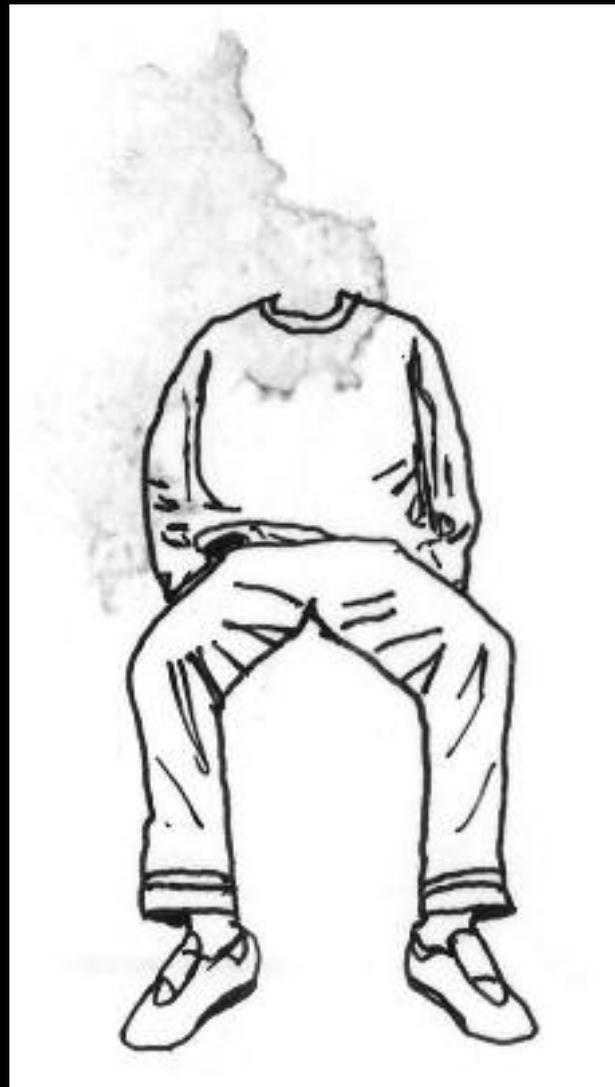


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Special Edition
The Prison and the Public

Talking Justice:

Building vocal public support for prison reform

Katy Swaine Williams led the Prison Reform Trust's outreach programme from 2011 to December 2013, supported by the Monument Trust and aimed at bringing prison reform to a wider audience, inspiring and supporting others to take action. Janet Crowe is deputy director at the Prison Reform Trust and has ongoing responsibility for the charity's work with the public.

Introduction

This article explores why working with the public has always been key to the Prison Reform Trust and why it is now as important as ever to build vocal public support for prison reform.

The Prison Reform Trust is an independent UK charity whose aim is to work with others to create a just, humane and effective prison system in the UK. Its underlying aims are to reduce unnecessary imprisonment and promote community solutions to crime, and to improve treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families. The charity's work is based on evidence from research, public opinion polling and testimony from the 5,000 prisoners and their families contacting its advice service each year. Working in partnership is key to the charity's work with the public.

The context

Over-use of imprisonment

Prison numbers have exploded since the early 1990s, leading to high levels of overcrowding which persist to this day. The pressing social needs of many people in custody (mental health problems, learning disabilities, lack of skills and qualifications, care history to name a few¹) have led some to describe prison as a 'warehouse' of our social problems.²

All but a handful of people who spend time in prison will return to live in the community. Nearly 47 per cent of adults and 72.3 per cent of children (under 18s) are proven to reoffend within a year of leaving custody.³ Prison sentences of less than one year have a particularly poor record of reducing reoffending, with 58.5 per cent of adults proven to reoffend within a year

of their release.⁴ Government research has found that community sentences are nearly seven per cent more effective than these short prison sentences at reducing reoffending.⁵

These poor results come at a high economic cost. The average annual overall cost of a prison place in England and Wales for the financial year 2011-12 was £37,648.⁶ The cost of a high intensity two-year community order, containing 80 hours of unpaid work and mandatory accredited programmes, has been calculated at £4,200. Shorter community sentences cost much less.⁷

The government's approach

The Ministry of Justice must make dramatic budget savings by 2016 and is at the same time committed to a 'rehabilitation revolution'. Yet, despite evidence of the relative effectiveness and fractional cost of community sentencing, the government has rejected calls to reduce reliance on short prison sentences for less serious offending in favour of increased investment in effective community options. Instead, current efforts appear to be focused on saving costs by creating ever larger prisons, even though they have been found to be less safe and less effective than smaller, local prisons.⁸

One interpretation of this policy approach is that the government believes punitive public attitudes demand the use of prison even for comparatively petty offences.

The Prison Reform Trust's view

The Prison Reform Trust, allied charities and civic society groups together with many who manage and work in the justice system, believe that the government

1. For recent statistics see: Prison Reform Trust (2013) Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile Autumn 2013, London: Prison Reform Trust.
2. Colin Moses, former Chairman, Prison Governors' Association. Talking Justice, London: Prison Reform Trust (2011).
3. Tables 18a and 18b, Ministry of Justice (2013) Proven reoffending quarterly October 2010 – September 2011, London: Ministry of Justice.
4. Ibid, Table 19a.
5. Table A1, Ministry of Justice (2013) 2013 Compendium of reoffending statistics and analysis, London: Ministry of Justice.
6. Table 1, Ministry of Justice (2012) Costs per place and costs per prisoner by individual prison, National Offender Management Service Annual Report and Accounts 2011-12: Management Information Addendum, London: Ministry of Justice.
7. National Audit Office (2010) Managing offenders on short custodial sentences, London: The Stationery Office.
8. Prison Reform Trust (2008) Titan Prisons: A gigantic mistake, London: Prison Reform Trust.

should make a concerted effort to reduce reliance on short prison sentences, as well as reining in overall inflation in sentence lengths. Instead it should put its money and its rhetorical weight behind effective community sentencing options and look far beyond the criminal justice system to find solutions to crime and disorder. Recent research suggests that public opinion is closer to that view than politicians appear to think. However, it may be that public support needs to be louder and clearer in order to break through the opposing rhetoric, often expressed in sensational media headlines.

Building vocal public support for prison reform

The state of public opinion

A People's Justice poll commissioned by the Prison Reform Trust in 1982, the year after the charity was founded, demonstrated public support for what was then known as community service. A 2011 survey similarly found that *'while the public may 'talk tough' in response to opinion polls which ask whether sentencing is harsh enough, when considering specific criminal cases and individual circumstances, there is considerable support for mitigating punishments'*.⁹ Recent surveys conducted for the Prison Reform Trust have indicated strong public support for opportunities for people who have committed offences such as theft and vandalism to do unpaid work in the community as part of their sentence, and for drug treatment, mental health care and intensive supervision of community orders to prevent such offences being repeated.¹⁰

A 2006 ICM poll of 1,000 victims of crime commissioned by the Prison Reform Trust and Victim Support showed that almost two-thirds did not believe that prison works to reduce non-violent crime.¹¹ Research published in 2012 by Make Justice Work and Victim Support concludes that, like the general public, victims are broadly open to the use of community

sentences but have doubts as to how effective they are in practice.¹² The research findings suggested that raising awareness and confronting misplaced perceptions about community sentences would lead to higher levels of public support for them.¹³ This is backed by the results of surveys conducted under the Prison Reform Trust's recent outreach programme.

The Prison Reform Trust's work to build public support

'...the more one learns about conditions and practices in Britain's prisons, the more convinced one becomes of the urgent need for change...

'If we can persuade the British public... then the battle is part won.'

Sir Monty Finniston,
Founding Chairman,
Prison Reform Trust, 1981

... it should put its money and its rhetorical weight behind effective community sentencing options and look far beyond the criminal justice system to find solutions to crime and disorder.

The Prison Reform Trust was founded on the belief that people should know what is happening in their own penal system, and this remains at the core of the charity's values. Public support also has a unique power to achieve reform, whether through financial support for reform organisations, or vocal public support expressed in ways that influence decision makers.

The Prison Reform Trust fulfils its commitment to working with the public by disseminating

factual information on what is happening within the system, researching and publicising public opinion and acting as an independent advocate for change.

The Prison Reform Trust is perhaps best known for its regular, informative publications, produced for a wide range of supporters, policy makers and practitioners — first in the Prison Report (from 1987) and more recently in the Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, as well as monthly e-newsletters and, since 2013, the 'Prison: The Facts' app.

The charity makes positive use of press comment and broadcast aimed at promoting sensible messages

9. Roberts, J. and Hough, M. (2011) Custody or community? Exploring the boundaries of public punitiveness in England and Wales, *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 11(2) pp181-197, Norwich: Page Bros.
10. Prison Reform Trust (2011) Public want offenders to make amends briefing paper, London: Prison Reform Trust; Prison Reform Trust (2012) Public back community and health solutions to cutting crime – press release 18/12/12, London: Prison Reform Trust.
11. Prison Reform Trust (2006) SmartJustice briefing: Crime victims say jail doesn't work, London: Prison Reform Trust.
12. Victim Support and Make Justice Work (2012) Out in the Open: what victims really think about community sentencing, London: Victim Support and Make Justice Work.
13. Ibid.

about prison reform to a wider audience, and responding to the many criminal justice news stories with a measured, evidence-based approach. In this way, the charity's messages can be heard by millions of people each month via print and broadcast media.

Many of the Prison Reform Trust's successes over the years have been achieved without seeking the support of public opinion. However, where it has been possible to demonstrate public support, this has had a powerful impact. Three major programmes of work over the last 12 years have added to the charity's learning about working with the public.

SmartJustice (2002-2008)

The Prison Reform Trust established SmartJustice in 2002, supported by the Network for Social Change and the Big Lottery Fund, in order to draw attention to and reduce the number of, people serving short prison sentences. Activities included extensive national and regional media work, publishing opinion surveys, participating in local and regional events, using creative publicity and e-campaigning.

SmartJustice succeeded in framing the debate on criminal justice in an accessible, innovative way and in taking these messages to the general public and media. It garnered cross-party support and created an active alliance of supporters. Amongst the programme's key achievements were the building of alliances with national and regional organisations, including civic society bodies such as the National Council of Women and Soroptimists International, and helping to secure the 2008 resolution by the National Federation of Women's Institutes (the NFWI) to end the inappropriate imprisonment of people with mental health problems.¹⁴ This laid the foundation for the current Care not Custody campaign led jointly by the Prison Reform Trust and the NFWI and with a broad coalition of support (see below).

Out of Trouble (2007-12)

2007 saw the start of the Prison Reform Trust's five-year Out of Trouble programme, supported by The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund. The programme made a major, independently evaluated

contribution to a 42 per cent reduction in the number of children in custody from 2007 to 2012. Focusing on the decision to imprison — who makes the decision and who or what in turn influences the main decision makers — the team found particular success in developing relationships with key civil servants, working locally and nationally, and using research to throw new light on areas of common practice and uncover information.¹⁵ Working closely with the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Education and the Treasury, the Prison Reform Trust was able to inform national decision making.

At the same time the Out of Trouble team's initiative to determine what factors were driving up child custody was welcomed by local authorities with the highest child prison numbers all of whom succeeded in dropping below the national average by planned earlier intervention to support children and families in trouble and better coordination of existing services.

The Prison Reform Trust's high media profile helped to bolster the programme's effectiveness. However, the Out of Trouble team found that making e-campaigning work required considerable staff and resources and concluded that, however desirable it is in the long term to shift public opinion, penal reforms can be achieved

without it by working largely behind the scenes to achieve change.¹⁶

Outreach programme (2010-13)

Supported by the Monument Trust, the Prison Reform Trust invested in a programme of outreach work from 2010 to 2013 to inform public debate and support others to get involved through volunteering or pressing for reform.

We wanted to reach a wider audience with engaging, high quality materials about the prison system

We established new and closer working relationships with civic society organisations with a combined reach of about 1.7m people, including the Soroptimists UK, the National Council of Women and the University of the Third Age (U3A). The Soroptimists

... where it has been possible to demonstrate public support, this has had a powerful impact.

14. Prison Reform Trust (2008) SmartJustice North East final report, Durham: Prison Reform Trust.

15. Prison Reform Trust (2012) Reducing child and youth imprisonment: learning from the Out of Trouble programme, London: Prison Reform Trust.

16. Ibid.

adopted a national campaign to reduce women's imprisonment and the National Council of Women made a resolution to call on the Government to reform women's justice. The U3A collaborated with the Prison Reform Trust to develop and disseminate discussion tools about prison reform. We collaborated with new partners with large social media networks such as Mumsnet, and benefited from ongoing partnership with the NFWI.

Thanks to these relationships and using the Internet and social media, the Prison Reform Trust is now regularly able to reach tens of thousands of people across the UK with information and opportunities to support prison reform. The charity has also been able to extend its reach at local level throughout the UK, including through local events and media coverage.

We produced new materials about prison reform in a variety of formats during the outreach programme, including film and audio material. The resources are aimed at building support for prison reform by using firsthand accounts by people with direct experience of the system and setting the context using official data and independent research. They also give guidance on how to get involved in making the system better, including through voluntary work. Some resources were produced with, and for, specific audiences. For example:

❑ **Short films and audio material**

Short films and audio material containing testimony of men, women and children with convictions, policy makers and practitioners, posted on YouTube and the Prison Reform Trust website, and played at meetings and events.

❑ **Targeted action packs**

We collaborated with the NFWI and the Soroptimists UK to produce tailored resources to support their campaigns:

- The Care not Custody action pack was disseminated to over 6,000 branches of the NFWI, setting out the achievements of their campaign to date seeking appropriate treatment for people with mental health needs and learning disabilities in the criminal justice system, and providing a toolkit for further action by WI members
- The Soroptimists' Action Pack was a tailored resource to support the Soroptimists' campaign to reduce women's imprisonment, disseminated to all 246 clubs UK-wide. A follow up report detailing clubs' activities and achievements will be published in 2014. This will provide a unique map of services for women as well as highlighting current gaps in provision.

❑ **Talking Justice resources**

Two new resources aimed at the general public were produced and widely disseminated:

- Produced with the U3A, 'Where Do You Stand?' is a set of discussion tools aimed at non-experts aged 16 and above who are looking for authoritative and engaging material on which to base discussions in schools and community groups about prison and community sentencing in England and Wales. It includes activities based on facts and figures, firsthand accounts, photographs and films as well as a 'before and after' attitudes survey
- 'What Can I Do?' is a comprehensive, widely distributed guide to volunteering in the criminal justice system and pressing for reform, produced by the Prison Reform Trust with Pact. The guide provides the basis for one of the 'Where Do You Stand?' activities, focusing on how participants might take their interest further by taking action.

Following initial electronic and postal dissemination and a launch event in Manchester attended by representatives of the U3A, Pact, Victim Support, the Magistrates' Association, the Soroptimists UK, Action for Prisoners' Families and others, the Prison Reform Trust embarked on a programme of local Talking Justice meetings across England and Wales, to get people talking and getting involved in improving outcomes in the criminal justice system. The charity has been invited to present Talking Justice and its outreach programme in general to the NCW, the Magistrates' Association and Manchester Students Union debating society and further talks are planned throughout 2014. From January 2011 to December 2013 the charity reached well over 630,000 people with these materials and a range of other publications produced in the same period. This is in addition to routine media work by the charity's senior staff, reaching approximately eighteen and a half million people in January 2014 through printed press alone and an extraordinary 124,446,396 via web and wires!

By improving the Prison Reform Trust website and increasing social media activity, the charity achieved a 39 per cent increase in unique website visitors from 2011/12 to 2012/13 (to over 84,500), and a 27 per cent increase in page views per year (to over 400,000). Since launching a Twitter feed in January 2011, the Prison Reform Trust has built an audience of over 7,000 Twitter followers. The charity has gained over 500 Facebook 'likes' since launching an active profile in July 2012. Live streaming the charity's 2012 lecture attended by over 400 people more than doubled the event's audience.

We wanted to support others to take action in line with our strategic aims, adding strength to work to effect reform

A key part of the outreach programme was to build on the success of SmartJustice by developing new and closer working relationships with civic society organisations and to support them to take action. We also wanted to continue experimenting with e-campaigning, partly in order to develop more ways for the Prison Reform Trust's supporters to get actively involved in its work, thereby strengthening and sustaining their support and making the most of their influence to help achieve reform.

These two strands of work produced tangible results. As a result of being approached by the Prison Reform Trust and with the charity's ongoing support, all the civic society organisations we worked with during the programme have taken action, achieving some real change in the justice system.

NFWI — Care not Custody

The NFWI's 'Care not Custody' initiative was inspired by the tragic death by suicide of a schizophrenic young man in Manchester prison, the son of a WI member. Since then the Prison Reform Trust has worked in partnership with the NFWI to effect change in the justice and health system.

In 2011 the then Secretaries of State for Justice, Kenneth Clarke, and for Health, Andrew Lansley, acknowledged that they were influenced by the NFWI to make a joint commitment with the Department of Health to invest £50m to begin implementing mental health and learning disability liaison and diversion services across England. A further £25 million has recently been invested to extend pilot services but the original commitment to full roll out of liaison and diversion services has slipped from 2014 to 2017. The ongoing joint leadership by the NFWI and the Prison Reform Trust of the Care not Custody coalition which they convened is helping to maintain pressure on the government to ensure this promise is kept.

Amongst others Coalition members include the Prison Governors and Prison Officers Associations, the Police Federation of England and Wales Royal Colleges of Nursing and Psychiatrists, the Law Society and Bar

Council and many mental health and penal affairs charities.

Soroptimists UK and National Council of Women — Reforming women's justice

We held the first two e-campaigns on the main Prison Reform Trust website in 2011 and 2012, promoted via the networks of the charity's partners. Here we encouraged people to write to their MPs in support of new legislation to secure women's justice reforms. This took the form of a proposed amendment first to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill and then, in a slightly altered form, to the Crime and Courts Bill. The campaigns were supported by over 58 NCW members as well as many Soroptimists and others who wrote to their MPs. Together with the work of our Chair, Lord Woolf, in Parliament, this helped to secure a published government strategy on women's justice (June 2013) and a government amendment to the Offender Rehabilitation Bill that provides a first legislative foothold for rehabilitation services in the community that take account of the particular needs of women.

What we learned

The Prison Reform Trust's fact-based, partnership approach provides a strong and credible foundation on which to base effective communication with the public and other audiences. However, the organisation is not simply a neutral provider of information. Its communications are founded on values and aims which are not necessarily shared by all those who have the power to help achieve the changes the charity is looking for. This means the Prison Reform Trust must continually examine how it communicates with audiences who have different perspectives and motivations. Some of the challenges we encountered in the outreach programme included developing the charity's voice for non-specialist audiences and communicating nuanced messages effectively in different forums.

Regular joint work with partners like Victim Support adds important balance to the Prison Reform Trust's work. Too often the popular press in particular try to create an unhelpful divide between those who

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work with victims and those who work with offenders when the shared aim is to reduce crime and distress and ensure fewer victims in future. It has also been valuable to engage with a range of audiences in order to ground the charity's messages in the real world and be persuasive. It helps that the Prison Reform Trust acts as a 'critical friend' to the prison service and many of the team have worked in, or managed, justice services and consequently understand that there are no easy answers when working with people in difficulty.

The organisation is still learning how to use Internet discussion forums and social media effectively to raise awareness and engage in constructive debate. Experimenting through collaboration with Mumsnet on a discussion thread, and working closely with the Soroptimists, has helped the Prison Reform Trust to refine its messages about reforming women's justice, including developing 'mythbusting' information.

Regular media work extends the Prison Reform Trust's reach and the charity is learning to reach out further using film and social media. The work with the NFWI, the Soroptimists and the NCW, in combination with the use of the Internet and social media, has had significant results. Relationships with civic society organisations have allowed the Prison Reform Trust to make the most of its resources by communicating with networks of people who are already engaged in their local communities. There is considerably more potential to achieve change by working in this way to inform and support civic society groups.

Involving individual members of the public actively and effectively in justice reform on a regular basis is an area of continuing development for the Prison Reform Trust. Carefully targeted e-campaigns, conducted in partnership with civic society organisations, have helped the charity to achieve change. Developing this work further will require dedicated staff resources and closer integration into the charity's regular strategic planning.

Conclusions

There is much that can be achieved without changing public opinion or demonstrating that there is public support for reform, as seen in the Out of Trouble programme. However, vocal public support can have tangible results. It remains a longer-term aim of the Prison Reform Trust to work with its partners towards achieving cultural change at a national level, to 'mainstream' prison reform.

The Prison Reform Trust's vision is for decision makers to be operating in an environment in which mainstream public opinion is widely understood to be strongly in favour of sensible criminal justice reform. Until this goal is achieved, most policy makers will continue to feel constrained by perceptions of hostile public opinion and fears of negative headlines, distorting policy development and severely limiting progress towards a more just, humane and effective prison system.