressures which prisoners, staff, and managers frequently brought up in our conversations.

Context and literature review: Overcrowding and the function of open prisons

Overcrowding has been a persistent problem for English & Welsh prisons for many years, but has reached a critical point more recently.² This has forced emergency strategies to arise to manage population pressures, one of which has been the Temporary Presumptive Recategorisation Scheme (TPRS). Introduced in March 2023, just months before fieldwork for this study began, this scheme accelerated the decategorisation and transfer of determinately-sentenced prisoners who met specific criteria and were 12- weeks away from their conditional release date.³ Concerns have since emerged from practitioners about

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1. Waite, S. (2023). *"Their ethos is all about building trust": An Exploration of Staff-Prisoner Relationships at a Women's Open Prison*. [PhD thesis]. Leeds Beckett University; Przybylska, D. (in progress) [PhD thesis]. University of Cambridge.
 2. UK Parliament. (2024). *Government plans to ease prison capacity pressure and manage the needs of vulnerable prisoners*. Available at: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/government-plans-to-ease-prison-capacity-pressure-and-manage-the-needs-of-vulnerable-prisoners/> (accessed 14 February 2025).
 3. Ministry of Justice. (2023). *Temporary Presumptive Recategorisation Scheme*. Available at: https://insidetime.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/TPRS_rulebook.pdf (accessed 11 June 2025).

the detrimental implications of the TPRS policy on the culture and function of open prisons.⁴ For instance, staff have identified rising levels of non-compliance, with reports of increasing 'drug use, bad behaviour and organised criminality' attributed to more 'unsuitable candidates' entering open conditions.⁵ Notably, though, this is not the first time open prisons have been relied upon to alleviate population pressures in the closed estate. This positions open prisons not merely as institutions focused on resettlement, but as a contingency for the closed prison estate.⁶

Historically, open prisons emerged to better prepare prisoners for 'freedom' than was deemed possible under the restrictive regime of a closed prison.⁷ This was to be achieved through fewer in-prison restrictions, a more porous and normalised regime, and encouragement of pro-social interactions with the outside community.⁸

There has been a long-standing understanding that this would be of particular benefit to people serving longer sentences who might need more time to (re-)build resources and re-adjust to the outside world.⁹ This original purpose – of gradual resettlement and reintegration – has persisted, as open prisons today continue to function as places of transition between custody and community. Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), which allows prisoners to leave their establishment for specified periods of time for resettlement purposes, including maintaining family/social ties, voluntary work or employment, education/training, or finding housing, is crucial to

open prisons' function.¹⁰ In the longer-term, all of this is also intended to reduce the risk of recidivism.¹¹

Alongside this gradual transition, however, open prisons are now host to a different kind of transition, one that is – by distinction – brief, as an increasing number of women spend only a few months or even weeks in an open prison before release. This may be appropriate for the needs of women serving shorter sentences for first-time and non-violent offences, who do not require strict supervision under very secure and restrictive conditions. Nonetheless, it has important implications for all living and working in women's open prisons. In the following section, I turn to the study findings to show that these mechanisms cannot be understood without contextualising how – and *when* – women transition from a closed to an open prison.

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Findings

Transitions to open conditions

According to the women interviewed for this study, the meanings afforded to progressing to and being in an open prison varied depending on individual needs and circumstances. Specifically, a time-based distinction emerged in terms of how long it took women to move from closed to open conditions, at what point in their sentence this occurred, and how long they had left until their release date. This generally depended on women's sentence length and on their risk assessments (e.g., risk of harm to the public, risk of abscond). On this basis, a distinction could be made between long-term and short-term stays, which was determined by (a) the overall length of women's sentences and (b) the

4. Dearden, L. (2025, January 4). Fears of unrest as PM considers open prisons for more offenders. *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jan/04/fears-of-unrest-as-pm-considers-open-prisons-for-more-offenders>; Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Independent Sentencing Review: Final report and proposals for reform*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-sentencing-review-final-report>.

5. See footnote 4: Dearden, L. (2025).

6. Jones, H., & Cornes, P. (1977). *Open Prisons*. Routledge & Keegan Paul.

7. Paterson, A. (1951). *Paterson on prisons: Being the collected papers of Sir Alexander Paterson*. F Muller; Menis, S. (2019). *A History of Women's Prisons in England: The Myth of Prisoner Reformation*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

8. See footnotes 8 and 9: Jones, H., & Cornes, P. (1977); Menis, S. (2019).

9. O'Brien, C., & Guy, T. (2025). The confines of 'Invisible Walls': An exploration of life sentenced men in an open prison; Rennie, A. (2024) *The impact of release on mandatory life-sentenced prisoners' identities*. [PhD thesis]. University of Cambridge.

10. Ministry of Justice. (2019/2022). *Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) Framework*. Ministry of Justice.

11. Goodley, G., & Pearson, D. (2023b). Risk management in open prisons: A critical analysis and research agenda. *Probation Journal*, 70(4), 367–384.

amount of time they had to spend in open conditions relative to their total time in custody. For example, two women could be serving a 3-year custodial term, but one of them progressed to open conditions after 6 months and would spend over 2 years in open conditions (i.e., long-term), while the other only moved to an open prison 3 months before her Conditional Release Date (CRD) (i.e., short-term). While the exact amount of time that qualifies as a long-term stay is hard to ascertain, based on participants' testimonies, ideally, it would be at least 9 months or more.

Throughout the fieldwork, prisoners and practitioners alike reiterated that increasing numbers of women were arriving in open prisons shortly after coming into custody, often after only spending a few days/weeks in a closed prison, and leaving shortly after, i.e., *passing through*. Many of them were serving very short sentences. Participants expressed mixed views about this development, which saw some women transferring to open conditions very quickly, without *working towards it*. Most (though not all) women whose transition was rapid welcomed it, but did not find it particularly momentous. In contrast, long-termers viewed transitioning to open conditions as progression and an achievement, which required them to "jump through a lot of hoops" (Simone),¹² such as completing targets on their sentence plan and maintaining a record of good behaviour. Other women simply had to wait until they had three years of their sentence left until release, as per policy at the time.¹³ Several long-termers who described the effort it had taken for them to progress criticised short-termers being moved to open conditions without having faced the same demands or obstacles:

"I had to work so hard. [...] I don't agree that prisoners who have been in prison for two weeks in closed have got their open. I get that... There's that three-year mark. [...] So, anyone who's got less than three years, they can apply for open conditions. But how can you be open conditions if you've only just come into prison?" (Priya)

"I've heard this lady, she was [...] in closed prison for two weeks before she got here. I'm like, [...] I don't even wanna say it, but I just thought, they're actually taking the piss. They really are, because why? [...] I thought open prison breaks at a halfway mark." (Amani)

For some long-termers, then, this difference in pathways into open prison devalued this transition and the effort they had put into progressing. This sometimes led to a sense of unfairness, frustration, and even contempt for short-termers. Not all long-termers felt this way, though. Molly, who saw her transition as a great achievement, was not fazed by this, exhibiting trust in the system:

"... for lifers [...] you do have to work to get here. It's not given to you on a plate. [...] some people get it given on a plate, which I totally get [...] But it doesn't affect me, because I always think it's about risk. It's like, they're obviously trusted enough to be in an open jail. Otherwise, they wouldn't be in an open jail." (Molly)

Paige, meanwhile, speculated that if she had personally struggled to get to an open prison, she might share other long-termers' frustration and bitterness:

"I feel like if I'd had to wait about six, seven, eight months to come here, and then someone is just rocking up just because they needed spaces and they're only here for two weeks, I feel I'd be hard done by, maybe [laughs]."

Evidently, it was not just the timing of the transition that shaped women's orientations. The *process* and *experience* of the transition – whether it was challenging or straightforward – also mattered. The picture that emerged from women's accounts, then, was that open prisons became host to both a *gradual* transition for women who spent extended periods of time in open conditions, and a *brief* transition for women who were there for a short time.

Crucially, women and staff identified ROTL as the primary resettlement tool. While the prisons provided in-prison resettlement services, such as help with obtaining ID documents or practicing conviction disclosures, resettlement was largely conflated with ROTL. As such, women who were not (yet) accessing ROTL felt they had negligible resettlement opportunities.

Perceived purpose of open prisons

Significantly, most women and staff identified resettlement, alongside reintegration, as the main

12. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

13. Ministry of Justice. (2011/2021). PSI 39/2011 – *Categorisation and Recategorisation of Women Prisoners*. Ministry of Justice; since April 2025, this has been replaced by an updated *Security Categorisation Policy Framework (2025)*, which has changed the timeline for eligibility for open conditions from 3 to 5 years left to serve.

purpose of open prisons.¹⁴ Women described open prisons as aiding their transition from custody to community, emphasising opportunities for (re)building financial and material resources, mainly through paid employment in the community. Additionally, for many women, maintaining family ties in the community via ROTL was near or at the top of the list of benefits of open imprisonment, and a key resettlement aim: “I think the main purpose that I've got out of this is sort of maintaining my relationship or my family ties to people” (Mia).

However, despite a consensus that open prisons should be about resettlement, not all women believed or felt that this was currently being effectively delivered: “It should be resettlement and reintegrating back into community. But I think you've got that many things, hurdles, to jump over before you get to that” (Laura); “It's all meant to be about resettlement. It's all meant to be about doing what is best for you for your release. I wouldn't say 100% I believe that” (Bridget). Indeed, women and staff alike identified a gap in the availability and delivery of resettlement services in the women's open estate.

Accessing resettlement opportunities

Since resettlement opportunities were almost exclusively perceived in terms of ROTL, it was significant that accessing ROTL took time: women had to wait a certain period between arriving in open conditions and applying for ROTL, during which various ‘checks’ were conducted to assess ROTL suitability. Many women found this confusing and redundant given that, as they pointed out, they had already been de-categorised and deemed suitable for open conditions. How long this process took depended on individual circumstances and resource availability; on average, women waited between two and three months to begin ROTL. These average waiting times meant that an increasing number of women who arrived in open conditions for short periods of time – a few weeks or a couple of months – would likely be released before they were approved for ROTL. Nadiya illustrated this point:

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“I feel like I'm not here long enough to sort of gain from what they offer, like the ROTLs, and [...] how you would progress when you go home, because I think that's rebuilding everything that's gone on having been in prison, and it has an impact on everybody's mental health in here.”

Several long-stay women acknowledged that they “reaped all the benefits of being here” (Abby), which women on short stays would not get to access in the limited time they had:

“I think there's a timescale on [open prison]. So, the last time I was here, I was only here for seven month. It wasn't long enough to do anything. It wasn't long enough to get anything out of being here. And I enjoyed it, yeah, but I got frustrated because I couldn't progress. I think if you've got that time to be able to get here, get your ROTLs, get out to paid work, build a future. I think that is everything. [...] So, open conditions gives you the option to live a normal life, if you've got the time

for it. I think it's stupid to have girls coming here for three months.” (Bridget)

This further illustrates the importance of timing in women's penal trajectories, which determined what kind of resettlement opportunities they could access and for how long – and, crucially, whether this included ROTL.

This was accompanied by a spatial dimension: sometimes, being transferred to an open prison meant being moved further away from their home and their loved ones. This issue is especially pertinent for women given that there are only two women's open prisons. This could exacerbate women's feelings of frustration and disappointment. In fact, even if the distance was similar, the transition to a new prison could be emotionally, psychologically, and socially destabilising.¹⁵ Consequently, a brief transition could be counterproductive to resettlement, even if women

14. The two terms were often used interchangeably by participants.

15. Waite, S. (2024). ‘A whole new world ...’: Exploring transcarceral habitus and women's transition from a closed to an open prison. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 63(1), 82-97; Micklethwaite, D., & Earle, R. (2021). A Voice Within: An Autoethnographic Account of Moving from Closed to Open Prison Conditions by a Life-Sentenced Prisoner. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 60(4), 529-545.

appreciated completing their sentence in a less prison-like environment: "It's better than in closed" (Nadiya). Moreover, not all women in this study felt they needed support with resettlement, often because their sentence was relatively short, and they described having considerable social and economic capital that they believed would cushion the negative impact of their sentence on their lives: "I haven't been away that long. I feel like I don't need reintroducing, so that I find a bit frustrating as well" (Patricia). This included financial and material resources (some women were middle-class, home-owners, business-owners) and relational resources – personal and professional networks as well as ties with loved ones who continued to support them.¹⁶

Population pressures: 'push' and 'pull' factors

As mentioned at the start of this article, the main reason for this growing number of short-termers in the (women's) open estate is overcrowding in the closed estate.¹⁷ This was frequently discussed throughout the fieldwork at both establishments, illustrating the salience of this issue for those living and working there. Notably, the women were acutely aware of the open estate being used for the purpose of what staff often referred to as "crowd control":

"I think my understanding from those sort of situations was that closed prisons were overcrowded. And the people who were the least risk level were the ones that were sent here because we had space." (Abby)

In addition to this 'push' factor, in the case of the women's open estate there was also a 'pull' factor: both HMPs Askham Grange and East Sutton Park have been under threat of closure since 2013, with the closure notices never having been formally rescinded.¹⁸ Both establishments had also been under capacity and struggling to fill spaces for a number of years. Some participants speculated – or spoke from experience – that this was because women did not want to come to open conditions after hearing negative accounts from other prisoners.¹⁹ Whatever the reasons, participants believed that open prisons were consequently forced to accept more women simply to fill the empty spaces, partly to avoid being shut down. This was often linked to the minimum number of prisoners required for the prisons to run:

"I think the open prison, from my understanding, needs to have a certain amount of people in here. So, I feel like the criteria, if you want to call it criteria, has maybe changed. And maybe people that probably wouldn't have been accepted before are being accepted now." (Paige)

This was reiterated by staff at both prisons; notably, at one of the prisons, I was told that, on a few occasions in previous years, they had to hold women back from accessing ROTL because they needed them to stay and help run the prison. Although necessitated by a lack of alternatives, this strategy undermined the open prisons' primary function of facilitating resettlement via ROTL. In this light, then, the frequent turnover of short-termers through the open estate became a steady source of labour. It allowed women eligible to access ROTL to continue doing so, while the task of keeping the prisons running fell onto those women who could not access ROTL anyway due to existing time restrictions. Ostensibly, this addressed both the 'push' and 'pull' population pressures, at least until better, long-term solutions emerged.

Implications for (the experience of) resettlement

The combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors created the right conditions for changes in terms of how – and which – prisoners transitioned to open conditions. Specifically, it enabled the acceptance of more women, more frequently, for shorter periods of time, even when they might not benefit from the open regime's resettlement function as much as long-termers. Conversations with the incarcerated women, staff, and management revealed this was now happening at an unusually high rate, and had several implications.

First, having such a transient population – as opposed to a more stable population of women with longer periods to serve in open conditions – affected the social dynamics, largely in a detrimental way. Some long-termers highlighted the importance of a harmonious existence and the unspoken rules they adhered to in order to foster a calm and stable environment. Certain short-termers with near release dates, who were described by long-termers and some staff as "the wrong calibre" or "not open prison material," were seen as having failed or refused to adjust to this social arrangement, causing issues among

16. I develop this argument in more detail in my PhD thesis.

17. Daddow, D. (2023). *Preparation for release from open prisons: A comparison of short and long-stay prisoners.* [MSt dissertation]. University of Cambridge.

18. BBC News. (2013, October 25). *Askham Grange and East Sutton Park women's prisons to close.* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-24669657>.

19. Henson, C., & Lievesley, R. (2025). Understanding the 'walk of shame': exploring the experiences of individuals with sexual convictions who have been recalled from open conditions in England and Wales, *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 31, 1-25.

the prisoner community: “and there's people doing short sentences, when they come here, that doesn't bother them, because they're only in for a few weeks. They come here and they roll, they, they sort of aggravate the long-term people” (Cynthia).

This issue is magnified for people serving indeterminate and life sentences, for whom the consequences of becoming collateral damage to social insatiability initiated by prisoners on determinate sentences, who they see as having less to lose, are more severe.²⁰

Another social implication related to the jealousies that could emerge among short-termers as they witnessed long-termers regularly accessing ROTL: “But it can be very emotionally challenging for people that are in here watching other people going out all the time. I think you're always gonna have that element of jealousy in people” (Bridget). This jealousy could sometimes lead to women deliberately interfering with each other's access to ROTL, for example by (falsely) reporting rule-breaking, which could result at least in a ROTL suspension until the case was adjudicated. Priya admitted that she usually kept her ROTL dates secret from other women to minimise the risk of someone “Putting intel on ya and then you're losing everything. [...] Easily done. Especially in open. Jealousy is a bitch.” The infusion of short-termers, then, was seen by some long-termers as a disruption to the social stability they sought to cultivate. This was either because short-termers were perceived as not sharing the same investment in a harmonious community due to the brevity of their stay, or as seeking to actively undermine it precisely because they could not share in the benefits, again, due to time restrictions. Thus, women's access to and experience of resettlement was indirectly influenced by the changing nature of the prisoner population and shifting social dynamics.

Second, regular transitions of short-termers in and out of the open prison might alleviate immediate overcrowding concerns, but also interfere with the progression of women on longer sentences because of limited spaces. This was recognised not only by prisoners but also by senior staff and managers, who

shared concerns that too many women on longer sentences were missing out on the benefits of open imprisonment, as spaces in the open estate were instead occupied by short-termers, at a high rate of turnover. This revealed the fine balance between mitigating population pressures and providing adequate, needs-based support. Third, a changing population means different needs that now have to be addressed, which has implications for the operation and management of open prisons and their population. Crucially, having more women who were not in the prison long enough to meaningfully access resettlement could be challenging and demotivating for staff: resources needed to be allocated to managing this growing short-term population, but very little could

be offered to them. Moreover, as one manager explained, intra-prison risk escalated as more short-termers passed through the open prison, increasing concerns about (dis)order and safety. This demands a recalibration of the regime and redistribution (and increase) of resources, both of which have long been weighted towards a more stable population of long-termers. In the meantime, open prisons are more vulnerable to internal disruptions.

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Conclusion

These findings offer a novel empirical contribution to the limited scholarship on women's open imprisonment. Additionally, the findings disrupt some of the assumptions about the resettlement function of open prisons, which has largely escaped empirical scrutiny, especially from the perspective of those living and working in this environment. This article therefore sheds an important light, showing that there currently exists a gap between expectations and reality. Specifically, the article demonstrates that increasing numbers of women *passing through* open prisons have not only *destabilised* the social dynamics of these establishments, but also contributed to a *dilution of their resettlement function*. This dilution, which raises operational as well as ideological concerns, stems from a lower(ing) proportion of women who access ROTL – a core resettlement opportunity – due to their short stays in open prisons.

20. See footnotes 9 and 15: O'Brien, C., & Guy T (2025); Micklethwaite, D., & Earle, R. (2021).

Importantly, some of the findings I discuss here echo those from a recent study comparing men experiencing 'short-stays' and long stays in a men's open prison in England, particularly in terms of the impact of the TPRS policy on the establishment's social climate.²¹ Similarly, the Independent Sentencing Review (ISR) published in May 2025 also highlights the interference of population pressures with resettlement, and their destabilising effects on the open regime and social dynamics. While the needs of women and men in prison might differ, as might the specific impact on the men and women's estate, population pressures present a clear threat to the entire open estate and its role in the system. One solution, as recommended by the ISR and by some of my participants, is that, upon entering open conditions, "offenders should have at least 12 months left of their sentence to serve to enable sufficient time for their engagement in resettlement activities."²² For this to be possible, however, overcrowding must first be alleviated, so that open prisons do not need to be a contingency for closed prisons.

In the meantime, there may be scope for smaller-scale changes that could ease some of the functional and operational problems I have described. For example, initiating risk assessment processes for ROTL before women's transfer to open conditions might enable more women to access this key resettlement opportunity, especially on short sentences. Introducing additional in-prison services that provide women in open prisons who cannot access

ROTL with more opportunities for purposeful activity and release preparation could also be valuable. Perhaps this could utilise the considerable talent, wisdom, and expertise of currently and/or formerly incarcerated women, which would not only relieve some of the burden on staff, but also offer advice and support from peers who are best-suited to guide others in the resettlement process through which they have gone themselves, provided they are adequately remunerated.²³ However, all this requires additional

resources in a system that is already stretched thin, with staff managing huge caseloads and lacking the resources to provide adequate and meaningful support to prisoners in their care.

Ultimately, though, many women in prison are serving sentences that are too short for any rehabilitative intervention, but just long enough to severely disrupt their and their loved ones' and children's lives. Fundamentally, then, the priority should remain the reduction of the women's prisoner population and

the diversion of women from the criminal justice system.

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21. See footnote 7: Daddow, D. (2023).

22. See footnote 4: Ministry of Justice. (2025).

23. See recommendations in: Rennie, A. (2025). *Release from long-term imprisonment: Understanding the experiences of people released from the longest sentences and returning to the community*. Prison Reform Trust.