PRISON
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A Measure of Hope?

How purpose, meaning and fulfilment can ease the harms of long-term imprisonment.

An Active Citizens report by Kimmett Edgar, Claudia Vince and Rachel O'Brien

In partnership with the Building Futures programme

The Prison Reform Trust

PRT is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. It was founded in 1981 to inform and influence public debate on prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners, amidst concerns about a projected prison population of 48,000 by 1984. With the prison population in England and Wales approaching 88,000 and projected to rise to at least 95,700 by 2029,[1] PRT remains as important to civic society today as it was over 40 years ago.

We are one of the few organisations willing and equipped to hold the state to account for its treatment of people in prison. Our reputation, built over four decades of knowledgeable, reliable analysis and presentation of the facts, gives us influence behind the scenes that few organisations can match. PRT's main objectives are:

- Reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime.
- Improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families.
- Promoting equality and human rights in the justice system.

We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system, informing prisoners, staff and the wider public, and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. Whilst often working alongside the prison service and maintaining close links with government departments including the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), His Majesty's Treasury (HMT), and the Home Office, to retain its independence, PRT does not seek or accept government funding. The structure and rigour of our programmes are agreed with the trusts and foundations that fund our work.

https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/building-futures

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1 Ministry of Justice. (5 December 2025). Prison Population Projections 2024-2029.

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Executive summary

About this report

This report forms part of PRT's Building Futures five-year programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. Since 2020, it has developed and worked with a network of long-term prisoners to shed light on the human cost of long-term imprisonment and develop ideas for reform. At the time of writing, the Sentencing Bill, which aims to put in place changes recommended by the Independent Sentencing Review, was in the House of Lords for its second reading. While welcome, the Bill will not make a significant impact on the Building Futures cohort, and our work, including this report, explores the evidence of harms and need for further changes.

This report is based on a study dedicated to understanding the meanings, experiences, and difficulties of achieving and sustaining hope, meaning, and fulfilment among people serving long prison sentences, and how this is disrupted by their experiences of institutionalisation and other harms of long-term imprisonment.[2] Against a backdrop of fear, anxiety, trauma, depression, injustice, powerlessness, violence, and uncertainty that characterises prison life,[3] hopelessness[4] and lacking a sense of meaning and fulfilment are key problems facing long-term prisoners. These problems are exacerbated by the decades of 'dead time' that often make up long periods of imprisonment, where people feel unable to progress[5] and by the indeterminate nature of many people's sentences. More broadly, the harmful impact of long-term imprisonment on relationships,[6] on mental and physical health, especially in an aging population,[7] and on the prospects of resettlement post-custody[8] can all contribute to whether or not long-term prisoners feel hopeful, fulfilled, and like their lives have meaning.

This study set out to listen to long-term prisoners' lived experience to learn about these problems and how they can be mitigated.[9] Our aim was to generate ideas for reforms that inform policies that strengthen long-term prisoners' sense of hope, meaning and fulfilment, and to ensure these insights and recommendations are considered by prison leaders, policymakers and ministers.

Through a survey and active citizens group consultations, participants were invited to reflect on the impact of long periods of custody and were encouraged to propose reforms that would improve the treatment of long-term prisoners. They identified involvement in this kind of prisoner engagement work as one source of hope and meaning. Overall, participants identified the following harms of long-term imprisonment, all of which impacted their capacity for and sense of hope, meaning, and fulfilment:

- Impacts of separation from family, including experiences of bereavement, damage to relationships and the financial impact of this.
- Deprivation of autonomy due to being unable to make decisions for oneself and/or to atone, give back to society or take responsibility.
- Uncertainty about their future, both in relation to indeterminate sentences but also in relation to what would happen to them post release.
- Personal deterioration they experienced in relation to loss of social skills, being unable to open up about problems, and losing motivation.

2 The study was approved by the National Research Committee in September 2022; #2022-164.
3 Liebling, A, and Maruna, S. (2005). Introduction: The Effects of Imprisonment Revisited. In A. Liebling and S. Maruna (eds.) *The Effects of Imprisonment*, Willan: Cullompton.
4 Jewkes, Y. (2005). Loss, liminality and the life sentence: Managing identity through a disrupted lifecourse. In: A. Liebling and S. Maruna (eds.) *The Effects of Imprisonment*, Willan: Cullompton, 366-388.
5 Jarman, B. & Vince, C. (2022). *Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences.* Prison Reform Trust.
6 Hutton, H. & O'Brien, R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust
7 Davies, M. et al. (2023). Living (and dying) as an older person in prison. Nuffield Trust.
8 Ibid.
9 The study was approved by the National Research Committee in September 2022; #2022-164.

Findings

The harms of imprisonment

In line with previous research, our participants identified several problems or harms of long-term imprisonment. This included the deterioration or loss of family life. Participants also raised the issue of protected characteristics, describing experiences of unequal treatment and discrimination, and the problem of unmet needs for prisoners entitled to reasonable adjustments.

A chief harm identified was institutionalisation, which led to feeling 'programmed', uncomfortable with change, and 'addicted' to prison. This was partly due to the routinisation of prison life, but it also related to another key harm our participants identified, that is the loss of autonomy and control over their life and future, and the dependence on the regime and staff. Despite this, participants shared how they tried to hold onto their identity by maintaining control over their values, behaviour and lifestyle, and gave examples of how they tried to regain some sense of control and resist the effects of institutionalisation, often through small acts.

Participants also shared experiences of years of 'dead time' and loss of future, connection, and the belief that they mattered. Finally, participants reflected on the deterioration of their mental health, and on becoming desensitised as a way of surviving or protecting themselves against the harmful effects of long-term imprisonment.

Hope, meaning and fulfilment

Participants spoke of hope as a motivation to achieve goals and agreed that hope is reinforced when the person has a sense of their own agency. Some described hope as motivation and the idea that they still have purpose. Participants drew hope from family, faith, others being released, progression and appeals, and looking forward to being released, staying out of prison and being accepted back into society.

> *I thrive to the best I can, motivated by the challenge of wanting to live and be there for my kids even in a small capacity.*
>
> *Knowing that you can progress, especially when you're in a system that traps you.*

For participants, maintaining hope and meaning relied on believing that the system was underpinned by justice. This was undermined when they felt that decisions were arbitrary, where goalposts were shifted without purpose or where they felt stagnant in their sentence, experiencing long periods of 'nothing time'. Conversely, their sense of justice increased when they trusted that sentence management was reliable, reasonable and fair, and when they were treated as individuals who matter.

The group consensus was that whether a life in prison felt meaningful was based on how each day was spent, how their sentence was managed, and how they were treated. For many, fulfilment meant retaining personal integrity, finding inner peace, 'doing the right thing' and feeling happy about how they spent their time. Fulfilment was found in family relationships, personal development (including education), in helping others, and in faith. Many participants saw fulfilment in turning a negative experience into a positive benefit.

> *You need to be able to give this experience a purpose which is greater than your pain.*

Likewise, participants felt that their dignity was respected when officers genuinely tried to help them, when their safety was maintained, when formal arrangements recognised their needs (for example lifer forums), and when equality, diversity and inclusion schemes were pro-active.

> *Here, they try to help you. Sometimes they can't but then their attitude is that we can't help you with that, but what can we do for you?*

Dignity was undermined when people felt that they did not matter as a person because of officers showing rudeness or callousness, where healthcare was inadequate or dismissive of their concerns, and where they felt prisons treated them as statistics, not individuals.

Improving the care of long-term prisoners

The groups made recommendations to their governors about better support for people serving long sentences. From these recommendations the eight themes below emerged. In theory, these approaches are acknowledged as important by the prison system. Like other Building Futures consultations and wider research, this study found that practice often falls short.

- Treat people as an individual.
- Treat people as a responsible member of the prison community.
- Enable people to build and maintain relationships.
- Commit to rehabilitative aims.
- Give people greater control of their finances.
- Provide good access to support and medical care.
- Communicate accurately, clearly and in a timely manner.
- Target management of long-term prisoners.

Building on change

Building Futures is acutely aware of pressures on the system and has argued elsewhere for systemic changes, including sentence reform.[10] We aim to be constructive, acknowledge changes taking place, and identify participants' insights and recommendations that could potentially help. For example, when discussing activities that support hope, participants felt meaningful activity (such as education and peer work) were critical. The prison education contracts due to take effect from October 2025 will need to learn from past shortcomings and be supported by sufficient funding, while building on the more ambitious vision set out by the Prisoner Education Service in 2023.

There are signs within the MoJ of bringing greater flexibility and innovation to purposeful activity. A technical note published in relation to HMP Forest Bank in 2025 emphasises the diversification of activities linked to one of five 'healthy lifestyle' components: mattering, self-care, leisure, productivity and individualisation.[11] Such activities could include peer support, lived experience engagement and consultations. This emphasis is welcome and speaks to participants' views about the relationship between activities and hope, meaning and fulfilment. This resonates with Building Futures' wider recommendations, including the need for greater emphasis on age-appropriate activities and health maintenance,[12] and a national drive to map, expand and strengthen the range of 'partners in progress' that support prisoners' relationships, purpose and meaning.

Another example is New Futures Network (NFN) which has been supporting in-prison and post-release employment since 2018 and has extensive coverage across the estate. NFN has not been externally evaluated. We argue that it needs to adapt to better meet the needs of long-term prisoners where employment may be a long way off or irrelevant, and where in-prison and age-appropriate work could support hope, meaning and fulfilment.

A measure of hope

Hope is a complex idea. Yet, when asked what gives them hope, what enables its maintenance and what its absence means, participants identified consistent themes. While measuring hope was not discussed, there are well established methods that are relevant to this work. Building Futures wanted to explore whether such a measure could bring benefits and has developed and tested its own Hope and Fulfilment Survey (HAFS) that aims to reliably measure these factors in the long-term prison population over time. Co-designed with long-term prisoners, HAFS draws on existing models and approaches, including the Measuring Quality of Prison Life (MPQL) and Staff Quality of Life (SQL) surveys that assess prisoner and staff perceptions of various aspects of the prison environment, including respect and wellbeing.[13] The aims of HAFS include:

- Understanding how hope and fulfilment constructs are experienced and exploring whether these factors can be measured among long-term prisoners.

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10 *Prison Reform Trust Response to the Independent Sentencing Review 2024 to 2025*. (2025). Prison Reform Trust.

11 Technical Note Purposeful Activity. (April 2025). MoJ Available at: https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/Attachment/10225c71-b08e-492f-8966-ecba13b28391 (Accessed 8 October 2025)

12 Price, J. (2024). *Growing old and dying inside: improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust

13 Liebling, A., Hulley, S. and Crewe, B. (2011). 'Conceptualising and Measuring the Quality of Prison Life', in Gadd, D., Karstedt, S. and Messner, S. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods.* London: Sage.

- Identifying hope and fulfilment differences between demographic groups (for example, in relation to gender, ethnicity, age and other characteristics) and location (for example, what prison they are in, its function and whether it is private or public).
- Identifying which aspect of imprisonment (for example, risk category, tariff length or sentence stage) are important predictors in relation to hope and fulfilment.

In 2025, Building Futures trialled HAFS with 190 people, 28% of whom were in the long-term and high security estate and all of whom were long-term prisoners. The results provide a way of measuring over time the link between hope and fulfilment, how much control people feel they have, whether they felt able to progress and have a sense of purpose, and the sources of this. This work is ongoing, and we will continue to work with the prison service to explore whether, like MPQL, the HAFS model could be included within prisons' performance frameworks.

Recommendations

Our recommendations – combined with those of earlier Building Futures work – will help shape our final output as part of our drive for a national strategy for long-term prisoners.

- ***HMPPS should adopt a 'Partners in Progress' national drive to map, expand and strengthen the range of roles that support prisoners to maintain hope, purpose and meaning.*** This should be co-designed with prisoners and include better support around maintaining ties with family and significant others, and external support such as prison visitors.[14] It should also explore opportunities to expand and enhance education with partners in further and higher education.[15] It should place at its heart a collaborative approach that prioritises the role of peer work in relation to a range of outcomes from navigating programmes,[16] to social care support.[17]
- ***The MOJ and HMPPS leadership should explore the potential of Building Futures' HAFS model.*** This would include working in partnership with an academic partner to explore delivery options and how data can be captured over time, within individual prisons and across the estate. This work would need to include learning lessons from the MPQL model and how this is used in performance indicators and by HMI Prisons.
- HMPPS should commission an external evaluation of New Futures Network, including specific consideration of how it could better meet the needs of long-term prisoners. Co-design work with long-term prisoners should create a separate network that focuses on tailoring NFN's offer to their needs. This should include addressing all resettlement needs, including for those unable to work and exploring opportunities for those restricted to working in prison and/or those who will have been out of the labour market for a decade or more.
- The Prison Education Service should explore the potential of funding for further and higher education for more long-term prisoners. This should form part of the Partners in Progress approach and take a strategic and expansive view of the economic, social and cultural assets that can be leveraged to reduce the harms of long-term imprisonment.

These recommendations build on previous Building Futures' proposals, including those set out in our work on familial and supportive relationships,[18] the experiences of older long-term prisoners,[19] and around progress and risk.[20] These recommendations will inform Building Futures' final output that will analyse the findings of all consultations undertaken since 2020. This final output will identify principles for reform, cross-cutting themes and strategic recommendations that Building Futures believes should form part of a national strategy for long-term prisoners. The themes emerging so far, though varied in focus, all connect in different ways to hope, meaning and fulfilment. When we listen to prisoners, we hear experiences that reveal challenges not only for individuals in custody but also for the wider system and those who work within it. This report focuses on hope, fulfilment and meaning for long-term prisoners. Yet issues such as staff retention and morale, the enduring pressures and recurring 'crises' that characterise the prison system, suggest that – like the participants themselves – the system needs both the will and credible pathways for hope if it is to avoid fatalism.

14 Hutton, H. & O'Brien, R. (2024). A Long Stretch: *The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences*. Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A_Long_Stretch.pdf
15 Ibid.
16 Forthcoming Building Futures work on offending behaviour programmes. Prison Reform Trust.
17 Price, J. (2024). *Growing old and dying Inside: improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust.
18 Hutton M and O'Brien R, (2024) *The Long Stretch: the challenge of maintaining relationships for long-term prisoners.* Prison Reform Trust.
19 Price, J. (2024) *Growing old and dying inside: Improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences.* Dr Jayne Price. Prison Reform Trust.
20 Jarman, B. and Vince, C. (2022). *Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences.* Prison Reform Trust.

About this report

The Building Futures programme

This report forms part of PRT's Building Futures programme that is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. Our purpose is to give a voice to people serving long prison sentences (10 years or more for men and eight years or more for women), shedding light on the human cost of long-term imprisonment, and aiming to improve their conditions, experiences and progression. A fundamental component of this work is the development of a network of prisoners, former prisoners and their loved ones who have experience of long-term imprisonment and/or its impacts. These voices enrich our understanding, and our work provides a platform for people to inform the policies that affect their lives. It is their priorities that identified our workstreams below and which drive strategic direction of Building Futures.

In late 2025, Building Futures will analyse the findings of all consultations undertaken since 2020 (Appendix A), identifying common principles for reform, cross-cutting themes and strategic recommendations. Some of these have already emerged, all of which in their different ways link to issues around hope, meaning and fulfilment. In bringing together the collective responses we have had, this final piece of work will not shy away from the significant challenges facing the prison system in supporting long-term prisoners (now 11% of the prison population).[21] However, our aim is to be constructive, to recognise work taking place within the system, to push for a national strategy for long-term prisoners, and to suggest what this may look like.

The purpose of this report

This specific study set out to listen to those with lived experience of long-term imprisonment to learn about ways in which institutionalisation can be mitigated.[22] It was designed to explore how prisons can best nurture hope, foster a sense of meaning in people's lives while in custody, and provide opportunities for fulfilment. This included examining the extent to which sentence planning provides people with a sense that they have some control over their progression and future.

This process provides insights into the impact of policy which governors are unlikely to access by other means. By gaining a sharper grasp of the problems long-term prisoners face, these insights can be used to ensure establishments are run more efficiently and humanely. This can help prisoners feel their experience is valued, like they have some agency within the prison community, and enable them to identify common ground with staff. Our aim is to help shape the values and culture that support wellbeing, agency, fulfilment, positive relationships, and self-acceptance in prisons, and for this work to be considered by system leaders, policymakers and Government.

Methods and participation

In total, 123 people serving long prison sentences took part in the research, comprising 59 survey respondents and 58 men and 6 women who we consulted in our focus groups. Our methods were chosen to practise the procedural justice principle of 'voice', enabling people in prison to have a say.[23] Guided by four key questions, we explored factors that restrict people's decision-making, reduce their say about their lives and future, and undermine their capacity to exercise responsibility in prison and post-release.

Key questions			
How do long periods in custody affect the capacity for autonomy?	How do people find meaning while spending long periods in custody?	What do prisons do that supports hope and fulfilment among long-term prisoners?	What would participants change to reduce the harms linked to long-term custody?

21 Prison Reform Trust. (2021). 'Long-Term Prisoners: The Facts', Briefing, Building Futures.https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Long-term-prisoners_the-facts_2021.pdf

22 The study was approved by the National Research Committee in September 2022; #2022-164.

23 Fitzalan Howard, F. and Wakeling, H. (2019). *Prisoner and staff perceptions of procedural justice in England and Wales: Analytical Summary.* HM Prison and Probation Service.

A pilot survey	Numbers
We asked questions using *Inside Time* that circulates 60,000 copies to prisons, special hospitals and secure units. The first stage asked, "What is it like for you having to spend such a long time in prison?" and the second stage asked, "What are the main ways long sentences harm people?" and "What can you do to make your time meaningful?" Most replies were carefully considered letters.[24]	59
A pilot long-term prisoner focus group	
This was in a Category C training adult men's prison and helped to refine our methods for the main study.	8
Six additional long-term prisoner focus groups	
Active citizen panels were held in one women's prison, three Category B prisons, a multi-functional prison and an open prison (all for adult men).	56

Sample agendas are presented in Appendix B

Short surveys helped to refine our active citizen approach, which has been pioneered by PRT for over a decade.[25] PRT's active citizen panels recruit participants with relevant lived experience as partners in gathering evidence, according to a carefully designed sequence.[26] They consider a specified topic, gather evidence, generate ideas for improvement and report back to the governor. Active citizens panels differ from structured interviews with individuals. Different points of view, in conversation, evoke new insights that may not have arisen in speaking to an individual one-on-one.

The long-term prisoner focus groups explored topics like progression, family visits, risk reduction, and education. Group members created spaces of emotional safety where deeper themes, including anxiety, depression, hope and injustice could be explored. Participation was voluntary and participants were required to show respect for others, listen to opposing views, support their positions with evidence, and share decision-making equitably among the group. Groups were informed about sources of support if the discussion covered a distressing topic. Group size ranged from six to 10 and facilitators took notes on flipcharts so participants could see what was recorded. Data were stored securely and anonymised, with identifying details removed so that this report could be shared with participants.

Although the research team ran the sessions, each panel held the authority to analyse the evidence, articulate the findings and suggest proposals for reform. The aim was not to generate robust insights about individual psychological responses to long-term imprisonment. Rather, the groups analysed the social contexts in which people serve long sentences, focused on the whole prison community and generated proposals for the treatment of people in different prison settings. Each group produced a report, including proposals (Appendix C) relevant to some or all prisons. These inform our conclusions and recommendations, which focus on strategic change.

Report structure

This report is divided into eight chapters. Having set out the purpose, scope and methods of this work in *this first chapter,* the second chapter outlines some of the context of this work. This includes a brief overview of sentencing trends and some of their impacts. We then go on to summarise some of the existing evidence relevant to our core themes around life in prison including institutionalisation, hope and helplessness, fulfilment and meaning.

The third chapter explores our findings and wider research around the harms of long-term imprisonment. These include routinisation and loss of autonomy, control, connection and a sense of future, and the impacts these things have on mental health and in relation to hope and desensitisation.

In the next three chapters, we focus on participants' insights around hope (*chapter four*), meaning and fulfilment (*chapter five*), meaning and justice (chapter six), and dignity and justice (*chapter seven*).

In the final and *eighth chapter* we set out our conclusions and recommendations, including our key proposal around embedding a greater focus on hope indicators in assessing how well the prison system is functioning as part of a wider national strategy for long-term prisoners.

24 Unlike the survey, the long-term prisoner focus groups that followed did not require writing skills.

25 See for example, Edgar, K., Jacobson, J. and Biggar, K. (2012). *Time Well Spent: a practical guide to active citizenship and volunteering in prison.* Prison Reform Trust.

26 Prison Reform Trust. (2017). *A Different Lens: Report on a pilot programme of active citizen forums in prison.* Online: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/a-different-lens/ retrieved 28 October 2024.

The context

Prison trends and recent responses

The prison population in England and Wales was 86,958 on 10 November 2025.[27] The profile of this population has changed significantly in the past 20 years; it now includes more people over 50 and more people serving long-term indeterminate sentences.[28]

- Between 2003 and 2023, the number of prisoners aged 50 or over has nearly trebled, and this group now account for around one in six people in prison (17%).[29]
- Nearly three times as many people were sentenced to 10 or more years in 2023 than in 2010,[30] and at the end 2024, 8,493 people were serving indeterminate sentences in custody. [31]

The prison population is projected to grow, and the system will be responsible for meeting the needs of more long-term prisoners for the foreseeable future.[32] These trends have exacerbated the challenges faced by the system, staff and those responsible for providing a range of services. Since 2017, HMI Prisons has made 21 Urgent Notifications: nearly half were between 2023 and 2025.[33] The Chief Inspector of Prisons has highlighted the rising number of prisons failing to meet HMIP's Healthy Prison Tests,[34] calling for "a much bigger conversation about who we are sending to prison, for how long and what we want prisoners to do while they are inside." He warns that, without significant change, conditions are likely to get worse as the prison population rises.

People serving long sentences can be held in different category prisons, but many will spend at least a proportion of their sentence in one of the 14 prisons that make up the long-term and high security estate. Recent serious attacks on prisoners and prison officers within this part of the estate highlighted vulnerabilities in security and have called into question the effectiveness of counter radicalisation and violence measures, throwing into stark relief the question of how to protect staff and manage risk, while providing opportunities for progression for long-term prisoners.

Responding to some of the issues above, the government implemented its early release scheme to alleviate capacity pressures,[35] created the Women's Justice Board to reduce the number of women in custody,[36] and commissioned the Independent Review of Sentencing.[37]

PRT broadly welcomed the sentencing review, in particular proposals to introduce an external advisory body on sentencing and a requirement for ministers to report annually to parliament on prison capacity.[38] However, the proposed measures are unlikely to significantly reduce the use of long prison sentences, a key driver of the rise in the prisoner population. Given that imprisonment imposes harms and that long sentences impose deeper, longer lasting harms, it is important to understand what can minimise them. Below, we outline research on the key overlapping themes of this study.

27 Ministry of Justice. (2025). Prison Population: weekly estate figures 2025. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prison-population-weekly-estate-figures-2025
28 Prison Reform Trust. (2021). Long-term prisoners: the facts.
29 Prison Reform Trust. (2023). Prison: the facts. Bromley Briefings Summer 2023
30 Ibid.
31 Ministry of Justice. (2025). Offender Management Statistics Quarterly: July to September 2024. Online: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2024/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2024 Retrieved 5 February 2025.
32 Ministry of Justice. (2024). Prison Population Projections 2024-2029. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029
33 This information can be accessed via the HMIP website in their "'Our reports' section after selecting 'Urgent notifications' as the publication type. Available at: https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/our-reports/page/2/?listing_search&publication_typeyear=30&detention_type=0&report_themes=0 (Accessed 20 November 2025)
34 *HM Chief Inspector of Prisons annual report: 2023 to 2024.* (September 2024). HMI Prisons.
35 Guidance, New change to some offenders' automatic release dates. (9 September 2024). Ministry of Justice. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-change-to-some-offenders-automatic-release-dates
36 Women's Justice Board: https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/womens-justice-board
37 GOV.UK. (2024). Independent Sentencing Review 2024 to 2025. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/independent-sentencing-review-2024-to-2025.
38 Prison Reform Trust. (2025). PRT comment: Independent Sentencing Review. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/prt-comment-independent-sentencing-review-2/

The harms of prison and institutionalisation

Common features of prison include fear, anxiety, trauma, depression, injustice, powerlessness, violence, and uncertainty.[39] Long-term imprisonment presents deep psychological and emotional challenge including hopelessness.[40]

The early stages of any prison sentence are often disorientating and overwhelming. This is likely to be intensified among long-term prisoners, many of whom experience sudden, "entry shock, temporal vertigo and intrusive recollections" of the offence.[41] Prisoners have a "sudden encounter with the basic deprivations and lack of autonomy of prison life".[42] As well as anger, distress and hopelessness, Ben Crewe, Susie Hulley and Serena Wright found that early-stage life sentence prisoners often struggled to comprehend how they would survive.[43] Their ability to cope is closely linked to their access to meaningful contact with others. Regular communication with family and other supportive networks can act as a protective factor, helping to mitigate the psychological harms of isolation, anxiety, and institutionalisation.[44]

Harm linked to long-term imprisonment includes a sense of meaninglessness, threatening environments, loss of relationships, and identity crises.[45] The risks of being threatened, assaulted or robbed are prevalent,[46] and factors that contribute to poor mental health include long periods of isolation, lack of stimulus, overcrowding and violence.[47] Conversely, prisons that strike a healthy balance between security and trust, and regimes that are progressive and nurturing, can be 're-humanising'.[48] A 2019 study by Liebling and colleagues found that when staff were committed to providing meaningful support, prisoners felt trusted, cared for.[49]

Prison disrupts familial relationships, depriving people of some of their most positive roles; being a daughter or son, sibling, or parent, and making it harder to maintain a sense of self or meaning.[50]

Loss of contact can be a greater source of pain for women; often the primary caregiver, separation from children can result in deep maternal distress and the breakdown of key familial bonds, intensifying feelings of guilt, grief, and disconnection.[51] Having no supportive relationships outside can also contribute to people becoming institutionalised. Building Futures has undertaken two consultations exploring the impacts of long prison sentences on relationships: one with prisoners and a second with loved ones on the outside.[52] The former found:

> "Profound loss, which in many cases mounts over time as friends move on, families change, and people die. While the process of any human life involves loss, for people in prison for a long time, the experience is particular and creates deep tensions...for some, a keenly felt part

39 Liebling, A, and Maruna, S. (2005). Introduction: The Effects of Imprisonment Revisited. In A. Liebling and S. Maruna (eds.) *The Effects of Imprisonment*, Willan: Cullompton.

40 Jewkes, Y. (2005). Loss, liminality and the life sentence: Managing identity through a disrupted lifecourse. In: A. Liebling and S. Maruna (eds.) *The Effects of Imprisonment*, Willan: Cullompton, 366-388; Wright, S., Hulley, S. and Crewe, B. (2023) Trajectories of hope/lessness among men and women in the late stage of a life sentence. Theoretical Criminology 27(1): 66-84.

41 Wright, S., Crewe, B. and Hulley, S. (2017). "Suppression, Denial, Sublimation: Defending against the Initial Pains of Very Long Life Sentences". *Theoretical Criminology.* 21(2). 225–46, p226; see also Hulley, S., Crewe, B., and Wright, S. (2016). Re-Examining the Problems of Long-Term Imprisonment. *British Journal of Criminology.* 56: 769–92, p786; MacKenzie, D., and Goodstein, L. (1985). "Long-Term Incarceration Impacts and Characteristics of Long-Term Offenders: An Empirical Analysis". *Criminal Justice and Behavior.* 12(4). 395–414.

42 Hulley, S., Crewe, B., & Wright, S. (2016). Re-examining the Problems of Long-Term Imprisonment. British Journal of Criminology, 56, 769–792: 786.

43 Crewe, B, Hulley, S and Wright, S. (2020). *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time.* Palgrave Macmillan.

44 Liebling, A. (1999) *Prison suicide and prisoner coping.* Crime and Justice, 26, 283–359.

45 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020) *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time.* Palgrave Macmillan; Jarman, B. (2024) *Moral messages, ethical responses: Punishment and self-governance among men serving life sentences for murder.* PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge; His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons. (2024). Desperate times for prisons: Chief Inspector of prisons calls for sustained action to tackle the crisis. Press Notice. September 10, 2024. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/news/desperate-times-for-prisons-chief-inspector-of-prisons-calls-for-sustained-action-to-tackle-the-crisis/ (Retrieved 31/03/2025).

46 Gooch, K., and Treadwell, J. (2015). The Treatment of Young Adults in the Criminal Justice System: Written Evidence. House of Commons Justice Select Committee. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmjust/169/16913.htm#_idTextAnchor066 (Retrieved 24 March 2025)

47 De Viggiani, N. (2007). Unhealthy prisons: Exploring structural determinants of prison health. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 29(1), 115–135. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9566.2007.00474.x

48 Liebling, A., Laws, B., Lieber, E., Auty, K., Schmidt, B.E., Crewe, B., Gardom, J., Kant, D. and Morey, M. (2019). Are Hope and Possibility Achievable in Prison? The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice. 58: 104-126, page 112. https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12303

49 Ibid.

50 Condry, R., & Minson, S. (2021). Conceptualizing the effects of imprisonment on families: Collateral consequences, secondary punishment, or symbiotic harms? Theoretical Criminology, 25(4), 540-558. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480619897078; Prison Advice and Care Trust. (2023). "Serving a hidden sentence." Online: https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/latest/news/new-research-reveals-devastating-impact-of-imprisonment-on-families-and-children/ Retrieved 9 October 2024

51 Vince, C. & Evison, E. (2024). *Invisible women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment.* London: Prison Reform Trust; see also Baldwin, L. (2022). *s* Waterside Press.

52 Hutton, Dr. M., and O'Brien, R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust; Woolsey, R. (2025). *The Long Stretch 2 The emotional impact of long-term imprisonment on loved ones.* Prison Reform Trust.

of the detachment from being meaningfully involved in family life was that they were unable to participate in the rituals and rites of passage." [53]

Craig Haney described institutionalisation as the process by which prisoners: "...are shaped and transformed by the institutional environments in which they live...a unique set of psychological adaptations that often occur — in varying degrees — in response to the extraordinary demands of prison life".[54] In their study of released life sentence prisoners, Marieke Liem and Maarten Kunst described "post-incarceration syndrome", characterised by emotional numbing, hampered decision-making, hypervigilance, mistrust, and social alienation. They explained this numbness as "a coping mechanism that creates profound distance between prisoners and others".[55] Crewe, Hulley and Wright's study of life sentence prisoners found evidence of emotional suppression. To avoid being overwhelmed with distress and deal with the demands of the prison environment, prisoners learnt to 'shut down' and 'detach their feelings' in ways that reshaped them significantly.[56] More recently, Ben Crewe noted the impact of such coping strategies, which can be about self-preservation, but can also be detrimental, particularly upon release as people try to re-adjust to life outside following long-term imprisonment.[57] Similarly, Ian O'Donnell describes the phenomenon of 'learned helplessness', where prisoners do not think that their actions make any difference and therefore do not act, even when they could.[58] Importantly, emotional suppression and learned helplessness - especially when occurring over many years - can create disadvantages for life after release.[59]

Finally, it is important to recognise that all this occurs within a prison system that is unpredictable, inconsistent, and opaque, with demands on prisoners constantly shifting but never being clear, and where key decisions about prisoners are often made without them, with little explanation or recourse to question them without suffering negative consequences that can complicate progression, even many years down the line. This contributes to 'feelings of tension and anxiety generated by uncertainty...and the sense of not knowing which way to move, for fear of getting things wrong."[60] Ben Crewe notes that prisoners serving indeterminate sentences are especially impacted by this 'tightness', as their progression through the system and eventual release are conditional, yet the conditions are unclear, inconsistent, and constantly shifting, making it harder to fulfil and endure institutional demands, especially over the course of a long sentence with an uncertain release.[61]

Hope, helplessness and agency

In 2002, C.R. Snyder defined hope as a belief that one can achieve goals, requiring 'plausible routes' to fulfil them.[62] Conversely, powerlessness and uncertainty undermine hope.[63] This relates to the legal aspect to hope; degrading treatment is prohibited by international treaties.[64] Yet, as Justice Power-Forde argues, to deny prisoners "the experience of hope would be to deny a fundamental aspect of their humanity and, to do that, would be degrading."[65]

Hope is critical to coping with prison and for rehabilitation,[66] but as Erwin James reflected, it is exhausting as it requires strong resilience and effort to avoid despair.[67] Unable to plan, those serving indeterminate

53 Hutton, Dr. M., and O'Brien, R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust, page 35.

54 Haney, C. (2001). The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment, in From Prison to Home: The Effect of Incarceration and Re-entry on Children, Families, and Communities, Conference: University of California, Santa Cruz. https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/private/pdf/75001/Haney.pdf (Retrieved 31 March 2025)

55 Liem, M., and Kuntz, M. (2013). Is there a recognizable post-incarceration syndrome among released "lifers"? *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 36(3-4). doi:10.1016/j.ijlp.2013.04.012

56 Crewe, B, Hulley, S and Wright, S. (2020). *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56601-0.

57 Crewe, B. (2024). 'Sedative Coping', Contextual Maturity and Institutionalization Among Prisoners Serving Life Sentences in England and Wales. *British Journal of Criminology*, 64(5): 1080–1097.

58 O'Donnell, I. (2023). *Prison Life: Pain, Resistance, and Purpose*. New York University Press.

59 Crewe, B. (2024). 'Sedative Coping', Contextual Maturity and Institutionalization Among Prisoners Serving Life Sentences in England and Wales. *British Journal of Criminology*, 64(5): 1080–1097; Rennie, A. (2025) Release from long-term imprisonment Understanding the experiences of people released from the longest sentences and returning to the community. Prison Reform Trust.

60 Crewe, B. (2011). Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment. Punishment & Society. 13(5): 509- 529; see also Jarman, B. (2024) Moral messages, ethical responses: Punishment and self-governance among men serving life sentences for murder. PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge.

61 Ibid.

62 Snyder, C.R. (2002). Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind. *Psychological Inquiry*, 13(4): 249-275.

63 Ibid.

64 United Nations. (1984). The Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading (Retrieved 31 March 2025).

65 Power-Forde, A. (2013). Concurring Opinion: Vinter and Others v. the United Kingdom. European Court of Human Rights. Grand Chamber, Council of Europe, 001-122664.

66 Liebling, A., Laws, B., Lieber, E., Auty, K., Schmidt, B.E., Crewe, B., Gardom, J., Kant, D. and Morey, M. (2019). Are Hope and Possibility Achievable in Prison? The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice. 58: 104-126. https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12303.; Seeds, C. (2022). Hope and the Life Sentence, The British Journal of Criminology. 62(1). January 2022, Pages 234–250, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab037

67 James, E. (2013, July 7). Hope for a prison lifer is exhausting. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/07/hope-prison-lifer-exhausting-sentence

sentences often experience prolonged periods of hopelessness, resulting in a "state of almost psychological 'paralysis'".[68] Despite this, Christopher Seeds found that hope can manifest even when there is no realistic prospect of release: "When, in the face of collapse, a person determines to navigate the 'hopeless' situation in an active, realistic and ethical way... they manifest deep hope".[69]

Meaning and identity

Crewe, Hulley and Wright described the sense of meaninglessness as another harm linked to prison, where opportunities to find purpose are often sparse.[70] Prisoners' sense of meaning is undermined when they perceive a gap between how the justice system defines them and how they see themselves.[71] Karen Bullock, Annie Bunce and Daniel McCarthy found that restrictive and punitive prison regimes hinder personal change, whereas those that prioritise education, peer mentoring and faith-based activities help people develop coherent narratives of change.[72] Their study found that engagement in therapeutic or creative programmes can reduce feelings of hopelessness and the use of maladaptive coping strategies,[73] while supportive environments enable some prisoners to construct redemption narratives and sustain hope and a sense of fulfilment.[74] These findings echo Building Futures consultations that found participants felt too much weight was placed on offending behaviour programmes (OBPs), while other routes to personal development were ignored, hard to access, or were not age- or sentence-appropriate.[75]

While activities such as work and education were seen as critically important, participants wanted to see more opportunities that supported developing a sense of purpose. Across Building Futures work, consensus emerged about the importance and potential of peer work, and opportunities to use lived experience to support others, to provide prisoners with a sense of meaning and purpose.

This chapter offers an overview of literature that has explored some of the impacts of long-term imprisonment. In the next chapter, true to the aims of all of Building Futures' we have attempted to surface the lived experience of long-term prisoners in relation to the harms that they identify, much of which resonates with the literature above and wider research. While these harms can undermine hope, meaning and purpose for those serving long sentences, they can be reduced, if not removed, through approaches, activities and cultures that support the cultivation of hope, meaning, and purpose among long-term prisoners.

68 Liebling, A. (2004). *Prisons and Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality and Prison Life.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
69 Seeds, C. (2022). Hope and the Life Sentence, The British Journal of Criminology. 62(1). January 2022, Pages 234–250, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab037. Page 244
70 Crewe, B, Hulley, S and Wright, S. (2020). *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56601-0.
71 Liebling, A. (2014). Moral and Philosophical Problems of Long-Term Imprisonment. July 2014. Studies in Christian Ethics 27(3): 258-269. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274995426_Moral_and_Philosophical_Problems_of_Long-Term_Imprisonment (Retrieved 1 April 2025).
72 Bullock, K., Bunce, A., & McCarthy, D. (2019). Making Good in Unpromising Places: The Development and Cultivation of Redemption Scripts Among Long-Term Prisoners. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology.* 63(3), 406-423. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X18800882
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 See: Price, J. (2024). *Growing Old and Dying Inside: improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences.* PRT; Jarman, B., and Vince, C. (2022). *Making Progress?* PRT. See also BF PRT forthcoming work on offending behaviour programmes.

The harms of imprisonment

The pilot survey for this study asked respondents to describe the harms of long-term imprisonment. Participants echoed previous research that highlights how long-term prisoners often have a painful relationship with time. Crewe, Hulley and Wright point out that the person's future is cast into very stressful uncertainty: "One of the greatest struggles for prisoners serving long, indeterminate sentences is dealing with the overwhelming nature of the time ahead, which may feel impossible to contemplate…"[76] Liebling has observed that increases in prison sentence lengths and use of indeterminate sentences have introduced "a new and distinctive kind of 'prison pain'... consisting of a kind of existential and identity crisis brought on by both the length and uncertainty of contemporary sentences, but also by the restricted facilities available".[77]

The long-term prisoner focus groups began with the same question, and the passing of time emerged as a core theme.

> *IPP[78] sentences have led to so many worries about the future. Not knowing if we can have children. The vicious circle of release, recall, and back to prison.*
> Women's prison

Other themes that emerged were disruption to family life, loss of agency, uncertainty, personal deterioration, and lack of respect from staff. One person said his attempts at self-development were hampered by officers who resented his aspirations. Others felt talked down to by officers, undermining their self-esteem. Some of those who looked to staff to solve problems felt they were 'not a priority'. Participants cited poor communication from Offender Management Units about their status, poor or neglected keywork, and inaccurate security reports, which are not corrected.

> *I'm on an IPP. The last time I saw a probation officer was three years ago.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *Incompetence cost me time. My keyworker was supposed to complete my paperwork for the parole board. After six months of promises, I got a solicitor on it. The solicitor heard back from the governor that the officer wasn't up to job, and I'd be assigned a different keyworker. Then they did my paperwork, and I got progression. But that was six months of waiting, just because the officer couldn't do his job.*
> Men's open prison

Participants shared examples of personal deterioration, describing a loss of social skills, living with frustration, being unable to be open about their problems, and a loss of motivation. Many highlighted the impacts on mental health and described having to 'mask' any vulnerability, in part because they saw prison as a dangerous environment.

> *Behind the walls of a prison, frustration can easily kick in and mutate. This leads to further states of mental stress and anxiety.*
> Survey

> *If you are locked behind your door for long hours you will reflect on your acts, on your life, your loved ones, and this can have dramatic consequences on your mental health, especially if you can't talk to anyone about your feelings.*
> Survey

Family life

Many impacts identified by the research above are connected to the experience of long-term imprisonment as one that combines a lack of privacy and agency with isolation. As previous Building Futures work has shown, this is exacerbated by the damage done to important relationships outside, which can provide people with sources of support, purpose, identity and hope.

Participants described the effects of their sentences on their families including separation, impacts on relationships, finances, and bereavement. Group members spoke about the cost of being held at a

76 Crewe, B., Hulley, S., and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time.* London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. Page 87

77 Liebling, A. (2011). Moral performance, inhuman and degrading treatment and prison pain. Punishment & Society, 13(5) 530-550, p536.

78 Imprisonment for Public Protection – an indeterminate sentence introduced in 2005 and abolished in 2012.

distance from loved ones, a deprivation that can particularly profoundly affect women.[79] This pain was exacerbated when people were required to move prison to complete a course. This could mean having to choose between maintaining family ties and making progress.[80]

> *The longer people are locked up so more probabilities they have to lose their partners, children, wife, husbands, and that's taking away their reasons to better themselves.*
> Survey

> *It's very hard not being with family on birthdays, Christmas... for special milestones.*
> Survey

> *Families don't understand what prison is like. They don't know how to support us. That can create distance or barriers in relationships over time.*
> Women's prison

Distance from home puts added pressures on loved ones and participants expressed guilt at not being able to support their family. Many stressed that their sentence was hard on their families, not least because of enforced separation. One person said that when he was classified as Category A, it took a year for the prison to put his mother on his visiting list. [81]

> *Not being able to support their partner with upbringing their children, not being able to provide for their family, not being able to comfort and give the support their families need can cause numerous issues on the long term.*
> Survey

> *It kills me deep inside not being there with, and for, my loved ones... for some I never will be! That's what hurts the most...I will never be able to have any more quality time with my mum.*
> Survey

People serving a long sentence are more likely to experience the death of a loved one while inside. Participants expressed sorrow at not being allowed to attend funerals of relatives.

> *In 2012, I asked for a new OASys. Mine was years old. The new one came back – 'no contact with family'. I appealed, but during that time.... my mum died.*
> Men's open prison

> *A lot of despair and lack of motivation for rehabilitation is due to prisoners losing their loved ones while in prison.*
> Survey

More broadly, participants felt unable to keep up to date with the changes occurring outside. Part of being institutionalised related to the loss of skills, both social and practical.

> *The main way long sentences harm people is by isolating them from the real world and developments or advances taking place. … New laws, rules, ways of doing things. … I feel like a reel-to-reel tape player in an age of digital downloads.*
> Survey

> *I have lost a grip on reality as in all of this time I have never handled money or used up to date technology…All of the social skills needed to function in society are gone.*
> Survey

> *[You become]... out of touch with society and what it means to function as a free (and free-thinking) self and independent member of society. Learning to adapt again is comparable with one day awakening in a far-flung future. Imagine awakening in a time that was not your own.*
> Survey

79 Vince, C. and Evison, E. (2021). *Invisible Women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment.* Prison Reform Trust https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/invisible_women.pdf (Retrieved 9 April 2025)

80 Jarman, B., and Vince, C. (2022). *Making Progress?* What progression means for people serving the longest sentences. Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Making_progress.pdf (Retrieved 3 April 2025)

81 Category A refers to the highest level of security categorisation for male prisoners in England and Wales. This is for those prisoners whose escape would be highly dangerous to the public, the police or the security of the State. The aim is to make escape impossible. The most restrictive security measures are imposed on these prisoners, and they are generally held in designated high security prisons.

Protected characteristics

Building Futures previous work has identified the particular stresses on families and loved ones when the person serving a long sentence experiences discrimination or where they have mental health or learning challenges before going to prison. Some of the groups discussed protected characteristics and indirect discrimination, including issues around reasonable adjustments to ensure equal access to important resources. One group proposed that prison courses, education, and jobs be made accessible for those living with learning difficulties or disabilities. One participant hoped that the prison he was currently held in would repair the stairlift to the gym. Providing equal access to important resources is an example of the duty to make reasonable adjustments.[82]

Regarding indirect discrimination, one participant hinted at age discrimination.

> *There're no facilities for young adults who are stuck here until their 21st birthday. No courses to reduce risk, meaning no progression for Cat As.*[83]
> Multi-functional prison

The women's group argued that their needs are neglected. For example, because there are fewer women's prisons, they are more likely to have to choose between doing an OBP and being close to family. A long sentence can also mean that women are inside during child-bearing years. In two groups, members stated that the prison system denied them the right to define who counted as close family. These findings align with those of a previous Building Futures consultation: "Some prisons are still interpreting family as limited to biological connections, the partners of prisoners and their children. Recognising a broader definition is especially important for prisoners who have experienced being in care (overrepresented amongst the prison population)".[84]

> *Every prisoner has their own family dynamic. In many countries, the bond with aunts, uncles, cousins are equally as deep as those with 'close family'.*
> Survey

There are also legal obligations that extend to prisoners, including the right family life. These are underpinned by the European Convention of Human Rights,[85] incorporated in the Human Rights Act,[86] and the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment,[87] all of which shape the UK's regulatory framework.

Institutionalisation

> *The longer someone is away from society, with non-existent rehabilitation, the more they become institutionalised, depressed and resentful.*
> Survey

Our starting assumption was that institutionalisation is a particular concern for long-term prisoners.[88] As we have touched on above, the literature identifies key aspects of institutionalisation that can be found amongst long-term prisoners, including loss of agency, emotional suppression, and learned helplessness, all of which can impact people's wellbeing and ability to progress. In preparation for the study, we consulted a group of prison inspectors and asked them to list aspects of institutionalisation. They responded with 12 characteristics.

- Adaptation
- Abeyance
- All-you-know
- Conformity
- Degradation
- Dependency
- Flattening
- Hopelessness
- Loss of agency
- Paused
- Repetition
- Routine and uncertainty

82 This duty is set out in Section 20 of the Equality Act 2010. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/20 (Accessed 20 November 2025)
83 See forthcoming Building Futures consultation report on the experiences and needs of young adults serving long prison sentences.
84 Hutton, Dr M. and O'Brien, R. (2024). A Long Stretch. Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A_Long_Stretch.pdf; see also Fischer, A. (2025) *When families (co) exist within and across prison walls: A study of Simultaneous Familial Imprisonment.* Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge.
85 European Convention of Human Rights, Article 8. Available at: https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/human-rights/human-rights-act/article-8-respect-your-private-and-family-life (accessed 5 October 2025)
86 The Human Rights Act 1998. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/contents
87 United Nations. (2002). United Nations Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel
88 Crewe, B. (2024). 'Sedative Coping', Contextual Maturity and Institutionalization Among Prisoners Serving Life Sentences in England and Wales. *British Journal of Criminology.* 64(5): 1080–1097.

In theory, someone who is completely institutionalised has lost their autonomy, their capacity for self-determination; the opposite of a life filled with meaning, providing fulfilment, and offering hope.

A key driver of institutionalisation can be prisoners' dependency on staff for meeting their basic needs. This infantilises them, deprives them of control over their lives, and compromises their decision-making capacities.

> *I would rather be homeless and free than in here having everything I need provided for.*
> Cat B men's prison

Around this central theme, participants identified the following related effects: being 'programmed', routinised, uncomfortable with change, and 'addicted' to prison; feeling trapped in a loop and the loss of future; the deterioration of mental health, being desensitised, and becoming indifferent to one's own life; and being isolated, left behind, and losing social skills and networks. Many found this loss of autonomy very painful; some saw links between this and anti-social behaviour. Others suggested that the person's finances affect how vulnerable they can be to institutionalisation.

> *Because one is prevented from making even the simplest decisions, infantilisation may develop – hence aggressive, unruly, and self-centred behaviour.*
> Survey

> *There is an economic relationship with the prison. I have no income beyond what the prison provides. That makes me dependent on these walls.*
> Cat B men's prison

Participants resisted institutionalisation in paradoxical ways. One explained that he always closed his door before an officer would, so that he made the decision when he would be locked in. Another explained that he never closed his door because he refused to do the officers' job for them. The two responses show diametrically opposed strategies to maintaining autonomy against the coercive backdrop of prison life. While the regime depends on uniformity and regimentation, people find techniques that enable them to maintain a sense of agency and autonomy in individual ways.

Crewe, Hulley and Wright found the following adaptations to the loss of autonomy. Early-stage prisoners tended to 'tread water' – they were carried along. Others resisted, trying to swim against the current. But later in a sentence, some accepted they cannot fight and instead built a sense of agency by working with the system. "Their use of time was constructive rather than merely depletive; their agency was future-oriented and productive, rather than backwards-looking, defensive or reactive. They swam with the tide, rather than against it."[89] Had these people overcome institutionalisation by seizing responsibility wherever possible? Or was their 'swimming with the tide' evidence of institutionalisation? One group suggested prisoners can only resist the impact of institutionalisation if they recognise that they are institutionalised.

> *Through routine you can develop discipline. When you are aware that institutionalisation happens, you can take the good from the bad.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *You have to do the routine whether you like it or not. So, you should accept that you are institutionalised.*
> Cat B men's prison

Control

The coercive setting can imply that prisons completely control people's lives. Crewe, Hulley and Wright observed: "When asked specifically about the most difficult aspects of the sentence, responses from prisoners at all sentence stages very often focused on … limitations on everyday control and autonomy… the fundamental trauma of being deprived of liberty."[90] One response is disempowerment and fatalism. Another option is resistance. Some people make a conscious decision to rebel, as a means of exerting some control over their lives. As one participant said:

> *You can decide not to comply and accept the consequences.*
> Multi-functional prison

More broadly, some of our groups initially said that the prison controls 'everything'. This includes the timetable (when people get up, eat, work, and move around) and people's relationships (first, by defining

89 Crewe, B., Hulley, S., and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time.* Palgrave Macmillan UK.
90 Ibid.: 155.

who counts as 'family' and then by managing visits, the cost of phone calls, and depriving loved ones of intimacy). Prisons control people's basic needs (their food and diet, clothing, and living conditions such as temperature, cleanliness, and hygiene regimens).

Our participants echoed those of Crewe, Hulley and Wright,[91] who, over time, developed nuanced perceptions of the areas of life over which they have some control. Our participants listed aspects of their lives over which they had some control, including their values and emotions. They also made lifestyle choices such as what they watched on TV, who they associated with, the tidiness of their cells and, to some extent, what they ate.

Participants in an open prison group were more adamant than the other groups that they had control over their lives. One felt they controlled '99%' of their lives.

The effects of routinisation

Ian O'Donnell described the impact of habit in prison as 'fatalistic resignation'. "The timetable and an unchanging routine scaffold the day and allow the prisoner to move forward without needing to give much serious consideration to the situation."[92] Prison life involves 'batch living': "... a situation where each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike, and required to do the same thing together. It is the antithesis of individual living, where there are large areas of life which may be pursued on a basis of personal choice."[93]

Participants described how this aspect of institutionalisation was embedded in their lives and affected their sense of time.

> *Every day is the same, so you have no checkpoints.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *You get told when to wake up, when to eat, when to come out of your cell, when to lock up, when to sleep. When you've been told that for 20 years, it gets into you.*
> Cat C men's prison

However, routine was the one quality of institutionalisation acknowledged by a few participants as a positive, with some contrasting the structure of life inside with chaotic lifestyles outside.[94]

Loss of future

Participants described time during a long sentence as being 'in limbo' or 'life on pause'. The uncertainty about progression or release led people to doubt that there was any point in making plans. Some believed that they had permanently lost their future to the criminal justice system.

> *I'm a prisoner for the rest of my life, whether inside or out.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *You can't make plans in prison. All control is taken away from you*
> Cat B men's prison

> *Time for you stops (frozen) whilst the outside world carries on.*
> Survey

> *Psychology come along and ask, 'What do you want to do in the future?' Try telling them you don't have one. They don't like that.*
> Survey

The metaphor of 'Groundhog Day' was used to describe what seemed to be an endless loop of routine. In contrast, one participant described life after prison as 'full of possibilities', recognising that opportunities inside prison were limited. The repetitive nature of prison life led many to lose hope, including about release. Others spoke about their motivation to work on whatever the system required of them to progress.

> *There's no light at the end of the tunnel.*
> Cat B men's prison

91 Ibid.
92 O'Donnell, I. (2023). *Prison Life: Pain, Resistance, and Purpose.* New York University Press, page 230.
93 Jones, K., and Fowles, A.J. (2008). Total Institutions, in Johnson, J., DeSouza, C. 2008. Understanding Health and Social Care: An Introductory Reader. Sage.
94 A similar theme was identified, for example, by Crewe and Ievins in reference to male and female prisoners who had reported lives characterised by chaos, unsafety, addiction, or abuse prior to coming into prison: Crewe, B. and Ievins, A. (2020). The prison as a reinventive institution. *Theoretical Criminology*, 24(4): 568-588.

Some people are so worried about what will happen when they're out, they self-sabotage and actually want to stay in prison.
Cat B men's prison

Mental health and desensitisation

A few participants raised the possibility that long periods in prison cause mental health problems. One person said that his treatment was "psychological torture", and others described a slow decline in caring about one's life. Some people felt that the restrictive environment prevented them from living life to the full. This included losing hope for the future but also the meaning of the past.

...developing mental health problems is eerily common...The longer people are held in a sort of purgatory, without being able to meaningfully repay society's debt and rehabilitating, the more confused ghosts wander out into the alien lands they may once have known.
Survey

When you lose hope, that's when you give up. You don't care anymore.
Cat C men's prison

My brain is not being stimulated and challenged … I feel as if my mind is degenerating
Survey

I cannot relive the pleasures and disappointments, the good and the bad. I know I had them, but prison has destroyed and taken away my ownership. I relate to my stories as if I'm reading a book of facts - no feeling, no connection.
Survey

The findings outlined in this chapter show that the groups were unanimous in seeing institutionalisation as a harmful effect of living in prison. They were acutely aware that their autonomy was profoundly restricted and agreed that routine had embedded itself in their daily life. Uncertainty about their futures prevented them from planning and, for many, demonstrated that their lives were controlled by a faceless and unaccountable bureaucracy.

Conversely, participants described steps they take to retain agency, including maintaining control over their values, behaviour, and lifestyles. Their understanding echoed Crewe, Hulley & Wright's participants: "... even within conditions that restrict choices and actions to an almost unparalleled degree, individuals interpret and reflexively engage with the world in ways that give them some sense of control, meaning, purpose and hope".[95]

In the next four sections we focus on the core themes that emerged from the study: hope, meaning and fulfilment, meaning and justice, and dignity and humanity. These themes overlap and cannot be fully understood in isolation. They both echo the key findings of the literature above and provide important new insights and nuance to understanding how prisoners think about and articulate their experiences, and what matters to them. We start with hope.

95 Crewe, B., Hulley, S., and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time.* Palgrave Macmillan UK: page 22

Hope

The meaning of hope

A simple way to think about hope is that it is a positive view of the future. Its orientation is toward outcomes that are yet-to-be-determined, and it is nuanced and personal. It matters what gives people hope, what they hope for, what it means to them, how it influences them, and how some people can hold onto hope even when all appears to be lost. In the context of long prison sentences, four elements stand out.

- Agency
- Knowing what to expect
- What people hope for
- Sources of hope

Earlier we cited Snyder's definition of hope based on achieving goals and having agency and 'plausible routes' to pursue them.[96] This highlights how long-term imprisonment and the various harms it brings can undermine people's sense of hope and how important it is for prisoners to feel they can achieve their goals, even in a constrained environment.

Wright, Hulley and Crewe's analysis of late-stage life sentence prisoners linked hope to agency and trust in the system. "Late-stage lifers who felt most hopeful were those who could envision their pathway to release and felt a sense of control over their journey towards this, but who also felt trust and confidence in the system".[97] This research found some long-term prisoners chose not to hope as protection against 'knock-backs', and that in this context hope depends on a realistic possibility of eventual release, confidence in the system that manages progression, and the belief that one's decisions make a difference.[98]

Drawing on data from the same study, Crewe, Hulley and Wright found four sources of hope among people in the mid- to late stages of a long sentence. The first three were: family, faith, and education. The final source of hope was seeing others in their situation progress or gain release; another person's success signifies that their own release is a realistic possibility.[99]

In theory, the prison system recognises the importance of this and attempts to support hope as part of its role in incentivising positive change. In 2019, the government published a summary of evidence relating to how a rehabilitative culture in prison can support hope, change, and desistance from crime.[100] This defines an establishment that has a rehabilitative culture as one that, to quote:

- Encourages people to think with hope about their futures
- Supports them to plan and prepare for a different lifestyle
- Provides opportunities to change their attitudes and habits and try out new identities
- Rewards them when they do good things.[101]

The system provides intermediate stages that can evoke hope, such as enhanced status, recategorisation, transfer to Cat C or open conditions, and release on temporary licence.

96 Snyder, C. R. (2002). Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind. *Psychological Inquiry,* 13(4), 249-275.
97 Wright, S, Hulley, S, and Crewe, B. (2023). Trajectories of hope/hopelessness among men and women in the late stage of a life sentence. *Theoretical Criminology*, 27(1): 66-84.
98 Ibid.
99 Crewe, B, Hulley, S, and Wright, S. (2020). *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time.* Palgrave.
100 HM Government. (2019). Guidance: Rehabilitative Culture in Prisons. https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20210104234640/https://www.gov.uk/guidance/rehabilitative-culture-in-prisons (Retrieved 1 April 2025).
101 Ibid.

Deprived of hope

In most groups and in the survey, some participants responded to questions about hope by expressing their despair and hopelessness.

> *There is no hope. They strip you of everything.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *In my four years in prison, I have developed serious depression and lost all joy in the potential of my future.*
> Survey

> *I'm at the point of giving up hope because every time I reach a goal set for me the system then has another, prolonging the suffering and sense of helplessness.*
> Survey

These responses resonate with Crewe, Hulley, and Wright who described the outlook of prisoners who were either well past their tariff or convinced that they had little chance of being released. They quoted a man who told them that, "almost all of the life-sentenced prisoners he knew were over their tariff point and felt a sense of 'desperation' and 'hopelessness' about their powerlessness with regard to release: 'there's not even a tunnel, let alone a light there'".[102] Our participants explained the effects of hopelessness for long-term prisoners.

> *A life of plans and hopes lost…As strong a person as I am I sometimes feel my life has ended. I just live day to day now.*
> Survey

> *The lack of hope eats away at you.*
> Women's prison

> *[Without hope] ...you turn to spice and other drugs.*
> Cat B men's prison

The discussions developed consensus on the meaning of hope. One group described it as motivation, 'something that gets me through bad times'. Others spoke of the benefits of hope, and how long-term prisoners should manage hopes.

> *The idea that you can attain or achieve things, a reason or drive to evolve and grow.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *Hope gives you a sense of purpose, to achieve long-term goals.*
> Women's prison

> *You need to break your hopes into small steps and take one step at a time.*
> Multi-functional prison

> *You have to have a little bit of hope, or you'll lose your mind.*
> Cat B men's prison

102 Crewe, B, Hulley, S, and Wright, S. (2020). *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time.* Palgrave, page 200.

What people hope for

The things that participants said they hoped for ranged from institutional (for example, progression, recategorisation and release) to social or moral (for example, improved family relationships, acceptance, or forgiveness).

> *... you are constantly thinking of things you want to do [after release].*
> Women's prison

> *Knowing that you can progress, especially when you're in a system that traps you. Progression includes recat, security concerns about you being reduced, a bit of freedom or agency, getting a job, not being banged up for 23 hours a day.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *Making new memories with my daughter, mum and loved ones.*
> Cat B men's prison

The hopes expressed included personal goals and broader social change, such as justice, a sense of belonging, and forgiveness.

> *Becoming a stronger person.*
> Women's prison

> *I want to be able to support my kids from inside, so a well-paying job to support the family on the outside, rather than having them support us.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *Educate people outside about what prison is and who is there so society is more accepting.*
> Women's prison

Things that gave people hope included family, faith, others being released, progression, and appeals. This included improved family relationships, and many drew hope from family support. One participant said that hope thrives when family members recognise the prisoner's progress.

> *It is not forever. One day I will go out.*
> Women's prison

> *What keeps you going is, 'I'll speak to my kids tomorrow'.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *My beautiful grandchildren.*
> Women's prison

> *I've got a baby on the way.*
> Men's open prison

People said that they hoped to progress, reduce their level of risk, be transferred to lower security conditions, and be trusted with greater responsibility. For others, release was the main focus. Some found that meeting others who had gone on to thrive inspired hope, and nature was also cited as a source of hope.

> *Meeting or knowing someone who has been in our situation and has made something of their life.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *Seeing the night sky and dark clouds. I was outside at seven pm. It did my head in. You could smell the freedom.*
> Men's open prison

A person serving a life sentence whom we consulted in preparing for the study said that 'release' was a magic word with no content. She reflected that many people serving long periods of custody are unrealistic about life after prison and, therefore, risk being unprepared for it.

To summarise, we have set out in their own words the themes that participants articulated. They often linked hopelessness to being denied progression and echoed research on institutionalisation when they spoke of being 'stuck', 'stagnating', and 'invisible'. They also linked hopelessness to fatalism when they believed that their chances of influencing their futures were low. Prisons weaken hopes by making

release a distant possibility, being inconsistent and unreliable in facilitating progression, and by minimising opportunities for people to make decisions. This echoed Wright, Hulley and Crewe's findings that hope depends on believing in a realistic prospect of (eventual) release, trusting the system of progression, and feeling one can influence the outcome.[103]

Participants spoke of hope as a motivation to achieve goals and agreed that hope is reinforced when the person has a sense of their own agency. These findings echo previous research and some of the established methods of measuring hope, including the Adult Hope Scale developed by Snyder and colleagues, which is widely used in clinical and research settings.[104] As cited earlier, this model focuses on people's motivation state comprised of agency (their willingness to pursue goals) and pathways (or 'plausible routes') to achieving these.

Recent work by David Adlington-Rivers argued: "The emergence of hope theory as a cognitive tool for positive change for people in and released from prison should be explored, at a time when the prison population is too high, and focus and policy is shifting towards rehabilitative approaches to our penal system. It can be used as an intervention by a range of practitioners such as prison officers, probation officers, and other professionals working in criminal justice."[105]

We return to questions around measuring hope in our final chapter but what is clear so far is that achieving goals brings fulfilment and inspires people to hope that they might achieve further goals. Hope is also related to fulfilment and a sense of meaning. Activities that provide a sense of purpose foster hope that progression is possible or that there will be other opportunities for personal development. We explore these issues in the next chapter.

103 Wright, S, Hulley, S, and Crewe, B. (2023). Trajectories of hope/hopelessness among men and women in the late stage of a life sentence. *Theoretical Criminology*, 27(1): 66–84.

104 Snyder, C., Harris, C., Anderson, J., Holleran, S., Irving, L., Sigmon, S., Yoshinobu, L., Gibb, J., Langelle, C. & Harney, P. (1991). The Will and the Ways: Development and Validation of an Individual-Differences Measure of Hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 4, 570 – 585.

105 Adlington-Rivers, D. (2025). Unravelling the Complexities of Hope: the experience and potential of hope for people in prison and people with criminal justice experience. *Prison Service Journal*, 276, 41- 45. Page 45.

Meaning and fulfilment

The original design of this study gave greater priority to hope and fulfilment than to the concept of a meaningful life. But in the pilot study and long-term prisoner focus groups, meaning emerged as vitally important. The sense that one's life in prison was meaningful seemed to be based mainly on how one spent the day, how one's sentence was managed, and how one was treated. These relate to activities covered in the first section of this chapter, and to justice and dignity, which are covered later.

> *When you're doing something meaningful, time flies.*
> Long-term prisoner focus group member

For this study, we tentatively defined fulfilment as an individual's sense of satisfaction from having achieved goals. Imprisonment precludes many conventional paths to fulfilment, such as a career or a parenting role. Conditions that lead to meaninglessness have been criticised by Liebling. "The absence of any means for meaning making and identity formation in prison, and the imposition of indeterminate and unthinkably long prison sentences to which these experiences are linked, might arguably constitute inhumane and degrading conditions".[106]

The pilot survey indicated that the main contributory factors to personal fulfilment would include the scope for decision-making, setting future goals, finding meaning, and maintaining personally significant relationships. Some key aims were linked to fulfilment:

- Achieving goals
- Being happy in what you are doing
- Doing the right thing
- Holding onto your integrity
- Equipping yourself with skills
- Finding peace within yourself
- Self-development

Group discussions introduced two additional qualities of fulfilment. The first was that fulfilment was personal. Each person has their own sense of what they find fulfilling and what they need to pursue their goals. The meaning of an activity can be part defined by its official function and part self-defined. Some participants found fulfilment in seemingly mundane tasks and many cited gym as an activity that gave them fulfilment because of its benefits for their physical and mental health.

> *I go to gym, so I don't self-harm. It's like a fizzy drink: the pressure builds up and builds up. Gym releases that pressure and I don't have to harm myself.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *I worked packing tea bags. I used to put an extra sugar or tea bag in because I remember coming in and getting a bag that was short.*
> Multi-functional prison

A third group member said that as a wing painter he found fulfilment in making the environment more decent, even for complete strangers.

> *I feel the person moving into a freshly painted cell feels better: I get satisfaction.*
> Multi-functional prison

The second insight was that fulfilment can refer to what one participant described as "small victories". An example was given by a gardens worker who saw an orchid and convinced their colleague to strim round it. Participants also identified family as an important source of fulfilment.

> *Set yourself a goal and accomplish it – no matter how minute.*
> Multi-functional prison

> *Family days, being with my kids and keeping the bonds.*
> Cat B men's prison

106 Liebling, A. (2011). Moral performance, inhuman and degrading treatment and prison pain. Punishment & Society 13(5): 530-550, p545.

Activities and purpose

Each group listed activities in the prison which could lead to a sense of fulfilment. To be 'purposeful', activities must give a sense of hope and be meaningful to the individual, in order to improve wellbeing. Currently some 'purposeful activity' in prisons does not meet this definition.[107] Activities facilitated by a prison often have an 'official' purpose which might be linked to rehabilitation or reducing risk, although the MoJ recently issued a technical note on purposeful activity that has the potential to bring greater flexibility and a welcome emphasis on broader outcomes and on peer work (we return to this in our final chapter).[108] This seems to acknowledge that in undertaking an activity individuals invest these with their personal meaning and that, ideally, opportunities provided should strike a balance between official purposes and personal reasons.

> *I am involved in fighting for prison and law reform. I love this work. It gives me a purpose whilst in prison, and since I want to work within the criminal justice system upon release, I am gaining valuable experience.*
> Survey

> *I have progressed, but as my own achievement and not the prison.*
> Women's prison

Participants gave examples of activities that they saw as personal development, including learning, helping and advocating for others. They also mentioned yoga, drama, hobbies, art, chess, music, and learning a new language. Education was the area most frequently mentioned in relation to personal development.

> *Work that can feel like you aren't in prison.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *Education gives you something to aim for, a worthwhile thing to focus on.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *Experience and knowledge. Experiencing new things. The most valuable things I've learned, I've learned in prison.*
> Male open prison

> *Education gives you a genuine sense of achievement, you need that when doing a long sentence.*
> Cat B men's prison

Alongside personal growth, prisoners said that helping others was a way to find fulfilment in daily prison life. Examples of this included being a Listener, mentoring or helping someone with reading or maths, supporting someone with parole papers or resettlement plans, and working on a Prisoner Information Desk.

> *Working for Shannon Trust or as an orderly, somewhere you can help others, this can make you feel useful, and positive about yourself as others praise you.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *When you do good, good comes to you. You could be a Lifer rep and help people new to a life sentence.*
> Men's open prison

> *When I'm on the gardens, I show other people how to do it.*
> Men's open prison

Participants also cited possible activities which could make their time in prison fulfilling, but which were unavailable or very rare. These gaps included opportunities to make amends and the best use of their skills. The fulfilling act of making amends highlights a motivation for making best use of time in prison: finding a reason for the pain of being there.

> *People with long sentences should be able to repay the victim back meaningfully via good work and pay which can go towards a more sustainable Victim Support money pot. This will enable long*

107 Prisoners' Education Trust. (2022). Prisoners' Education Trust Response to the Prisons White Strategy Paper. Online: https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/PET-Prisons-Strategy-White-Paper-Response-Feb-2022.pdf

108 Technical Note Purposeful Activity. (April 2025). MoJ Available at: https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/Attachment/10225c71-b08e-492f-8966-ecba13b28391 (Accessed 8 October 2025).

sentences to have more of a purpose.
Survey

Not even probation or prison services will offer to assist in repairing harm we have caused to others or help rebuild bridges that our actions have broken.
Survey

The biggest problem for me is … the time is so wasted. I feel I am paying nothing much back to society.
Survey

Prisoners were often contributing members of society prior to their conviction; their skills should be utilised more and kept up to date if appropriate.
Survey

Suffering and atonement

Given the many and severe pains of serving long sentences, many people often seek to give their suffering meaning by identifying opportunities for personal growth, making amends, or helping others. When such beneficial outcomes are achieved, prisoners may come to believe that their hardship has a purpose. Crewe, Hulley and Wright found that "Prisoners explained the importance of counterbalancing the negative things they had done in their lives by becoming 'a better person', providing inspiration, and preventing others from reproducing their own mistakes".[109]

How much you give to a group comes from what you've gone through.
Multi-functional prison

You need to be able to give this experience a purpose which is greater than your pain.
Cat B men's prison

The benefits of helping others include a new self-image, of which one can be proud, and possibly a reduced risk of reoffending. As Shadd Maruna has written: "Compared to active offenders, successfully reintegrated ex-prisoners are significantly more care-oriented, other-centred and focused on promoting the next generation... In short, they find a reason to live that is inconsistent with continued offending".[110]

Squeezing everything I possibly can out of time has been fundamental to my own approach. Time has been taken from me, so I must frantically claw as much of it back as possible, applying it judiciously, purposefully in order to give my time here some meaning.
Survey

It's easy to lose hope on such a lengthy sentence. It is important to find something meaningful to do with your time, giving purpose to your life. That is how I survive.
Survey

Opportunities to find beneficial outcomes through the negative experiences of prison depend on a social structure that facilitates and promotes hope. In 2019, Liebling and colleagues cited the criteria of an Enabling Environment (EE) in their report on the positive environment in one prison: "The culture throughout Warren Hill strongly embodies the values of an 'EE': an environment that 'creates and sustains a positive and effective social environment', meeting ten standards of: belonging, boundaries, communication, development, involvement, safety, structure, empowerment, leadership, and openness..."[111]

One of our participants in a Cat B men's prison said they were, "energised by something negative: you want to do better," while others said they were motivated by self-improvement and helping others.

I want to gain knowledge, so I come out better than when I went in.
Cat B men's prison

Make up for those you've hurt.
Cat B men's prison

109 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood Adaptation, Identity and Time.* Palgrave Macmillan. Page: 196

110 Maruna, S. (2007). Why Volunteerism "Works" as Prisoner Reintegration: Rehabilitation for a "Bulimic Society", the 18th Edith Kahn Memorial Lecture, 24 April 2007.

111 Liebling, A., Laws, B., Lieber, E., Auty, K., Schmidt, B.E., Crewe, B., Gardom, J., Kant, D., and Morey, M. (2019). "Are Hope and Possibility Achievable in Prison? The Howard Journal. 58(1). March 2019. pp. 104–126, page 105.

Experience and knowledge. Experiencing new things. The most valuable things I've learned, I've learned in prison.
Men's open prison

I wouldn't have had all these qualifications if I weren't in prison.
Men's open prison

[I hope to]… have something good to show for the years spent in here and away from my family and loved ones, re-educate, learn new things... Show my family I did something worthwhile. Re-pay the debt in some way.
Survey

In about half of the groups, at least one person commented that working with a long-term prisoner focus group was one way that long-term prisoners could make a positive contribution:

Literally attending meetings like this can give a sense of fulfilment when you feel you are contributing to your community.
Cat B men's prison

For many participants, the search for meaning led them to make something positive out of a negative experience. Having a sense that one's life in prison was meaningful depended on constructive activity and justice and dignity, which we explore in the next two chapters.

Meaning and justice

A sentence that makes sense

Justice was extremely important to participants. Whether their sentences were managed fairly and in a reasonable way had a profound impact on whether they felt that their lives had meaning.

> *We're already serving life, so what's the point of making time in prison so painful?*
> Survey

Progression dominated discussions about meaningful time in prison. Formally, progression means recategorisation, transfers to lower security settings, ROTL, and release. While people might hope that the system is logical, humane and fair, there are well-established obstacles to delivering progression. These include lack of access to or priority for OBPs and limited open prison spaces; professional discretion and judgement; poor information and communication; and a culture of mutual distrust between officers and prisoners, and between psychologists and prisoners.

The main criterion for progress is the reduction of risk. The MoJ explains how Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) is meant to work: "Every prisoner should have the opportunity to transform their lives by using their time in custody constructively to reduce their risk of harm and reoffending; to plan their resettlement; and to improve their prospects of becoming a safe, law-abiding and valuable member of society."[112] As Ben Jarman and Claudia Vince point out in their work on progress, OMiC should support prisoners, "to understand their risk assessment(s), and to know what they can do to reduce risk". [113] However, they found that in practice: "The language around risk can become convoluted and imprecise, to the point of meaninglessness. Factors such as whether a prisoner is compliant might be conflated with the entirely distinct issue of whether and how they are at risk of being reconvicted, or at risk of causing serious harm. The link between compliance and these risks may be strong or tenuous, depending on context."[114] The authors conclude that this left many unclear about how to progress or use their time positively and productively.[115]

Participants talked of 'moving goalposts', achieving targets on their sentence plan only for new obstacles to be put in place. This led many to feel that the system was arbitrary rather than reasonable, and undermined their sense of meaning because the process is not seen as well-structured and fair, and because they face long periods of 'nothing time'. After completing courses on their sentence plan, system blockages can result in long-term prisoners experiencing unproductive years, during which time there are few activities that can influence their chances for progression. Time devoid of progression is likely to feel meaningless and contribute to feelings of depression and exasperation.[116] A constructive reaction was to focus on personal development, using their time productively to engage in education, arts, learning skills, and working in rewarding jobs. Jarman and Vince found that these types of engagement were often unrecognised by the prison but that: "finding activities which infuse 'nothing time' with meaning and turn it into a form of personal development, is critical..."[117]

Concerns about progression

Echoing Jarman and Vince's findings, the long-term prisoner focus group members raised three main concerns about their experience of the progression system: how arbitrary this seemed, shifting requirements (or 'moving goalposts'), and feeling stagnant (or 'nothing time').

Progression as arbitrary

Participants hoped for processes that were consistent, complied with policy, and were applied equally. They wanted good communication, to be listened to, kept informed about their progress, have decisions explained, and information to be accurate. They wanted different parts of the progression system to communicate well with each other. A common concern was that the system neglected positive behaviour.

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112 Ministry of Justice and HM Prison & Probation Service. (2018). Manage the Custodial Sentence: Policy Framework (Ministry of Justice, 12 September 2018), page 5, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/manage-the-custodial-sentence (Retrieved 10 April 2025)

113 Jarman, B., and Vince, C. (2022). Making Progress? Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Making_progress.pdf, page 31.

114 Ibid.: 21

115 Ibid.: 5

116 Ibid.: 6; see also Carceral, K. C. and Flaherty, M. G. (2022). *The Cage of Days.* Columbia University Press; Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2017), 'Swimming with the Tide: Adapting to Long-Term Imprisonment', *Justice Quarterly*, 34: 517–41; Medlicott, D. (1999). 'Surviving in the Time Machine: Suicidal Prisoners and the Pains of Prison Time', *Time & Society*, 8: 211–30; O'Donnell, I. (2014), *Prisoners, Solitude, and Time*. Oxford University Press.

117 Jarman, B., and Vince, C. (2022). *Making Progress?* Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Making_progress.pdf, page 50.

They don't take into account achievements or positive behaviour outside OBPs, but they do use negatives in their assessments.
Survey

Perfect record while inside enhanced prisoner, mentor, Listener.... means nothing. Prison staff tell you one thing, probation something else, and psychology different again.
Survey

I had 12 years of being blackmailed into doing a course only to be told at the end of that, 'You don't have to do that one'.
Men's open prison

Shifting requirements

Participants talked of goalposts being moved in relation to risk reduction. This could be to do with staffing changes, the arrival or cessation of OBPs, or targets added to sentence plans without warning and/or understanding. This is consistent with Jarman and Vince's report and with forthcoming Building Futures work on OBPs. It is possible that the main problems will be resolved by the programme that will replace most existing accredited programmes ('Building Choices'), which we discuss later in this report.[118]

Things you've been allowed, suddenly... they get taken away.
Men's open prison

Probation keeps putting up obstacles, not giving me practical help.
Men's open prison

New things come up, like PIPE... they say, 'You've got to go on to a PIPE.' ...when you've been there a year, they say, 'You've got to do two years on a PIPE.'
Men's open prison

Stagnation

Many participants expressed frustration at the lack of progress. Numerous reasons were given for this, including lack of continuity when they moved from one prison to another, not being able to access OBPs, or feeling they have done all they can without clear direction about what next.

I have sentence target plans in another jail but can't get a transfer.
Cat B men's prison

I completed every course on my sentence plan and now I am just stuck.
Women's prison

I have served eight years and completed no programmes. Eight years I have been applying to complete this one and only course only to be told it's too early every time…
Survey

These operational and sometimes systemic issues could contribute to people's sense of injustice and loss of agency, as well as feelings of not being treated as individuals with specific needs and wants. For some, this felt like a loss of dignity and humanity, which we explore in the next chapter.

118 Forthcoming Building Futures work on offending behaviour programmes.

Dignity and humanity

We posed the question: What happens here that makes you feel that you matter as a person?

> *That is hard to imagine.*
> Women's prison

> *Almost all attempts to make time meaningful at the B, C and D cat prisons I've attended over the last 4 years have met with obstruction.*
> Survey

> *Being treated as a statistic; not a person.*
> Men's open prison

> *Not a lot. I'm invisible.*
> Women's prison

For the group members, dignity was inextricably linked with being seen and exercising agency.

In response to the Woolf Inquiry in 1991, the prison service promoted a 'decency agenda', which was exemplified in the phrase, "If my son or daughter were ever sent to prison, would I be content for them to be treated in the way that prisoners are treated in this prison?"[119] The UN Nelson Mandela Rules also set standards for respecting people in the care of the prison service, including: "All prisoners shall be treated with the respect due to their inherent dignity and value as human beings";[120] and "The treatment shall be such as will encourage their self-respect and develop their sense of responsibility."[121] In addition, procedural justice has four themes (set out below) that provide another guide to showing respect for people in prison. These principles suggest that it is possible for people in the care of the prison service to be treated as people who matter.

Voice	Neutrality	Respect	Trust
People feel they are listened to, and their concerns are taken seriously.	Prisons comply with policy and are consistent and transparent.	People are treated with courtesy, staff are sensitive to their individuality, and the system upholds their rights.	Those in authority show integrity and commitment to fairness and doing the right thing.[122]

Feeling valued

Participants shared experiences that made them doubt the system believed they mattered. One described being re-categorised and promised transfer to a lower security prison, but experiencing repeated delays. Having packed up and said goodbye to peers, he was told he was not moving on the day of transfer. Being re-categorised made his efforts feel worthwhile and important, but delays and poor communication suggested that the system did not value his feelings or achievements.

> *I've been a Cat C for two years. In that time, I've been told I would be transferred five times, but each time they've cancelled the move.*
> Cat B men's prison

We heard other examples of the system failing to recognise an individual as a person who mattered and a consensus that the prison service does not treat prisoners with dignity.

> *Surprise lockups mean you can't plan for anything.*
> Cat B men's prison

> *They cancel education and workshops with short notice and no communication.*
> Cat B men's prison

119 Justice Committee. (2009). Role of the Prison Officer. Memorandum submitted by the Ministry of Justice. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmjust/361/361we15.htm. (Retrieved 2 April 2025).
120 United Nations. (2015). The Nelson Mandela Rules. Online: https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson_Mandela_Rules-E-ebook.pdf, page 2. Retrieved 29 October 2024.
121 Ibid., Rule 91: 27
122 Fitzalan Howard, F. and Wakeling, H. (2019). Prisoner and staff perceptions of procedural justice in England and Wales: Analytical Summary. HM Prison and Probation Service. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/771324/prisoner-staff-perceptions-procedural-justice-research.pdf (Retrieved 4 April 2025)

Women's jails are an after-thought.
Women's prison

There is an untapped workforce sitting here rotting away.
Multi-functional prison

Safety in prison was mentioned as a test of whether a prison respected prisoners. One participant said that the prison created the safety that made it possible for him to find fulfilment, but in other prisons, group members had the opposite experience.

I pressed my cell bell and waited an hour and forty minutes.
Cat B men's prison

I have been personally set upon or assaulted by other prisoners. My defence of my person was judged by the prison security department as excessive. Each time and each event could have been prevented in advance by the prison itself enforcing more authority and discipline in its everyday operation.
Survey

Prison pay won't get you what you need so there is a lot of bullying.
Women's prison

Relationships with staff

The groups viewed the attitude of prison officers as an important indicator of whether prisoners mattered as people. Alongside comments about caring and supportive officers were reflections on those who denied them dignity.

If we challenge staff, we get an IEP even if they are wrong.
Cat B men's prison

If you have a legitimate concern, an officer will say, 'Then don't come to prison.'
Women's prison

Liebling has described the importance of staff attitudes towards prisoners, suggesting that whether prisoners felt they mattered or not depended largely on the professionalism of officers: "Staff ideologies and orientation towards prisoners have practical consequences: when staff respect prisoners, they unlock them on time, respond to calls for assistance and they try to solve problems. The absence of respect and fairness is experienced as psychologically painful. Being treated disrespectfully or without dignity generates negative emotions such as anger, tension, indignation, depression and rage."[123] This echoes two participants' experiences of their Offender Management Unit, which made them feel like their lives were not valued:

OMUs, when they do not communicate, inform people of their risk level, or prepare sentence plans.
Cat C men's prison

I have a parole hearing. I haven't got my dossier until way too late. When they gave it to me it was out of date. It was inaccurate.
Men's open prison

At the same time, the groups described some experiences that showed that managers and staff cared about their dignity. One example was good-quality healthcare. At both the women's prison and the open prison, group members praised the professional approach of officers.

Some officers go out of their way to help you.
Women's prison

I started a campaign to change providers. An officer took up the cause, and we made it happen.
Women's prison

Here, they try to help you. Sometimes they can't but then their attitude is that we can't help you with that, but what can we do for you?
Men's open prison

123 Liebling, A. (2011). Moral performance, inhuman and degrading treatment and prison pain. *Punishment & Society* 13(5). Pages: 530-550, page 534.

Prison managers were also cited as potential champions of dignity. One group mentioned a 'Lifer forum' as a way of recognising their specific needs. Three of the seven groups listed equalities as a function by which prisons supported their fulfilment.

> *The prison's commitment to equality helped everyone to feel that they were respected.*
> Women's prison

A few participants cited ways that the prison respected their dignity by providing better opportunities to maintain relationships. This included one participant describing having phones in cells as "priceless", another citing being able to cook with family during visits, and another explaining how the prison supported his dignity in the management of visits:

> *This prison is one of the best places for visits. You can give them a kiss before you sit down. I've been other places where you are not allowed even that.*
> Men's open prison

To summarise, the groups made clear that, for long-term prisoners, the feeling that life had meaning depended on justice and dignity, trust that management of one's sentence was reliable, reasonable and fair, and being treated as a person who matters. Aspects of their treatment that detracted from this trust were progression processes that seemed arbitrary, shifting requirements, and stagnation. Participants felt that they did not matter when officers were rude or callous, healthcare was inadequate or dismissive of their concerns, and when prisons were managed by treating prisoners as 'statistics, not persons'.

Conversely, they said their dignity was valued when officers genuinely tried to help them, their safety was maintained, formal arrangements recognised their needs, and where equality, diversity and inclusion schemes were proactive.

Progress and crises

Building Futures seeks to do justice to those who live and work in prisons by combining clear sightedness about the challenges involved, with constructive ideas for reform. In 2023, it undertook a joint project with PRT that explored the tensions that arise in navigating this tricky path in the context of crisis.[124] This analysis is useful to understanding the context in which people serving long sentences are living and thinking about hope, and to the challenges facing the prison system.

Having consulted with policymakers, practitioners, victims of crime, and those with experience of prison, the project highlighted two faces of crises that can shape opinion and create space for change. The first face represents peril, where support for the use of authoritarian policy measures can rise, even when the evidence finds these wanting. The second face represents opportunity, which can heighten concern about the moral performance of prisons.[125] The paper also challenged tidy distinctions between 'normal' and 'exceptional' times and identified the need, even when faced with crises, to articulate and maintain values that underpin procedural justice.

The report focused on the opportunity for change and on these values – including fairness, voice, respect, and neutrality – that the system constantly needs to reassert in sustaining the moral performance of prisons. We suggest that a key shift is needed to reassert the centrality of hope for all prisoners, and in particular those who are serving long sentences.

Throughout its work, Building Futures has recognised that both individuals and individual prisons have limited capacity to effect change without system-wide leadership and political support – support that not only ensures adequate resources, but also underscores the importance of moral performance and upholding these core values. In the next chapter we set out our conclusions and recommendations but in doing so – as elsewhere in this report – we try to acknowledge the potential of some recent changes in policy.

124 Annison H., Guiney T. with Rubenstein Z. (2023) *Locked In: Achieving penal change in the context of crisis and scandal*. PRT in partnership with the Building Futures Programme.
125 Ibid.

Conclusions and recommendations

When scoping the Building Futures programme, the people we consulted were clear that hope and meaning should be central to our work. This study contributes to understanding how hope relates to agency, purpose, and identity for long-term prisoners, while reflecting broader themes found throughout the Building Futures Programme.

Participants described the harms of long-term imprisonment: separation from family; loss of autonomy; uncertainty about the future; and personal deterioration, including reduced social skills, motivation and being able to open up about problems. Many linked these harms to institutionalisation, shaped by years of routine, 'dead time' and feeling like they did not matter.

Despite this, people spoke of holding onto identity through personal values, positive behaviour and peer work. Hope was drawn from family, faith, personal progress, others being released, and the belief that reintegration into society was possible. Hope and meaning were closely tied to how people spend their time, how their sentence was managed, and – crucially – how they were treated. Justice, fairness, safety, dignity, and genuine support from staff were central in sustaining hope.

Each long-term prisoner focus group produced recommendations that they believe would improve the experience of long-term imprisonment. When combined, these form eight core themes: being treated as a responsible member of the prison community, maintaining relationships, individualisation, clear communication, targeted sentence management, good access to support and healthcare, financial autonomy, and a commitment to rehabilitation. While these principles are recognised by the system, practice often falls short.

Recent policy developments – such as reforms to prison education, new definitions of purposeful activity, employment initiatives, and the introduction of Building Choices – signal potential improvements. However, their impact for long-term prisoners remains uncertain and will depend on effective communication, sufficient funding, and meaningful adaptation to their specific needs.

Given the importance of hope to wellbeing, progression, and identity. Building Futures has developed the Hope and Fulfilment Survey (HAFS) to explore whether hope can be reliably measured among long-term prisoners. Trialled with 190 participants in 2025, HAFS offers a way to understand how prisoners themselves understand the concepts of hope and fulfilment, and how these concepts are affected by characteristics of their imprisonment. Building Futures will continue to work with HMPPS to explore whether HAFS could form part of prisons' performance frameworks, and, at the end of the programme, will bring together all findings to propose strategic recommendations for a national approach to long-term imprisonment.

Recommendations

Our recommendations – combined with those of earlier Building Futures work – will help shape our final output as part of our drive for a national strategy for long-term prisoners.

- ***HMPPS should adopt a 'Partners in Progress' national drive to map, expand and strengthen the range of roles that support prisoners to maintain hope, purpose and meaning.*** This should be co-designed with prisoners and include better support around maintaining ties with family and significant others[126] and external support such as prison visitors. It should also explore opportunities to expand and enhance education with partners in further and higher education. [127] It should place at its heart a collaborative approach that prioritises the role of peer work in relation to a range of outcomes from navigating programmes[128] to social care support.[129]
- ***The MOJ and HMPPS leadership should explore the potential of Building Futures' HAFS model.*** This would include working in partnership with an academic partner to explore delivery options and how data can be captured over time, within individual prisons and across the estate. This work would need to include learning lessons from the MPQL model and how this is used in performance indicators and by HMI Prisons.
- ***HMPPS should commission an external evaluation of New Futures Network, including specific consideration of how it could better meet the needs of long-term prisoners.*** Co-design work with long-term prisoners should create a separate network that focuses on tailoring NFN's offer to their needs. This should include addressing all resettlement needs, including for those unable to work, and exploring opportunities for those restricted to working in prison and/or those who will have been out of the labour market for a decade or more.
- ***The Prison Education Service should explore the potential of funding for further and higher education for more long-term prisoners.*** This should form part of the Partners in Progress approach and take a strategic and expansive view of the economic, social, and cultural assets that can be leveraged to reduce the harms of long-term imprisonment.

These recommendations build on previous Building Futures' proposals, including those set out in our work on familial and supportive relationships,[130] the experiences of older long-term prisoners,[131] and around progress and risk.[132] These recommendations will inform Building Futures' final output, which will analyse the findings of consultations undertaken since 2020, identifying principles for reform, cross-cutting themes, and strategic recommendations that it believes should form part of a national strategy for long-term prisoners. The themes already emerging across BF work all in different ways link to hope, meaning and fulfilment. When we listen to prisoners, we hear experiences and problems that not only face individual prisoners but also the system and those working within it. This report focuses on hope, fulfilment and meaning for long-term prisoners. However, issues around staff retention and morale, and the long-term pressures and punctuating 'crises' that characterise the prison system, suggest that, like our incarcerated participants, in order to avoid fatalism, the system itself needs both the will and plausible pathways for hope.

126 Hutton, H. & O'Brien, R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A_Long_Stretch.pdf
127 Ibid.
128 Forthcoming Building Futures work on offending behaviour programmes. Prison Reform Trust
129 Price, J. (2024). *Growing old and dying Inside: improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust.
130 Hutton, H. & O'Brien, R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust; Woolsey, R. (2025) *The Long Stretch 2 The emotional impact of long-term imprisonment on loved ones.* Prison Reform Trust.
131 Price, J. (2024). *Growing old and dying inside: improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust.
132 Jarman, B. and Vince, C. (2022). *Making Progress?* What progression means for people serving the longest sentences. Prison Reform Trust.

Appendix A: Building Futures outputs and evaluation

- Invisible Women: *Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment* (2021); *Progression* (2023); and *Hope, health and staff prisoner relationships* (2023).
- *Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences* (2022).
- *Progression within a prison: by HMP Rye Hill Building Futures Working Group* (2023).
- *Locked In: Achieving penal change in the context of crisis* (2023).
- *The Very Long Prison Population in Scotland: A scoping document* (2024).
- *Growing Old and Dying Inside: improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences* (2024).
- *The Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences* (2024).

Completed and forthcoming 2025

- The emotional impact of long -term imprisonment on loved ones.
- Understanding and improving the Category A review process.
- Improving the experience of OBPs for those serving long indeterminate prison sentences.
- Hope, meaning and fulfilment among long-term prisoners.
- Consultation with 18–30-year-olds serving long prison sentences.
- Post-release experiences of people released after a long sentence.

In 2021, PRT published a factsheet on long sentences,[133] and in 2023, in response to feedback in the scoping phase, produced an information and advice manual for those serving long sentences, with support from the Building Futures Network, Prisoner's Advice Service, HMPPS and the Parole Board.[134]

In 2021, Justice Studios was appointed as Building Futures' evaluation partner. Its interim report in 2024 found that the programme's 'active citizens study' had made 52 recommendations across five themes and that: "Training has become a fundamental part of the Building Futures programme. Indeed, the proficiency with which working groups have absorbed key elements within training programmes and deployed them effectively to conduct their own consultations, may go some way to acting as an indicator of how likely that group is to become self-sustaining."[135]

133 Prison Reform Trust. (2021). Long-term prisoners: The facts. Available at: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/long-term-prisoners-the-facts/. (accessed 8 October 2025).
134 Prison Reform Trust. (2023). Information Booklet for People Serving a Life Sentence. Available at: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/46-Lifer-booklet-v1.2-final.pdf (Accessed 8 October 2025).
135 Prison Reform Trust. forthcoming.

Appendix B: Long-term prisoner focus group agendas

Session One – Ways that long periods in prison harm people

- **Introduction and how this will work**

  National research project (questions)

  Go-Round – my name and one reason I joined this group

  Ground rules and confidentiality/consent
- **Exercise**

  Harms of long-term prison (discussion then respond to quotes)

  Four words: institutionalised

  Small groups: things I control/things the prison or prison system controls
- **Follow-up questions**

  What do prisons do that hold people back?

  What do prisons do that enable people?
- **Whole group summing up lessons**

  How did this go?

  Preparation for next session.

Session Two – Hope and fulfilment

- **Go-Round**

  A way I look after myself
- **Review last session**

  Any feedback from the landings?
- **Hope**

  Three small groups, with flip chart paper

  Questions, in order (3 minutes each):

  What gives you hope?

  What do you hope for?

  What is hope?
- **Meaning (discussion)**

  What activities in prison do you consider a meaningful use of your time?
- **Fulfilment – (discussion)**

  Thinking first of the outside, what things give people a sense of fulfilment?

  In prison, on a long sentence, what would make life fulfilling?

  On a long sentence, is fulfilment important (why / why not?)

  Prompt – if not raised already – in this prison, what can someone do to do good or to help and support other people?
- **Summary**

  What have we learned?

  How did this session go?

  Preparation for next session.

Session Three – What needs to change?

- **Go-Round**

  Something I hope to achieve in the next year or so.

  Or something I can contribute to this group

  Summary of evidence so far (interim report on session one and two
- **Exercise**

  What this prison does that contributes to harm & institutionalisation.

  What this prison does that contributes to hope, meaning and fulfilment.
- **Exercise**

  Design a prison that gives people hope and fulfilment

  What needs to change:

  Things this prison could do differently to give people hope.

  Things in this prison that could give people a sense of fulfilment.

  What needs to change so that long-term prisoners have hope and a sense of fulfilment?

Session Four - Group recommendations for this Prison

- **Go-Round**

  One thing I enjoy about this group.

  Solutions
- **Brainstorm**

  Solutions by priority

  Solutions by feasibility

  Final list
- **Plan ahead**
- **Follow up**

  PRT will draft the report, which will be sent to you for comment

  PRT will submit our report to the governor with a request to meet us within a month.

Appendix C: Participants' proposals for reform

Being treated as a responsible member of the prison community

- Peers trained to provide mental health support.
- Prisoners active in maintaining gardens, in education, managing wing life, and healthcare administration
- Active citizen teams given budgets, and answer directly to the Governor
- Involve long-term sentenced prisoners in training officers.

Building and maintaining relationships

- Maintain or expand Lifer days/long-term prisoner family days
- On visits, provide hot food
- Increase number of video calls per month.
- Purple visits on cell laptops

Being treated as an individual

- Staff trained to provide more personal support and encouragement.
- Opportunities on offer should be flexible enough to reach culturally diverse aspirations, as well as those for whom learning is challenging
- More time outside (nature)
- Allowed to shower at convenient times

Increase opportunities for personal development

- Build prisoners' confidence with IT, for example, allowing prisoners to purchase laptops (security cleared) for personal use.
- More options for training, including industrial cleaning, bio-hazard cleaning, health and safety, food hygiene, first-aid, and barbering.
- Offer more opportunities for higher learning, alongside vocational courses that develop skills and increase employability.
- Provide better work opportunities and improve pay.

Improve communication

- Do much more with digital tools, including laptops in cells, kiosks and digital methods of communicating.
- Train officers in social skills; improved social skills would enable officers to hold normal conversations, which in turn would help prisoners feel normal and increase mutual trust.
- Enable prisoners to send text messages to loved ones.
- Tablets in cell to be available for phone calls.

Target management of long-term prisoners

- Train and recruit officers with special expertise in the needs of long-term/Life sentence prisoners

- Assign a governor who is responsible for life sentence prisoners. That governor could have a team of officers with expertise in policies and progression for long-term prisoners.
- Establish a peer advisor role, trained in life sentence policies.
- Organise informative surgeries for long-term prisoners.

Improve access to support and medical care

- Better support for mental health and wellbeing, to cover anxiety, depression, and other problems that might not meet the threshold of severe mental illness.
- Make health care services more accountable.
- Quicker access to medical appointments.
- Medication provided when needed (less delay).

Give people greater control over their finances

- Link prison wages to the prices at canteen.
- Enable people to buy phone credit from private accounts.
- Commitment to rehabilitative aims
- Promote commitment and accountability across the prison.
- Up to date sentence plan for everyone who is eligible.
- Systematic strengths-based engagement with recognition of skills and achievements
- Step-by-step progression opportunities within each prison.
- Greater accountability for progression would increase its legitimacy: if a person is re-quired to undertake a course, there should be a timeline for when it will be offered.

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- *Closed Prison Regime Plan Guidance*, published by *Inside Time* at https://insidetime.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/FoI_Inside_Time_NRM_land2.pdf
- *Creating a Rehabilitative Culture* (powerpoint) at https://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=AwrLBmyBxpxn5wEAlhcM34lQ;_ylu=Y29sbwNpcjIEcG9zAzQEdnRpZAMEc2VjA3Ny/RV=2/RE=1739537281/RO=10/RU=https%3a%2f%2fpogp.hmppsintranet.org.uk%2fwp-content%2fuploads%2f2020%2f09%2fCreating-a-Rehabilitative-Culture.pptx/RK=2/RS=0FLuUMjaGHfbo1igMs_dodLh1sU-
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This report presents the findings of a research project carried out by Dr Kimmett Edgar as part of the Prison Reform Trust's Building Futures programme, drawing on the voices of 123 people serving long-term prison sentences. It explores how hope and meaning shape people's ability to cope with, progress through, and positively engage in long sentences, highlighting the harms of "dead time", institutionalisation, and the loss of belief that they matter, as well as the conditions that help sustain hope - fairness, meaningful activity, family ties, education and peer support. The report also examines where life in prison feels meaningful, including retaining personal integrity and finding fulfilment through relationships, learning, helping others, and faith.