



# Progression within a prison

What does it mean and what does it look like?

A report by the HMP Rye Hill Building Futures Network Group

Building Futures is the Prison Reform Trust's five-year programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, exploring the experiences of people serving long prison sentences. The programme aims to give a voice to people serving sentences of over 10 years in custody, providing them with the space to advocate for themselves, bringing about change from within the system and shedding light on the human cost of long-term imprisonment. Through consultation, advocacy and research, Building Futures will work alongside those with direct experience of long-term imprisonment to demonstrate the true impact of ever-increasing sentence lengths.

[prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/building-futures](https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/building-futures)

## Acknowledgments

This consultation report would not have been possible without the support and dedication of the following organisations and people:

The Prison Reform Trust who created the Building Futures Network Group, meet with us every week, and show continued support for the work we are doing and the changes we are trying to make.

HMP Rye Hill for allowing the creation of the flagship Building Futures Network Group, and facilitating the group's meetings and focus groups.

Building Futures Network Group, Rye Hill: CH, PT (report authors), PB, MM, TB, MF, KS, RL, and staff lead CR.

We would also like to extend a special acknowledgement to all the long-term prisoners who contributed to this report

Building Futures Network Group logo created by PT with the support of the Prison Reform Trust

The **Building Futures Network Group** (BFNG) is part of the Building Futures Project. Made up of nine prisoners serving more than 10 years in custody, the group meet on a weekly basis with members of the Prison Reform Trust to discuss prevalent topics at HMP Rye Hill and relating to the wider prison system. Our role is primarily data collection for the Prison Reform Trust, but we have been given the latitude to carry out our own consultancy and generate our own reports. This initial report and the ones that follow have been created solely by the Building Futures Network Group members with the support of the Prison Reform Trust and the senior management team at HMP Rye Hill.

*'Using inside experience to replace costly and ineffective long-term imprisonment, with effective rehabilitation, reliably delivered, in humane conditions, over a shorter time, at a lower cost.'*

This directly correlates with the main goals of the Prison Reform Trust: 'to create a just, humane and effective penal system'.

Both these statements echo the sentiments of many people who are interested in prison reform, and we hope that by doing the work that we do, we can instil hope for prisoners and generate an understanding of imprisonment within the wider public.

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## Executive summary

The Building Futures Network was launched in 2021, after a successful funding application by the Prison Reform Trust, to explore the challenges faced by prisoners serving long custodial sentences of 10 years or more.

HMP Rye Hill was selected as the pilot site for the project due to the long-standing relationship between the prison and the Prison Reform Trust. Rye Hill prisoners embraced the opportunity to contribute to national discussion on the impacts of long-term imprisonment, and are grateful that their voices are being heard and listened to.

Our inaugural report 'Progression within a prison' discusses the experiences and insights prisoners have into what they believe progression is, what it should be, and what it could include in the future. The core themes of the consultation were:

- Progression is about personal growth, not just risk reduction.
- For long-term prisoners, progression should not be structured or defined by their release date.
- The present system of progression is discriminatory towards prisoners with disabilities and learning difficulties.

In this report, we have considered responses from over 80 prisoners serving a minimum sentence of 10 years in prison. All of these prisoners had at points been housed in prisons that differed in security category, occupancy, contractual obligations, resources and purpose.

Prisoners demonstrated a good understanding of the different activities available for them to achieve progression. The core methods of progression were seen as: recategorisation, offending behaviour programmes, education, sentence planning and personal growth. This indicates that there is a limited amount of communication between the prison service and prisoners about pathways to risk reduction. It was evident that the majority of attendees were not aware of the pathways of risk reduction generally expected by HMPPS.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that beyond the basics of a consistent regime, hygienic living conditions and fair treatment by staff, prisoners want to have realistic, achievable targets and set milestones to work towards during their sentences. In our consultation, recategorisation was seen as the main incentive to work towards. It was seen as the clearest way to show suitability for release or progression to the Parole Board. However, prisoners conceptualised the most meaningful form of progression as personal growth, which was highly individual, and often sidelined by decision-makers, who gave greater credit to more formalised progression pathways.

Prisoners generally described being unable to access offending behaviour programmes, in some cases for many years, due to factors including sentence length, prioritisation strategies, and the impact of COVID-19. Participation in core offending behaviour programmes was discouraged until

<sup>1</sup> These are typically accommodation; education, training and employment; finance; health; addressing substance misuse; children and family; and attitudes, thinking and behaviour.

within five years of earliest date of release. However, this did not deter people from engaging in other available risk reduction pathways, such as education and vocational training.

It was widely accepted within the focus groups that feeling optimistic about the future was key to promoting engagement with rehabilitative activities. In order to do this, there needs to be more readily available access to core risk reduction work, so that prisoners can access recategorisation, and eventually open conditions. This is so that they are able to consolidate their learning early enough in their sentence to be able to put into practice and utilise the skills they have learnt effectively before being released. More should also be done to avoid 'progression voids' in the early part of people's sentences, and prison policy leads need to make core risk reduction work accessible for long sentenced prisoners earlier in their sentence. Personal growth should be encouraged, identified and recorded as progression and where appropriate considered alongside other pathways to risk reduction.

Prisons need to be mindful that a large number of prisoners have some form of disability or language barrier, making standard methods of communication in prison counterproductive and exclusionary. Prisoners want to feel that they are understood, and that they can understand what is said to them. Special considerations and adaptations are key in supporting progression fairly and effectively.

It was widely agreed in this consultation that prisoners had made the majority of their progression upon transfer out of their remand establishment, and were more willing to engage in risk reduction work when they felt they were in an environment with low levels of violence and a non-judgemental safe space.

Family involvement in the progression of prisoners was unanimously supported. It was felt that families are a positive influence on driving meaningful change. Greater involvement would help families learn how to be a source of support both during and post-custody when re-integrating and building a connection with wider society. Fulfilling family engagement in rehabilitation requires promotional information for both prisoners and families about how they can participate. Family involvement should be in a format which is positive, constructive and in a safe environment. Communication derives from the culture that guides the hundreds of thousands of daily interactions that comprise how prison thinks and operates. Policy frameworks drive the format in which any interactions take place. However, prisoners felt that these frameworks were implemented inconsistently, with variation and contradiction in how staff interpreted guidance. Motivated and determined national and local leadership remains essential in creating and sustaining progressive opportunities in a rehabilitative environment. It was evident from our engagement that only a very small number of prisons were offering a diverse, relevant and substantial number of progressive pathways as part of their regime.

We hope that the evidence contained within this report will encourage reform to access and availability of all forms of progression throughout prisoners' sentences, and not just in the final stages. Nine recommendations to facilitate this are detailed in the Recommendations section.

# Introduction

In April 2022, the Building Futures Network Group launched its first project on the topic ‘progression’. There were many other topics that were discussed, such as education and release, but fundamentally, they all related in some way to progression.

Progression has long been a controversial and complex issue for prisoners. Particularly, what prisons believe progression is, and what prisoners perceive progression to be, do not always correlate. The issue of access to facilities, services and activities that support progression also vary depending upon sentence length, the establishment in which the prisoner resides and the individual needs of that prisoner.

We generated this, our first report, based on feedback relayed to us directly from prisoners at HMP Rye Hill, but as every prisoner has spent time in other establishments, their views are formed from their experience of multiple prisons. This report gathered those experiences through focus groups and survey questions issued to prisoners. These methods gave forthright and revealing accounts of how progression is viewed from a prisoner’s perspective, and highlighted patterns and trends that we hope will contribute to a better understanding of challenges within the prison system.

When considering the relevance and possible application of this report, please consider the following points to contextualise our findings:

- As of September 2022, the total prison population was 81,309<sup>2</sup>.
  - 4,514 were serving sentences of 10-14 years in custody.
  - 4,160 were serving sentences of more than 14 years.
  - 6,976 were serving extended determinate sentences (EDS).
  - 8,551 were serving indeterminate sentences (IPP and life).

The Prison Strategy White Paper states ‘offenders...having meaningful opportunity to engage with rehabilitative activity; and enabling working age prisoners to leave custody to accommodation and to a job, education or training’<sup>3</sup> is of paramount importance.

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Justice. (2022). *Offender management statistics quarterly: April to June 2022*. Ministry of Justice.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Justice. (2021). *Prisons strategy white paper*. CP 581. Ministry of Justice.



# Consultation structure

## Submissions to this report

This report bases its findings on 26 written responses received by our team, in addition to information collected from focus groups, which had a total of 63 participants. All participants, were serving a minimum of 10 years in custody, representing just over a quarter (26%) of all prisoners Rye Hill who are serving this amount of time.

Participants were serving a range of sentence types, including standard determinate, extended determinate, sentence for offenders of particular concern (SOPC), Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) and life. We wanted this range as we believed that people serving different sentence types (and lengths) would have a very different understanding of progression, and their priorities would change as a result. The IPP sentence in particular has generated considerable press coverage in recent years, and being able to listen to the concerns of those serving it has helped to create a balanced report. We also sought to cover the specific issues that prisoners with learning difficulties and disabilities may face in the course of progression. Although we did not formally collect data on protected characteristics, we are confident that the participants represented a range of racial and ethnic identities, ages, and sexual orientations.

We were acutely aware that a large number of prisoners struggle with reading and writing, have learning difficulties and have mental health conditions that may affect information processing. To alleviate some of the barriers to relaying key information, we reached out to people with the use of our bespoke Rye Hill Times newspaper and Rye Hill TV channel, using a series of articles, podcasts and video recording. These channels are available to every prisoner at Rye Hill, with the exception of those in the Care and Separation Unit. During our free time at weekends, the group also visited wings in order to engage personally with prisoners and to invite them to the focus groups. This step was vital to assuage any beliefs that the focus groups would not be open to all, and that they were independent of the Prison Service. This step also helped us to assure people that their opinions and experiences would be heard and duly noted.

## Focus groups

All prisoners who registered an interest in attending our focus groups were added to a database, and with our staff liaison, we managed to secure two dates for the progression focus groups. They took place on the evenings of Monday 9 and Tuesday 10 May 2022, and were open to every prisoner in Rye Hill serving at least 10 years in custody, with the exception of those in the Care and Separation Unit. 79 prisoners registered to attend, and 63 attended over the course of the two evenings. The focus groups garnered very positive reviews, with most of the attendees finding them useful, and we found that subsequent groups covering other topics were just as heavily subscribed.

## Consultation questions

Five questions were sent out with the focus group invitation letters. These were used as 'icebreaker' questions to prompt a range of conversations about progression. They were selected as we thought they would give us plenty of emotive responses and create talking points during the focus groups.

1. What do you think progression in prison means?
2. What progression do you think you have made?
3. Do you think that...
  - a) Your victims should be able to monitor your progress in prison?
  - b) Your family / friends should be able to monitor your progress in prison?
4. Do you, or those you know, have a condition, impairment or barrier (such as language, vision, cognition etc.) that affects your ability to access or interpret information?
5. How is progression relevant to a person who is unlikely to or never going to be released?

These questions are wide ranging, and the third one in particular is quite controversial. This was completely intentional, as we wanted to generate honest and frank conversation on difficult aspects of progression, and to reach out to people who may have been reluctant to otherwise engage in 'well-trodden' topics.

The focus groups were conducted in an informal and conversational manner, with BFNG representatives noting down answers, comments and quotes.

As a precaution, due to the sensitivity of the topic, we had peer representatives from ASSIST (who offer mental health support) and Listeners in attendance. We felt this was necessary as we would be asking some questions that could reopen old wounds and could potentially have caused distress or anxiety. To our knowledge, there were no incidents that required support from these groups.

# Findings

In response to the five questions posed, we received a vastly diverse set of responses, which we believe are indicative of the diverse population within HMP Rye Hill and the prison population as a whole.

At the beginning of the focus groups, participants were split into three smaller groups and were assigned Building Futures facilitators. Each group had an A2 flipchart, and the participants were asked to shout out words that came to mind which they associated with 'progression'. These included:

Risk	Shame	Professionalism	Punitive
Time	Hope	Privacy	Risk
Cost	Normality	Engagement	Paranoia
Acceptance	Consistency	Attitude	Screwboy
Better jobs	Confusing	Respect	Intimidation
Perseverance	Interpretation	Violence	
Personal pride	Preparation	Wages	
Corruption			

Initially, some participants were reluctant to engage fully, which we predicted might be the case, as these focus groups were the first time we had been able to interact for some time, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was soon assuaged as the evening progressed, and the participants who initially were quite reticent ended up contributing well to their respective groups.

After the icebreaker, the groups discussed their views on the five questions we had posed to them. Their responses are detailed below, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data.

## Question 1:

### What do you think progression in prison means?

We classified participant responses about the meaning of progression into 11 themes, presented below, together with the number of participants who endorsed each theme.

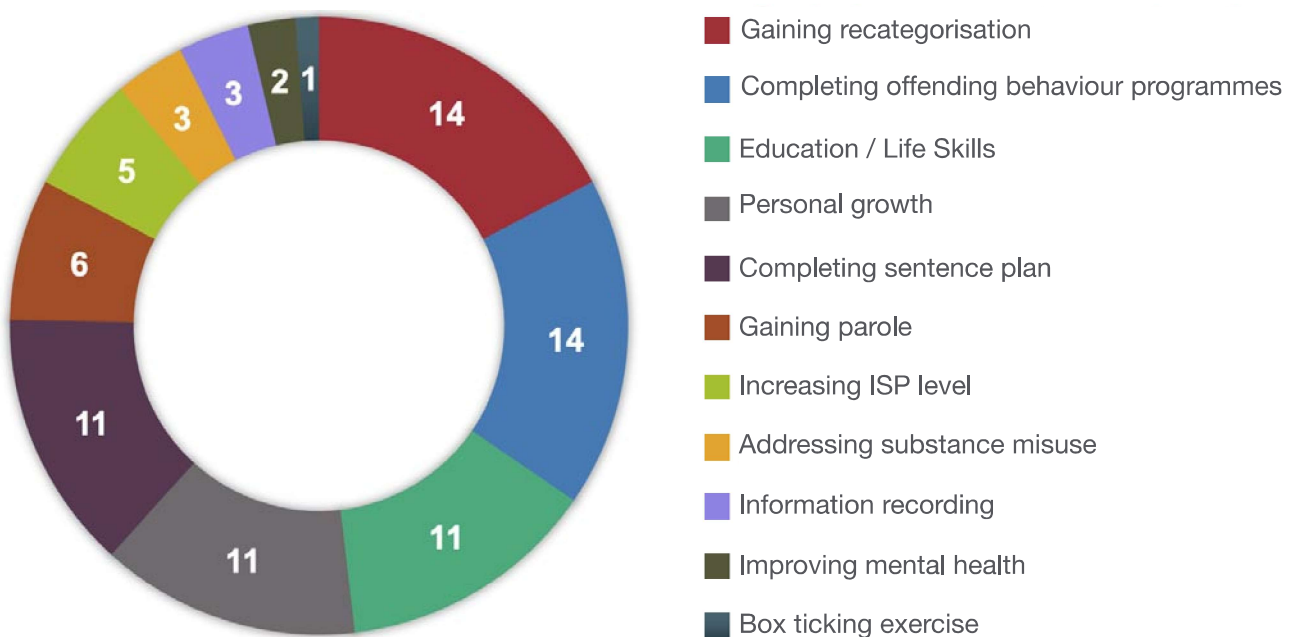
The two biggest factors defining progression were recategorisation and offending behaviour programmes, followed quite closely by education / life skills, personal growth and sentence plans. These key areas, with the exception of personal growth, can generally be demonstrated with tangible and measurable evidence. Several prisoners highlighted that whilst personal growth is important, it often went unnoticed, and wasn't factored in as part of a progression plan.

**Table 1** Key themes on ‘the meaning of ‘progression.’

Theme	n*	%*
Gaining recategorisation	14	17.3
Completing offending behaviour programmes	14	17.3
Developing education / life skills	11	13.6
Achieving personal growth	11	13.6
Completing sentence plan	11	13.6
Gaining parole	6	7.4
Increasing ISP level	5	6.2
Addressing substance misuse	3	3.7
Information recording	3	3.7
Improving mental health	2	2.5
Box ticking exercise	1	1.2

\* This table does not include the nine consultees who gave no response to this question.

**Figure 1** Key themes on ‘the meaning of progression.’



Recategorisation is used to indicate a reduction in risk within the prison system, and so was seen as the joint most important factor of progression.

*... moving to a lower category prison.*

*Progression to me means you are working towards release by going A-B-C-D and to help towards stopping you reoffending when released by doing programmes and courses to help you get your Cat C / Cat D.*

It was highlighted that the best way to achieve this recategorisation was through completing offending behaviour programmes (OBPs), evidenced by the equal representation with recategorisation.

*Progression is moving through the flow of the prison estate using education / programmes and jobs to increase and enhance life skills allowing you to improve as a person. This allows you to demonstrate your level of trust in lower security conditions on your pathway to release.*

*... taking part in offender behaviour courses to learn new skills.*

*Progression to me means doing programmes and courses to help you get both your 'Cat C' and 'Cat D'.*

There was a clear view that participating in education and improving life skills were also important and strongly intertwined with progression and offending behaviour programmes.

*For me, progression in prison means completing everything you can in one establishment, then moving on to the next to do all you can there.*

*... to better myself with the help of programmes, education and physical activity ... incentive level kept high.*

*Progression is moving through the flow of the prison estate to increase and enhance life skills, allowing you to improve as a person...*

*... working with Education to gain qualifications to help you once you're released with job opportunities.*

Respondents emphasised that prison job opportunities and vocational training were equally as valuable as education:

*... demonstrating that you can hold down a steady job.*

*Progression is the journey of preparing to enter a new sector, having the skills to regain employment.*

One person viewed progression as a ‘box ticking exercise’ and that you have to jump through many arbitrary ‘hoops’ in order to progress.

*Programmes are a box ticking exercise. Once you complete a course you can get recategorised.*

## Question 2

### What progression do you think you have made?

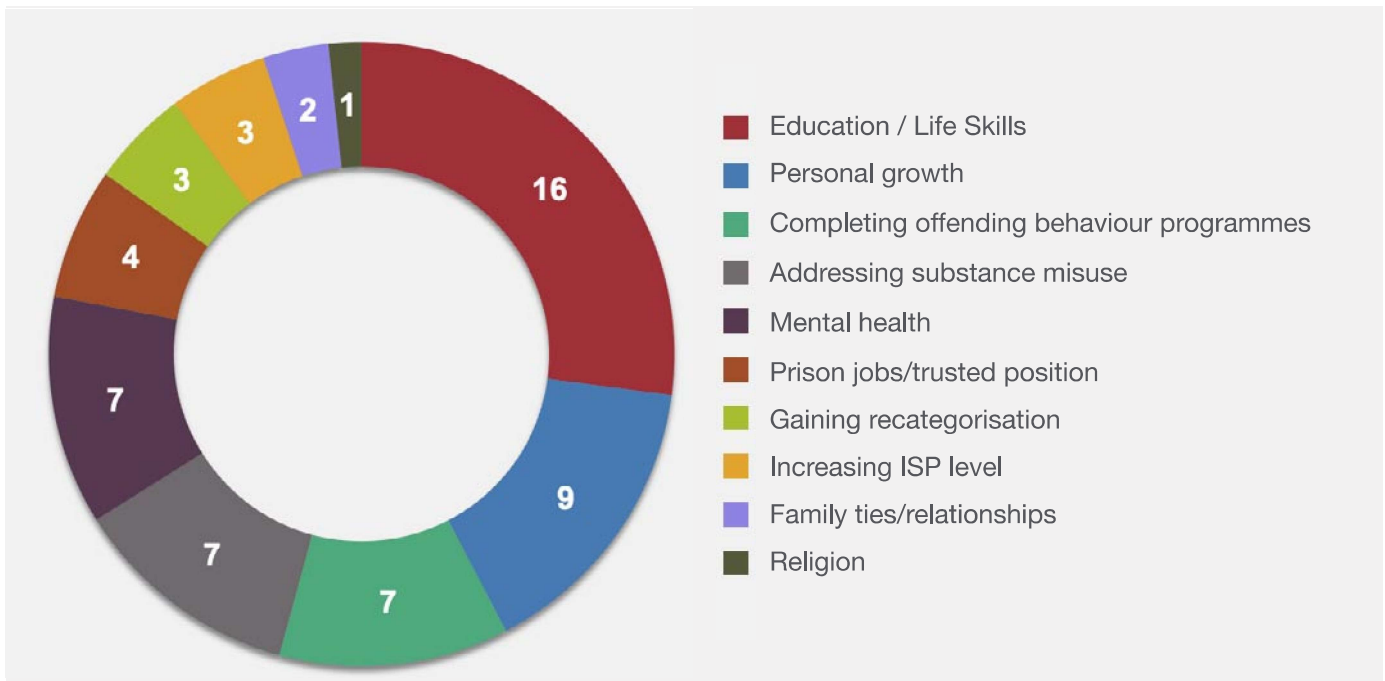
We classified responses into the areas in which prisoners believed they had progressed.

**Table 2** Ways that people reported achieving progression

Theme	n*	%*
Developing education / life skills	16	27.1
Making personal growth	9	15.3
Completing offending behaviour programmes	7	11.9
Addressing substance misuse	7	11.9
Improving mental health	7	11.9
Achieving prison jobs / trusted positions	4	6.8
Gaining recategorisation	3	5.1
Increasing ISP level	3	5.1
Improving family ties / relationships	2	3.4
Religion	1	1.7

\*This table does not include the 30 consultees who gave no response to this question.

**Figure 2** Ways that people reported achieving progression



It is of little surprise that most respondents found education to be an important aspect of their progression, and with the current government drive making it mandatory for prisoners to be working towards Level 1 in Maths and English, most respondents found it to be an accessible and attainable form of progression. It was also seen as a gateway and aid to other areas of progression.

*I have been able to achieve over 34 qualifications for future employment.*

*I have enrolled with the Open University for a degree in Business and Management. I am proud of myself for doing so as I never completed college and I never would (have) even considered OU out in the real world.*

*I have done everything I am (supposed) to do. Completed education courses that I would not have done on the outside and completed courses that are relevant to me whilst in prison.*

Whilst recategorisation was seen as the joint most important theme for Question 1, Question 2 indicated that only three of our respondents had been able to progress through this method. This was of little surprise, given the fact that Rye Hill is the starting point for many prisoners' sentences, and is a higher security establishment with few people progressing from Category 'A' security status.

*Before coming to prison in 2016, I was addicted to drink and drugs, when I was sentenced, I was smoking spice every day until I passed out. Now I have been clean from drugs for two years, I have (gained) my 'Cat C', gained weight and focus on fitness and my daughters.*

*... moving out of high security 'Cat A' (HMP) Wakefield.*

*I have been able to reduce my risk level enough to be relocated from a Category A high security prison, to a Category B establishment.*

Many respondents felt that they had made a significant amount of personal progression in prison, which was defined subjectively and came in various forms, for example, “improving social skills” and “learning to understand myself better.”

*I have made some progression, I have learned to fully accept why I am where I am, and trying to better myself...*

*I have found ways to serve and help others. I have challenged myself to reach out for positions in prison which use and stretch my talents.*

*I have changed my whole lifestyle by changing my gender identity and now live as a woman.*

Working with mental health, substance misuse services and engaging with programmes were strong areas where prisoners felt they had progressed. They felt these areas were accessible in both their current and past establishments.

*I have completed the 'New Me' programme and I have put myself forward for the extra version of 'New Me'.*

*I'm too low risk to do a programme, but I did a PSD [Personal and Social Development] course to help me learn more about myself and how to deal with prison life.*

*I have made progress through working with DART [Drug and Alcohol Recovery Team]. I have set myself a 5-year plan, so I can measure my progression and I hope I can put such practices to use when I finally get my day out there.*

*Before coming to prison, I was addicted to drink and drugs. When I was sentenced, I was smoking drugs (spice) every day until I passed out. With support I have now been clean for two years.*

We received a letter from a prisoner who spoke about the general impact of progression on his sentence in its entirety. We believe that this view is representative of a significant number of prisoners, and we have therefore provided an extract:

*Progression for me is limited and this quite frankly terrifies me. I'm 'maintaining innocence' but willing to do any courses deemed suitable. I have been enhanced/gold since eligible. Not been a perpetrator of violence, nor received so much as a warning from staff for any reason. I am a model prisoner / person and yet I'm frequently reminded getting parole may not be possible as 'my behaviour hasn't improved'. I'm constantly on my best behaviour and do not do anything that could jeopardise my parole or enhanced status and help whenever I can by handing canteen out. I am to be a 'red band' prisoner eventually. As above mentioned, I am willing to do any courses that are deemed necessary, however due to COVID, spaces are limited which means I will not get onto them for the foreseeable future, halting my progression to C-Cat and jeopardising my parole...*

### Question 3

#### Do you think that...

- a) your victim(s)/alleged victim(s) should be able to monitor your progress in prison?
- b) your family/friends should be able to monitor your progress in prison?

This question created the most controversy and compelling debate in our focus groups. Our rationale for selecting this question was that it might prompt those who were initially reluctant to engage with the focus group, in frank and honest conversation about a difficult subject. Our written responses were varied in opinion and almost all answers expressed deep seated sentiments.

We recognise that this is a sensitive topic, and consultation with victims has not been possible. This report only takes the information gathered by prisoners into account. We are also acutely aware that assumptions have been made about how victims may or may not feel. We understand fully that it is critical that victims feel that they have a voice and involvement in what can be life changing decisions for them.

We also want to acknowledge that *victims* and *families* are referred to as separate entities in this report. In many cases victims are in fact family members. Furthermore, families are secondary victims of offences as they often have to deal with the consequences and suffer with guilt and personal loss.

Figure 3 Percentage of consultees who believed that victims should be allowed to monitor progress

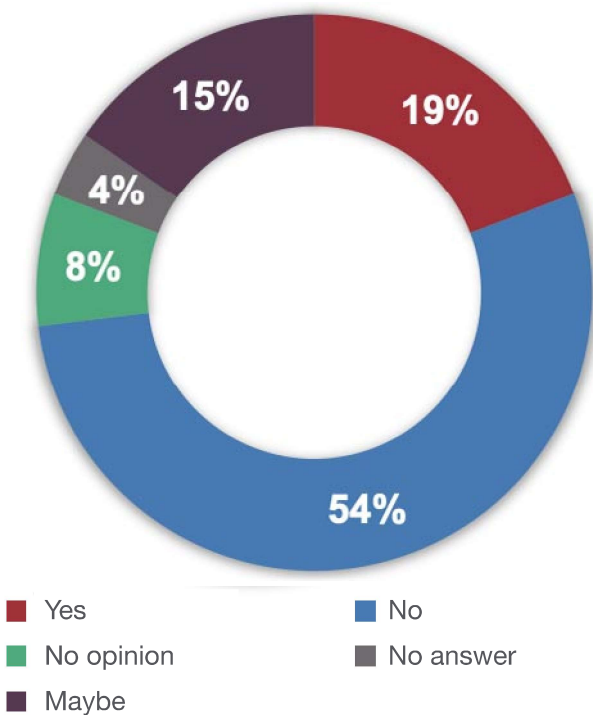
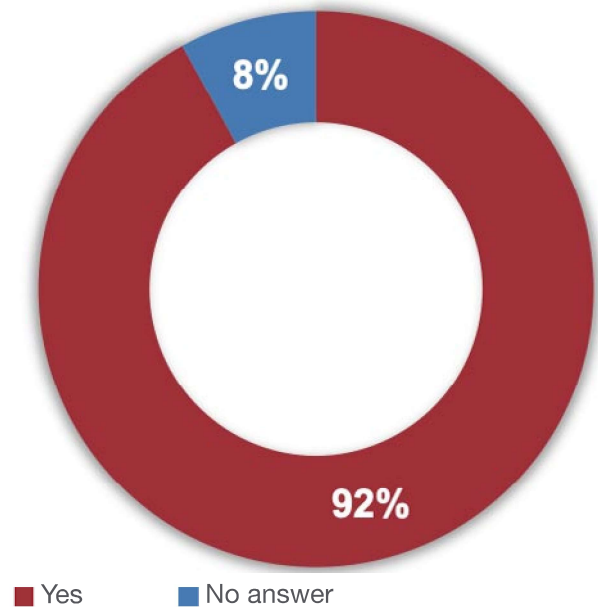


Figure 4 Percentage of consultees who believed that family or friends should be allowed to monitor progress



Many prisoners felt that there would be little benefit from victims being able to monitor their progress as it wouldn't have an impact on their progression pathway. Others felt that this shouldn't happen as it will hinder victims in trying to move on from their ordeal.

*No because – yes, they have been made a victim, but they might not be interested and will want to forget their offender and wouldn't want to be reminded of the offence.”*

People also felt that having victim involvement would not be in the best interests of rehabilitation. One person stated:

*people would not be able to address their issues without being able to separate, and leave in the past, what they did and who they did it to.*

Several respondents felt that alleged victims should not have any future involvement with prisoners, as for those who maintain innocence it would only have negative consequences and feel unjustified.

*No, they shouldn't know anything about what's going on in my life. They gave up their right to know me when they well and truly stitched me up.*

*I do not believe that in prison, progress should have anything to do with any victim as their version was heard at court and this should be an end to their involvement and suffering.*

There was a minority view that victims should have the ability to monitor progression if it would help victims, but not if it had an adverse effect on rehabilitation.

*Yes, if it helps them deal with what happened, and it should be risk assessed.*

*Yes and no, if the prisoner did the crime, yes, the victim(s) should be able to monitor his / her progress, but if a person has been wrongfully convicted, the alleged victim may use this information against you.*

The above quote was one of a number of responses where concerns were raised around accuracy of convictions and the potential for this to have adverse effects for those wrongly convicted.

Further comments referred to how updates could be used to fuel negative perspectives on people convicted of sex offences by making disclosures through the media, which would take the focus away from rehabilitation and draw it towards punishment.

In relation to families, almost all respondents indicated that family engagement was a positive and motivational factor in their progression. This view was generally accepted by those that maintained innocence and accepted guilt.

*I think that the opportunity for family and victims to see the efforts being made to make progress towards becoming a better, reformed person would be a good idea.*

*Yes, [it] improves motivation to engage, showing commitment to change for the better.*

*Yes – as they can help you on release to not reoffend, and to give you a stable, safe place to live.*

*Some people’s family / friends have ceased contact due to their offences, so this could be restorative for some people to rekindle relations.*

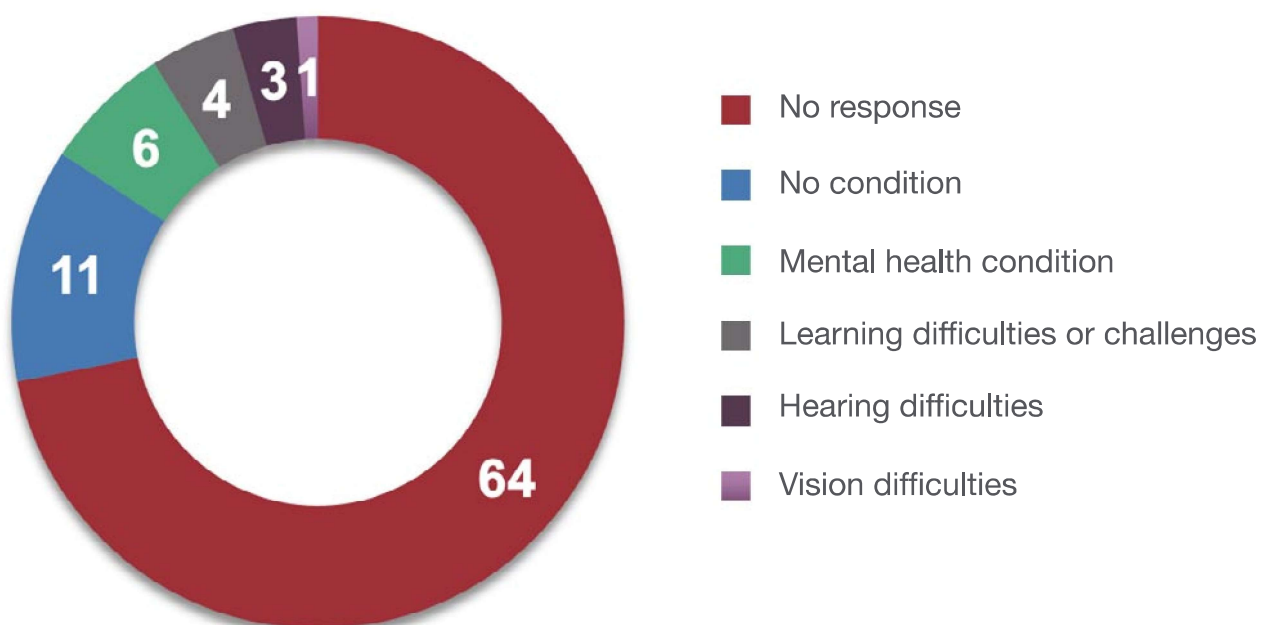
In our focus group responses, the main concern about family involvement was privacy. Whilst responses were overwhelmingly supportive of family / friends’ involvement, participants felt that permission for involvement should be a unilateral decision by the prisoner, and not a standard entitlement for friends and family.

#### Question 4

**Do you, or those you know, have a condition, impairment or barrier (language, vision, cognition etc) that affects your ability to access or interpret information?**

This question was added to establish if any medical, cognitive or linguistic factors have hindered prisoners’ progression due to not being able to process or understand information that has been provided to them. It is worth noting that there was a low response rate to this question, which may reflect reluctance to disclose conditions.

Figure 5 Consultees with conditions that affect how they understand information.



Just over half of the people who responded to this question identified as having some form of difficulty in being able to access and interpret information. Most felt this hindered their ability to understand decisions made about them.

*I have met lots of people within prison that have impairments / barriers which affect their ability to interpret information. I have worked as a carer for four years whilst in custody.*

Several prisoners stated that learning difficulties made not only accessing and interpreting information difficult, but also when representing themselves at meetings such as sentence planning.

*Yes, not being able to write very well, so I have to ask people to help me.*

One important point was made by an individual, who noted how those that may not have a 'condition, impairment or barrier' could still struggle with understanding complex terminology often used in reports and assessments.

*I know many prisons that can't read or write, let alone understand 'legalese'*

*Not me personally, as I don't have any barriers but I do know some that do, provisions must be made to ensure (that) everyone understands fully information that is relevant to them and that (they) can convey grievances.*

Focus group participants highlighted a 'lack of understanding' as an issue when staff are delivering information (complex or otherwise) to a prisoner with mental health and / or learning difficulties. It was further emphasised that some participants would often 'pretend to understand' what is being said to them, to avoid the indignity of having to ask staff to further condense what is being said, or because of the view that some staff would have little patience or would talk in a patronising manner.

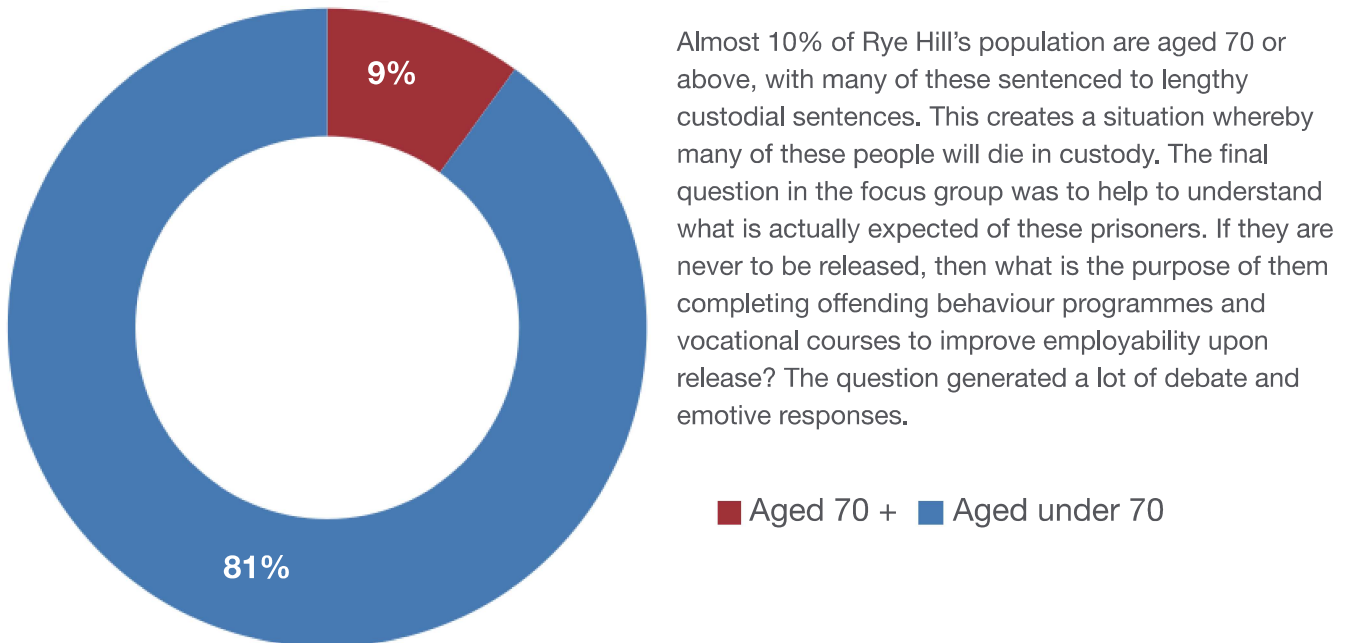
One participant stated that on 'many occasions' (in a previous establishment), staff would ask foreign national prisoners to sign documents without them knowing what they were actually signing. In one case a respondent indicated that one of these documents was an agreement to being voluntarily deported.

There was a clear feeling of frustration in the focus groups, stemming from the lack of equality for those that suffer with mental health issues or learning difficulties, alongside prisoners that do not speak English as a first language. The issue of 'consistency' and 'fair treatment' for all was stated as a key priority.

## Question 5

### How is progression relevant to someone who is unlikely to or is never going to be released?

**Figure 6** Percentage of residents in Rye Hill who are over the age of 70



Three respondents used the term 'self-improvement' in their submissions. Their view was that, regardless of release, progression is something that everyone needs "...to show (that) you are improving as a person." and that "...without progress, your mental health will deteriorate."

*Progression is relevant to a person who is unlikely or never going to be released because they need a goal to focus on. Without progression, mental health suffers dramatically and the system becomes clogged with people stuck in a higher security status / condition (than they ought to be).*

*I think (that) every prisoner should be given the opportunity to make progression in themselves to be able to have a more fulfilling life in prison and to feel better about themselves.*

Some focus group responses stated the opposite view about progression's importance. Progression was referred to as irrelevant for those who will (or are likely to) die in prison, but after some strong debate, the consensus was that – those who commit offences should be given the opportunity to work towards improving themselves as people by participating in meaningful rehabilitative work.

The general view held was that, those given whole life terms were guilty, and there was no consideration for those that maintained innocence. In these discussions, progression was seen as a way of helping prisoners to repent for their actions. This sentiment was echoed by the following submission:

*When a person who is unlikely or never going to be released, progression should involve day-to-day opportunities for the prisoner, which enables that individual to feel (that) they are still part of humanity. Whatever the crime, locking up an 85-year-old for 28 years is just about revenge, certainly not rehabilitation.*

The issue of sentencing and the application of long sentences was noted as a point of contention:

*How can we be sure that locking someone up for ever is anything other than a death sentence unless we look at our justice system differently?*

A view of giving prisoners serving full life terms a sense of purpose was highlighted as a way of driving positive change, echoing the principles of rehabilitation.

*I think (that) progression for whole lifers should be peer led roles. Or whole lifers could share their experiences with determinate (sentenced) prisoners. It may be a way of helping prisoners (to) find a purpose to their lives. I know in America where there are a lot of whole lifers it is a common occurrence. Prisoners serving whole life sentences could offer some form of redemption by helping the prison service and be offered better living conditions in reward for such services.*

Two respondents argued that access to ‘meaningful progression’ with ‘the end goal of leaving prison’ and other purposeful activity were irrelevant to those who were never going to be released.

*If someone is never going to be released then they can never progress (but) they can still make use of their time by doing education or other things that are constructive to pass time and help other people.*

It is of note that many prisoners referenced the variations on the definition of what classed as progression within the prison estate, citing the weightings placed on differing elements being a direct result of the nature of offence, security category, and the Director’s agenda within that particular establishment.

Several prisoners quoted the need for people to “have hope” when serving long sentences as “without hope, how can someone be optimistic about the future”. This summed up the general feelings within the group at closure, and a final rhetorical question was:

*If you have no hope or optimism about the chance of release, is there truly any relevance to progression?*

## Conclusions

The core themes that emerged from the consultation were:

- Progression is about personal growth, not just risk reduction.
- For long-term prisoners, progression should not be structured or defined by their release date.
- The present system of progression is discriminatory towards prisoners with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Throughout this consultation, prisoners engaged effectively and offered constructive ideas about how the prison system can better support progression. The opportunity for prisoners to engage in this project was positively received. Our participants were mindful that our work has a national agenda and chose not to use the consultation to air and pursue personal grievances. In fact, there were numerous efforts to draw on the positives of their prison experiences, made possible through instances of good practice.

It was made clear to us that many of these prisoners with lengthy sentences felt that they had a big void in the early part of their sentence.

*I was told (that) I couldn't access programmes probably until my last year...*

There was limited or no access to programmes for at least the next five years, for the majority of prisoners consulted. Prisoners were at pains to stress their desire to have access to as much mind-stretching purposeful activity as possible. They want to have a chance to grow and use their time effectively, not solely as a means of rehabilitation, but to make personal progression as well. Progression needs to be conceptualised as involving highly personal growth *throughout* someone's sentence, not as a set list of risk reducing activities structured around a person's release date.

This reframing of progression is especially important for people likely to never be released. It was widely thought that these prisoners should be able to access progressive opportunities that could *improve their quality of life*, which should still be seen as important and meaningful. It was emphasised that without doing so, the negativity would filter down through the prison estate ultimately leading to increased levels of frustration, and potentially violence.

Addressing the growing number of prisoners with disabilities was highlighted as an important area to invest resources. Even prisoners that didn't have some disability or issue impacting information processing generally stated they knew others who did struggle with this. Enhanced staff training would help in identifying and meeting the requirements necessary to manage prisoners with complex issues fairly, and make sure they have the equal opportunities to progress.

In addition to reframing progression as a steady process of personal growth, equally available to all, our consultation underscored the importance of safety and support for facilitating progression.

The will and desire of prisoners to change and better themselves requires more than simply access to progressive opportunities. We heard that prisoners only felt ready to self-reflect when they didn't have to worry about violence. It was evident that prisoners need to be situated in a calm and safe environment where they can feel supported, motivated and self-driven to want to change.

Families were unanimously seen as an effective way to keep prisoners release driven, even by those who don't have anyone on the outside. Family engagement in different areas of prison was seen as a good idea to help build stronger relationships with loved ones, which would support rehabilitation, resettlement and personal growth.

## Recommendations

Throughout this consultation on 'What does progression mean and what does it look like?' a number of recommendations emerged from those who are living a custodial sentence of imprisonment, totalling 10 years or more.

### **1. HMPPS (HM Prison and Probation Service) should provide opportunity for long-term prisoners to engage in risk reduction work earlier in the sentence in order to:**

- Enable them to address their issues as early as possible so that they don't become dominant features, exacerbated by the violent nature of prisons and many of their occupants.
- Empower prisoners by teaching them skills to cope with life and navigate through prison early on.
- Give them the opportunity to consolidate and implement the skills learnt from programmes so that they can demonstrate progression well in advance of their pre-tariff sift or earliest eligibility for open conditions.
- Allow time for any further risk reduction work to be identified through assessments/psychology reports.
- Enable any further risk reduction work to be completed in advance of eligibility for open conditions.

### **2. HMPPS should have processes in place to manage, monitor and evidence personal progression which falls outside the scope of standardised risk reduction.**

### **3. HMPPS should have resources in place to enable long-term prisoners to use their time productively and have varied and substantial sentence plans.** This includes providing support and advice to prisoners on what they need to do in order to achieve recategorisation, especially when through no fault of their own, they have been unable to access core risk reduction work, such as offending behaviour programmes.

- 4. HMPPS should provide training packages for staff working with prisoners with disabilities and learning difficulties.** This includes ensuring that all written materials shared with prisoners are written in plain language. Support must be provided for those who have difficulties reading and writing.
- 5. HMPPS should provide a wider variety of academic opportunities in prisons.** Refresher courses should be made available for prisoners with pre-existing qualifications and Open University degrees should be made accessible for prisoners regardless of sentence stage.
- 6. Prison governors should seek to utilise the individual skill sets of prisoners where possible.** This would empower them and make them feel that they are doing something positive for the prison community, whilst utilising their skills to enhance prison life. This could include organising structured peer-support, learning and development schemes.
- 7. Prison governors should create opportunities for improved family contact, and ensure family members have better quality access to the services that are supporting prisoners.** This should form part of the wider resettlement strategy to support, promote and sustain change during and after custody.
- 8. Prisons should consider initiatives to promote the positive work and progress that prisoners are making to the outside community.** Examples include community engagements, helping to build bridges and turn the tide of negativity for those trying to change and lead a law-abiding life.
- 9. Prisons should provide more resettlement related opportunities, not just for Category C prisoners or those in open conditions.** These activities should include practical basic living life skills such as: budgeting and financial management, CV writing, cooking and admin skills. This is to offset against the increasing number of prisoners being released from high security and Category B prisons.

**Thank you for taking the time to read this report**

**The Building Futures Network Group**

**Report #1 – Progression – January 2023**







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The Building Futures Network was launched in 2021, after a successful funding application by the Prison Reform Trust, to explore the challenges faced by prisoners serving long custodial sentences of 10 years or more.

HMP Rye Hill was selected as the pilot site for the project due to the long-standing relationship between the prison and the Prison Reform Trust. Rye Hill prisoners embraced the opportunity to contribute to national discussion on the impacts of long-term imprisonment, and are grateful that their voices are being heard and listened to.

This report discusses the experiences and insights prisoners have into what they believe progression is, what it should be, and what it could include in the future.