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Special Edition  
Rehabilitative Culture

# Living in an open prison

*Ahmed Shah, James Allen and Philip Peters are residents at HMP Springhill. They are interviewed by Dr. Jamie Bennett, Governor of HMP Long Lartin.*

**HMP Springhill is an open prison in Buckinghamshire. It holds 335 men who are assessed as suitable for open conditions. They are nearing the end of their sentence and are preparing for release and resettlement. Two out of three of the men have been convicted of violent or drug offences. Many have served long sentences, with around 30 per cent serving sentences of 10 years or more, while only 2 per cent are serving less than two years. At any time, half of the men will have been in the prison for less than six months and half for more than six months.**

The population is diverse. Half of the men are White British and half are Black, Asian or from minority ethnic communities. There are many faiths represented in the prison, including around 40 per cent observing various Christian faiths and over 20 per cent Muslim. One in five self-report that they have a disability.

In 2013, a prisoner had been released from Springhill on temporary licence (ROTL) from Springhill and had committed a murder. This terrible event exposed serious weaknesses in the ROTL process and had shaken the confidence of the establishment. The HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) carried out an investigation into the events that led to the murder and were rightly critical, describing that 'the system failed the public it was supposed to protect'.<sup>1</sup> This led to major changes in the national ROTL policy. The impact at Springhill was significant. An inspection of Springhill in 2014, noted that the events had 'struck at its central purpose' and that although there was work to improve ROTL, 'getting this right was difficult; relationships were being impacted and staff in some roles were very stretched'.<sup>2</sup> They assessed that purposeful activity and resettlement work were 'not sufficiently good'.

In order to rebuild and improve the establishment started work towards the Royal College of Psychiatrists'

Enabling Environments Award.<sup>3</sup> This award is assessed against ten standards and is intended as 'a mark of quality allowing a service to demonstrate that it has achieved an outstanding level of best practice in creating and sustaining a positive and effective environment'.<sup>4</sup> Over a three year period, residents and staff took this forward. In 2018, Springhill became the first men's prison to receive the Enabling Environments Award for the whole establishment. The award was also a vehicle for wider organisational improvement. The most recent inspection of Springhill, conducted in December 2017<sup>5</sup>, recognised that the establishment had improved, with all four healthy prison tests being 'good' or 'reasonably good'. In addition, OFSTED judged for the first time that learning and skills provision at Springhill was 'good'. The experience of residents and staff has also improved. In 2018, there were Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL) and Staff Quality of Life (SQL) surveys conducted at Springhill. This is the first time since 2014, so again it is a reflection of the period in which EE was developed. The outcomes showed that overall quality of life for both staff and prisoners improved, as did their perceptions of safety.

This interview focusses on the experience of three residents at Springhill and other prisons, particularly on their perceptions of rehabilitative cultures and enabling environments. James has served seven years in prison and has a further year before he is considered for parole, Ahmed has served sixteen years and has 18 months before parole, and Phillip has served three years and is released in under a year.

**JB: What for you are the key features of a rehabilitative culture? Why is this important to achieve?**

**AS:** My understanding of a rehabilitative culture is that it is the way you do things, the way you talk to each other and interact with one another. People are

1. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2014) *A review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons: Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) failures* available at <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/07/ROTL-unredacted-WEB-amended-16-July-2015.pdf> p.5
2. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2014) *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Spring Hill 6–15 May 2014* available at <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/09/Springhill-Web-amended-2014.pdf> p.6
3. 4 Royal College of Psychiatrists (2013) *Enabling environments standards* available at <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/ee%20standards%20-%202013.pdf>
4. Ibid p.2
5. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2018) *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Spring Hill 4–15 December 2017* available at <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/04/Spring-Hill-Web-2017.pdf>

sent to prison as punishment, the punishment is the loss of liberty, that doesn't mean they should receive further punishment on a daily basis. The idea is to have a culture, from the top to the bottom where people encourage one another to rehabilitate themselves. That has to be in a way that's going to be long-lasting, not something that will just feel positive for a short while. That means thinking about how you interact, encourage and support each person as an individual on a daily basis.

**PP:** It's an atmosphere or environment that encourages people to change for the better. It's very difficult to achieve that in an environment that has 23 hour a day bang-up. A rehabilitative culture also considers practical effects of time unlocked, access to work and training, and support for good mental health. Prisons have many people who have mental health problems or have experienced terrible events in their backgrounds of childhoods. Putting them in a restrictive regime is just going to damage their self-esteem and encourage them to think that they have nothing to offer and they can never be anything other than a criminal. A more positive environment can encourage them to have a more healthy view of themselves, more confidence and so re-join society in a positive way. That needs practical support and resources, as well as compassion.

**JB: How have you been involved in creating a more rehabilitative culture? How has this been taken forward where you are currently?**

**JA:** I currently work in the activities department, so I can help to a degree, in particular by helping individuals in getting a job and producing the best CV they can. That's not to say that is consistent across the board, different people have different opportunities. There does seem to be more focus on this more recently. As a peer, there is something special about being able to relate to the people I'm working with as I will have shared many experiences. I'm also sometimes better able to identify the talent that people have and encourage them to make best use of it. As I don't work for a company, I can work in a way that is more individual, there is always the risk with commercial services that they become standardised and less personal.

**JB: How does the physical environment contribute to this and what efforts have been made to make a positive difference? This can be**

**quite a challenge at Springhill, where the living accommodation is old and beyond its normal life.**

**AS:** You do get a sense sometimes when talking about rehabilitative culture that people are thinking 'you want us to get involved in this or that, but the heating isn't working in our hut'. On the lifer hut, we get that maintenance is a much bigger prison and prison service issue, but the question is what can we do? What environment do we want? We can give the place a lick of paint, keep it clean and have a bit of pride about the place. At the end of the day, we have to live here. Being in an open prison, being able to use the grounds, particularly in summer, is appreciated. You do want to enjoy the freedom you do have, to be able to walk around.

**JB: Are basic services such as food and clothing important?**

**JA:** Food is always important. Clothing does tap into image in this environment. You do have some people who have access to more than others. There can be an element of 'look what I've got compared to what you've got'. You have to think about the impact that has on those who don't have access to those resources.

**JB:** I can see that. One of the arguments made for school uniforms is that it acts as a social leveller, whereas outside, clothing is one of the ways in which social status and inequality can be

displayed.

**JA:** You can certainly see that in open prisons and I wonder how that might tap into old behaviours.

**JB:** The assumption is often that giving people choice about clothing is positive, but you're challenging that and suggesting that this may also enable the enacting of problematic identities and social dynamics.

What about food? Here we have shared meals at important festivals, such as Eid, where Muslim residents can also invite a guest who is of a different faith, so as to encourage a multi-cultural community. There was also the 'bake off' competition, where each hut had a team. There is also the award for the cleanest hut competition, which is a shared meal. On an everyday basis, there is also some, albeit limited, opportunity for people to cook for themselves.

**AS:** Those things are massively important. Having some choice and ability to cook for yourself is good.

**PP:** Food can be a big event, yesterday there was an end of course celebration, where people had burritos. There were a few left at the end and there was a lot of excitement about that.

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**JA:** You can walk onto any hut and there is almost always some form of shared cooking effort going on. Cooking and eating together is at the heart of building relationships.

**AS:** Often when people are moving on, the hut will get together and have a leaving meal the day before.

**PP:** One of the most memorable experiences for me was arriving at Springhill and being able to eat a meal sitting at a table talking with friends, rather than being alone in a cell. It felt like a step back into normality.

**JB: What about relationships between those who live and work in prisons? What role do they have and how are they being improved?**

**AS:** To me that is the crux of the matter, it is the foundation of the culture. Sometimes people have had difficult experiences with one another, that can be staff or prisoners, so it is important that through good relationships, mutual respect and encouragement, people are supported to build good relationships rather than fall into old ways.

**PP:** People are in prison temporarily, they are only 'prisoners' for a period of time, they are individual people first. I remember one occasion where at the servery there were some left over burgers and someone asked if they could have extra and the person working there said 'no, they are going in the bin. I'd rather throw them away than give them to you'. If someone already has had problems in relationships, they think they are worthless and won't amount to anything, then behaviour like this is going to reinforce it. It's not about the burgers, it's that this was the wrong way to handle the issue.

**JB:** Yes, the way we each interact can have an impact not only in the moment, but in a long-lasting way. That can be good or bad. Gethin Jones<sup>6</sup> is a former prisoner who has rebuilt his life and supports others on the same journey, he has talked about how interactions can plant seeds that may have a long germination, but can grow. A few words of encouragement, support or interest can nurture the process of change.

**AS:** In one prison, a member of staff offered me a coffee. I didn't know what to say at first, as in all the years I'd been in prison I'd never been offered a cup. I eventually said 'yeah, go on then'. He brought out the coffee and I was just looking at it. He said, 'it's just a

cup of coffee'. I said 'To you it's a cup of coffee, but to me it's messing with my head because I've never had this before'. Since then, I had a great relationship with him. I worked with him for five years and got to know each other. He was someone I could really look up to and trust. That's really important when you are in prison and sometimes surrounded by people you can't trust, or are only around temporarily. The kindness that man showed went a long way. You never forget those people.

**JA:** There are many people who sometimes you forget it is an officer-prisoner relationship because you can interact with them in a way that is normal. I went out on an escorted temporary release and I was planning it with the officer and we were talking about going into the town, having a coffee and doing some other activities. It was great that they would do that in such a relaxed and informal way. The relationships here, in an open prison, are better than you would generally get in a closed prison. There are boundaries, in particular there are expectations about how we behave and interact. When some people complain about how they are treated, I have to remind them that actually they need to look at how they are interacting. They have to think about what they expect and also act in the same way.

**PP:** At school everyone has that one teacher that they really remember. It's the same in prison and I had this one officer who really helped me when I was in Woodhill. In fact, I saw him here a few weeks ago and I was so pleased to see him, I went to hug him! When I first came into prison, it really affected me and my family. After I'd been in for a couple of days, he noticed I was down and came to my cell and said, 'right, get up, have a shave. You've got three years so do something with it, study for a degree. In the meantime, I've got a job for you'. He put me to work cleaning and helped pull me out of the misery I was in. Later, my wife and I were guest speakers at a 'Family Matters' event, which he arranged and helped me prepare for. We all have that one person who has made a difference.

**AS:** The needs of individuals vary throughout a long sentence. Early on, I needed a lot of help and support and experienced crises. As I've adapted and moved on, I've become more self-reliant. At this stage, approaching the end of my sentence, I'm seeking more

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6. See <https://unlockingthepotential.co.uk/>

normality in my relationships. When I go on temporary release, it's almost as if I'm breaking free of the shackles of prison life, mentally as much as physically, and that's an amazing feeling.

**JB: Do families have a role in building a more rehabilitative culture? How are they involved in your establishment?**

**PP:** The most painful part of being imprisoned can be the time away from family and children. My experience of how families are treated in closed prisons has been terrible. Not just the searching, it's the way some people look down their noses at them. There can be a family that has travelled three hours with a baby and then be turned away because the baby doesn't have a birth certificate. It can be dire. It takes a massive commitment from a family to make a visit in a closed prison. A lot of people say that they don't want their family to visit because they know how awful it can be. I appreciate that there are security concerns, but it's not just that where the problems lie.

**AS:** Here, there is hot food available and there are outdoor areas to use. So people are happier. That atmosphere means people are more willing to interact, including staff and family members. Then people move on to day release.

**JA:** People come in here and there are no walls and it almost doesn't feel like a prison environment. On the flip side it's great when people say 'I've had my last visit', because they are starting day release, so they will now be meeting their families outside. I sometimes also hear officers talking to people asking how their wife and children are because they've also built up that relationship with family members.

**JB: Two of you have been in therapeutic communities, where there are 'family days', which involve family members being invited onto the wing, sharing a meal, seeing where their loved ones live, meeting those they live and work with. How did you find that experience?**

**JA:** The first time, they were coming into an environment, by which I mean closed prisons generally, where I had been for five or six years. It was difficult as it made it real. They weren't sitting in the bubble of the visits room, but were seeing the living accommodation. It was uncomfortable to a degree, but it has helped my relationship as they can better understand what I am going through and vice versa.

**AS:** My mum and sister came. I showed them my room and said, 'this is where I sit and sleep, this is where I live. My mum sat there in my room. That was painful. At the same time, it really helped. When that door closes, you feel on your own. You have all of that time and all of your thoughts. The fact that my family had been there, I kept that with me. When I'm there I can feel that my mum and sister have been there with me.

I do try to explain to my family the process of life sentences, the assessments and reports. It is very hard. I wish this had been explained to them from the start so they could understand and be involved. I did at one stage ask my offender supervisor to come to a visit to explain this to them, which they did. That was very helpful.

**JB: What opportunities are there to address problems such as health and substance misuse?**

**JA:** Healthcare varies from establishment to establishment, but I always compare it with my own family's experiences of waiting for appointments. From that perspective, it's not too bad. The support is available here for those who need it and want to make use of it.

**AS:** When you use something like a health service, you want to feel that your concerns are being treated seriously.

**PP:** With those who have substance misuse problems, one of the difficulties is the availability of drugs. If someone has a problem and drugs are available to them, it's going to be very difficult not to give in to temptation.

**JA:** Is that a problem here, or is the problem that people are coming to open conditions without their substance misuse problems having been addressed beforehand.

**PP:** It's both. There is an issue of availability, and that some people are coming here being used to getting medication through the health service, but then that being managed more assertively here. Those people who want and need support can get it, the drug and alcohol recovery team are excellent.

**JB:** So, even where there are good services available, the wider culture can be corrosive.

**PP:** Yes, where there are drugs available, there is always the risk of temptation becoming too much in a moment of weakness.

**AS:** But where does the responsibility for that lie? Is it the prison or is it about individual and the

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community. There are lots of people who aren't part of a drug culture, who don't want to be part of it and help those who want to keep out of it.

**JB: Do punishments, adjudication, incentives and privileges have a useful role in shaping the behaviour of people in prison?**

**AS:** I got caught with a mobile phone about ten years ago and got cellular confinement for a few days. That was the worst possible punishment for me because I'm a social person. I thought I never want to do anything like that again. It depends on what type of person you are.

**JA:** In a closed prison, IEP is more obvious, but in an open prison it's less clear. There are some people who are petrified that they are going to lose their access to temporary release, but there are others who have been caught, sometimes more than once, but their behaviour doesn't change. Their motivation and drive is different from someone who is more concerned about their own progress and the impact on their family.

**JB: You have described how drugs and criminality can be corrosive to a rehabilitative culture. How should that behaviour be responded to?**

**AS:** It has an impact on everyone, staff and prisoners. It can lead to trust breaking down and it can have an impact on how everyone is viewed. It is better if it can be viewed as an individual issue rather than everyone being affected.

**JA:** Sometimes you see a disappointment in staff members when something happens, particularly when they have tried to help someone.

**AS:** As well as supporting those who break the rules to rehabilitate them, those who are affected also need support, so they don't end up thinking, 'I'm not doing that again', 'I've been hurt before'.

**PP:** Inside or outside prison, it is important that people have something to lose. In here, with the access to temporary release, we have a lot to lose. Outside, if people can be set up so they have family, a job, somewhere to live, then they have something to lose.

**JB: Have you had the opportunity to develop your talents and interests, for example through education, training or employment?**

**PP:** Absolutely. For most of the time, I've been teaching or helping people. That's been really good for

me. There are a lot of people with basic skills needs. It would be good to have some incentive as at the moment, there's all stick and no carrot. There are sometimes huge mental monsters because people had difficulties at school, they see themselves as a 'manual' person, not an 'academic' person.

**AS:** I started planning for resettlement before I came to open conditions. I've completed the courses I need to do internally and now I've started to get involved with educational and mentoring organisations. I've had a lot of support from people at all levels. The managers here set the right example in supporting people. Sometimes people, including me, have lots of dreams and fantasies about the future, but that takes a lot of hard work. Eventually with the right effort and support, it comes together. That's what rehabilitative culture is about.

**JA:** You are an example of what someone can achieve when they are self-motivated and have the support of others around them. On the flip side, how do you achieve that with people who don't have that same level of motivation. In the area I work, the activities department, I see that on a daily basis. There are many people who need their hand held to go out and find something for themselves, and others who expect someone to do it for them.

**AS:** when I was editor of the prison magazine at Grendon, I went through a period where I felt like obstacles were being put in my way and I couldn't get over them. I spoke to Jamie and said 'I'm just a prisoner' and you said 'No, you're a person'. That impacted me. You also said that I can't change everyone, I can't change the world, but I can change how I deal with it. I've also tried to help other people. I had a good business idea, but gave it to a friend who was released and he is now developing it. I feel that if you do good, good also comes your way.

**JA:** When I first came to prison, I thought that my previous skills were not relevant or valued. Later, when I was in a therapeutic unit, I was encouraged to reconnect with that, so I've been able to do that since then. I've also tried things that I hadn't done previously, including some creative activities, including pottery, which I did in a therapeutic prison unit. I never thought I was artistic but then I found myself sitting in front of

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a pottery wheel and I found I was quite artistic in what I could do. I went on to win some Koestler Awards. It was the first time I'd won anything. For me it was great. Not only did someone appreciate what I had created, but the fact that I was a prisoner didn't matter. That then developed into an interest in gardening and horticulture. After coming here to Springhill, I've started to do Open University. I've had ample opportunities to demonstrate what I'm good at and learn new skills.

**JB: Is there one thing that you feel is a particularly powerful way to foster a more rehabilitative culture?**

**AS:** The prison accommodates a lot of events involving external people coming in. Recently we had a pantomime. It was good to see people going in, including families and staff. Anything where you have

staff and prisoners involved together is massive. It builds trust and a meaningful bond between people.

**JA:** The officer-resident relationship stands out. It is now the majority and not the minority of officers who want to work with you, who care and have an interest in what we are doing. That has been more so in the last six months. That is due to the new staff coming in, their understanding of what is expected of an officer.

**PP:** The accessibility and open channels of communication are powerful. When I first arrived, I sent a couple of applications in suggesting an improvement. I got a reply and was then called to a meeting. I thought, wow, someone has actually listened to my idea. That idea has now grown into the Springhill careers advice service, which has now helped almost 200 people.



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