Partnering in Justice Briefing Paper

Prisoner Pathway Programme

University of Strathclyde & SPS

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INTRODUCTION

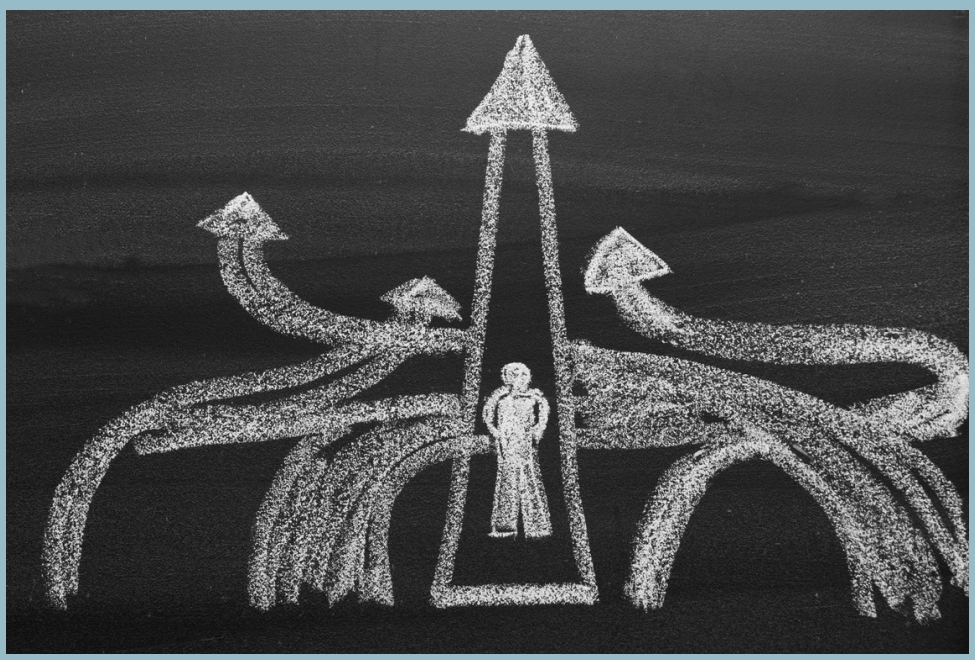
In 2023 the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) began an ambitious project – the Prisoner Pathway Programme – which aims to reimagine their case management systems and processes. The vision for this project is to establish a clear pathway through their sentence for each person in custody, underpinned by a single, personalised plan, which outlines how the person will be supported throughout their time in custody and in returning to the community.

To enable this vision to be realised, the SPS collaborated with Dr Cara Jardine and Karyn Mabon from the University of Strathclyde Department of Social Work and Social Policy. Funding from a Strathclyde HaSS Knowledge Exchange grant was secured to support this project. Initially, a scoping literature review was conducted using search terms related to case management, progression and best practice in prisons. This provided insight into current research and identified key publications to support the design and structure of an in-person engagement event.

Held at the University of Strathclyde in June 2025, with over 40 stakeholders from numerous statutory and third sector organisations in attendance, this engagement event sought to capture a wide range of perspectives on how case management is currently working in Scottish prisons.. An introduction was given to the Prisoner Pathway project, setting the context for delegates, followed by a presentation on the learning from the relevant research, informed by the initial literature review. Key topics were chosen based on the findings of this review; lived experience, desistance, families, the pains of modern imprisonment, hope and resettlement.

The remainder of the event consisted of interactive activities such as a traffic light exercise (explained in detail below) and group discussions based on case studies designed by the SPS to represent the journey of two fictional people living in prison today. The discussions throughout the day brought into dialogue policy priorities, practice wisdom and contemporary research to allow key stakeholders to share their views on both what is working well in prison case management, and what are the strategic priorities for change.

This briefing paper draws out the key learning from this project. It begins with an overview of the policy context, before moving on to distil key messages from the research topics outlined above. It then draws directly from delegate inputs to outline stakeholder views on what is working well, what could be improved, and what is problematic regarding case management. We conclude by distilling the key actions participants felt were required in three key areas: stakeholder engagement, case management, and staff development.



POLICY CONTEXT

The ambition of the Prisoner Pathway Programme derives, in part, from the scale of the issues facing many imprisoned people and the difficulty of the terrain which they must negotiate to achieve more positive outcomes from their time in custody. The prison population in Scotland is not only amongst the highest in Europe[i], but also disproportionately drawn from our poorest communities[ii]. Consequently, many people in custody report histories of victimisation, poor mental and physical health, disrupted experiences of education, drug or alcohol use, and distress as a consequence of imprisonment itself[iii]. Those working within the system increasingly highlight the growing complexity of the prison population, as sentences in Scotland are becoming longer with a greater number of ageing prisoners, links to organised crime, and convictions for sexual offences[iv].

These systemic pressures can limit access to case management resources such as rehabilitative programmes or other purposeful activities[v]. This is particularly the case for the over 20% of the prison population who are being held on remand, who may not be able to access the full prison regime[vi]. Yet, challenges in delivering supports and services are not confined to the prison setting. When people in custody are released, they can they can face a complex and fragmented throughcare landscape, with community justice agencies also facing considerable fiscal pressures and often short-term funding arrangements[vii][viii].

From within this broader context, the Prisoner Pathway project responds directly to several key policy developments which demonstrate in detail the systemic barriers to rehabilitative and resettlement activities within prisons. For instance, the 2024 HMIPS Thematic Inspection on Progression outlines a number of factors hampering progression, such as: insufficient resourcing; inefficient use of facilities across the estate; poor communication; a lack of accountability, governance and quality assurance measures; and limitations in staff knowledge and training. In sum, they conclude that current progression arrangements are "simply not working" [ix]. Similarly, the 2024 joint Care Inspectorate and HMIPS thematic review of prison-based social work (PBSW) found the governance and funding arrangements for PBSW to be problematic, characterised by outdated guidance, fragmented systems, resource constraints, and a lack of clear lines of responsibility for the strategic direction and development of these services. Consequently, people in custody often felt they had insufficient contact with PBSW, and that many of the interactions they did have were task focused and did not engage holistically with their wellbeing or provide adequate information to allow them to fully understand risk assessment or release planning processes.

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) have published several important reports, often led by those living in or with lived experience of prison, which resonate with many issues highlighted above[x][xi]. With regard to practice in Scotland, they highlight that progression is a major concern for people living in prison. Issues raised related to a lack of efficient communication around progression and parole, as well as administrative delays in judicial reviews. Related to this, the report also identified a 'bottleneck for progression' due to a lack of spaces at the National Top End (NTE) or Open Estate (OE) to allow people to move into different environments with the opportunity to prove themselves, and delays in accessing the required programmes to address their specific risks and needs. Issues with the risk management process and negative consequences of encountering barriers to progression – including impacts on mental and physical health – were also highlighted in the report.

A prior PRT report, focusing on England and Wales, contains vital insights into the perspectives of people with lived experience of custody. Entitled 'What do you need to make the best user of your time?' , this project asked 1200 people in England and Wales who were currently in prison, had been in prison, and their families, about how to make the best use of time in prison. Whilst the report also identified areas of good practice – such as the prisoner buddy system, examples of staff advocating for them, visitor centres creating opportunities for family connections and prioritising education as well as work – these were inconsistently applied throughout the prison estate. 11 recommendations were made to help improve time spent in prison, including; a more consistent regime with clear communication, sufficient staff training, better contact with families, facilitating access to community-based organisations to improve wellbeing, having access to more practical help earlier in the sentence and taking a more proactive approach to address needs prior to release. Similar findings were reported in another PRT report, 'Prisoners Reforming Prisons' [i] by the Active Citizens Panel who highlighted that these changes were key to ensuring those living in prisons felt safe, listened to and hopeful.

This picture of pockets of good practice existing alongside the need for systemic change is reflected in Scotland. Examples of the former include the trialling of alternative models of throughcare[ii], the redesign of the women's custodial estate[iii], and developed flourishing partnerships with third sector, educational and other organisations who build meaningful relationships with those in custody[iv]. In early 2025 it was announced that SACRO will launch a new National Throughcare Service to support people following release from a short sentence or period of remand[v], evidencing an increased policy interest in addressing these issues. In sum, these developments demonstrate not only that innovation and good practice can be achieved, but also the importance of learning from previous policy reform, practice wisdom and lived experience perspectives, alongside research insights.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Lived experience

Research with communities who have lived experience of imprisonment highlights how these groups are often neglected and marginalised in these discussions. As we have noted above, an exception here is work by the Prisoner Policy Network and the Prison Reform Trust, which engaged meaningfully with large numbers of people in prison to consider the questions of progression, case management and how time in custody might be spent more positively. Findings emphasised the importance of incorporating the principles of procedural justice – voice, neutrality, respect and trustworthiness – into both policy and practice to improve life in prison for both incarcerated people and staff. Imprisoned people also emphasised the need for consistent regimes, better staff training, using technology to encourage strong family ties, alongside the involvement of people living in prisons in decision-making processes.

Desistance

These findings resonate with the literature on desistance, which is broadly defined as the 'cessation of offending behaviour' [i] and involves the stopping of criminal behaviour and the process whereby this happens. It is often defined as primary (the change in behaviour) secondary (the change in identity from a person who commits crime to a person who is law abiding) and tertiary (the shift to feeling a sense of belonging to a moral community). Broader social, cultural and structural factors – as well as the individual – must all work together for desistance to be successful[ii].

Prison can hinder desistance due to its often disruptive and harmful nature, however there are recommendations for how penal policy and practice can support desistance. For example; offering tailored interventions, fostering hope and motivation, avoiding stigmatising language, practical post-release support, and the building of social capital. Addressing obstacles to reintegration concerning housing, employment and community supports is key to support long-term realistic change. For this, partnership working and communication is key.

Families

Given the emotional and relational nature of desistance, it is perhaps unsurprising that policy developments around families affected by imprisonment often emphasise their potential to reduce reoffending. However, research with families casts doubt on whether they have the emotional, social and financial capital to support desistance in this way. Families often experience a range of complex emotions and practical issues such as difficulties with housing and childcare, financial pressures, travelling long distances to visit prisons, and stigma and a lack of support in their communities[i].

Concerningly, recent research found that the costs associated with supporting a person in custody can run into hundreds of pounds a month (£180-300 median sentenced vs remand) and this is a key factor in driving, deepening and sustaining poverty amongst families, with some spending up to a third of their household income on this[ii]. This financial and caring burden is almost always shouldered by women[iii].

Consequently, families will require supports in their own right. Positive initiatives here include increased funding for prison visits, free phone minutes, Visitors' Centres at every prison, up-to-date, accurate and accessible information, and high-quality and meaningful family contact.

The pains of (modern) imprisonment

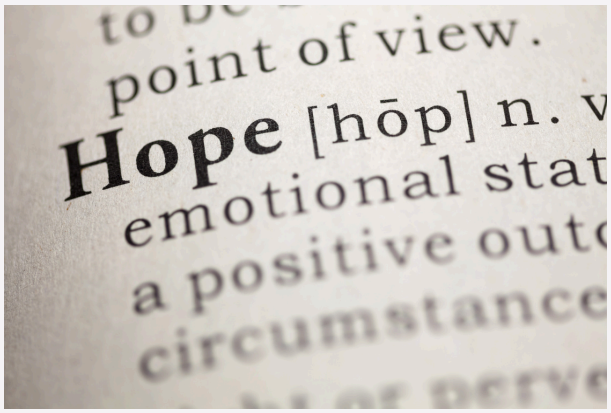
Separation from family is only one element of what can make imprisonment profoundly painful. Research demonstrates[iv] that contemporary prison regimes no longer allow people in custody to passively do their time, but instead they must take active steps to manage their sentences proactively and productively, and to reduce their risk.

This can be extremely stressful for people in custody, who often feel that actions and decisions are monitored and recorded, but with unclear consequences for the future. The need to engage with aspects of the prison regime which might evidence a reduction in risk – such as psychological assessment and cognitive behavioural course – can feel intrusive, and these interventions can be poorly understood or seen as lacking relevance to problems waiting for many people upon release (such as poverty).

The bureaucratic nature of these systems and the difficulty in accessing or challenging written records can lead to feelings of frustration and hopelessness, which can be exacerbated by long waits to access offender behaviour programmes or to progress to more open conditions.

Hope

Whilst prisons can therefore feel like spaces absent of the possibility of hope, there are and should be ways to create opportunities for hope within this context. Feeling productive, taking part in meaningful activities and having something tangible planned for release in the form of support or secure housing, for example, is essential to wellbeing and mental health for people living in prison. Van Ginneken said in their research;



'...a positive outlook on the future was one of the elements that set apart prisoners who were 'doing well' from those who were 'just doing time'' [i]

Instilling people with the opportunity to develop and create hope for their future is an important building block for wellbeing, as well as desistance. Encouraging agency is also key but can be difficult to do in a prison setting where many restrictions and limitations on daily life and movements are already in place. For hope to occur, it is suggested that people need thoughts of positive goals, plans of how to achieve these, as well as motivation and self-belief that they can be achieved [ii]. However, it is important for these hopes to exist within achievable parameters that are realistic as encouraging unrealistic hopes and goals can set people up to fail, resulting in reoffending and a possible return to prison.

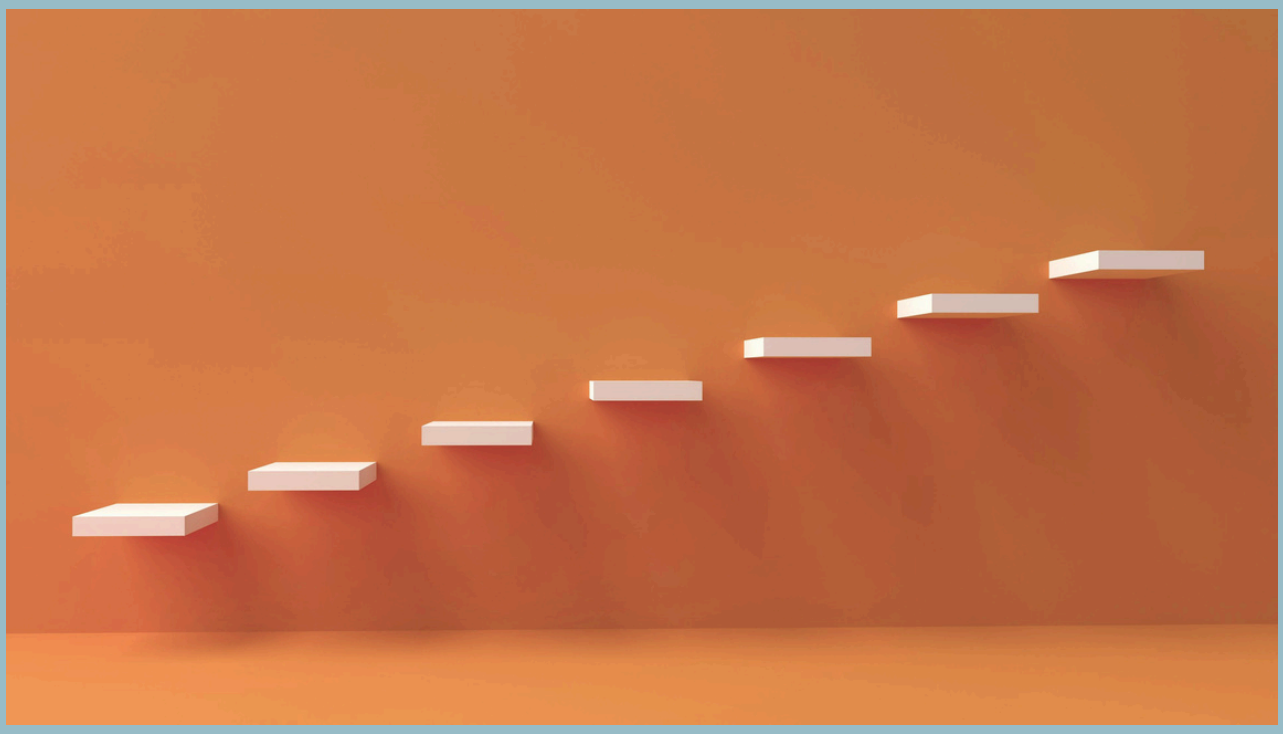
Resettlement

Such attention toward achievable goals is particularly important given the significant challenges justice systems face in delivering successful resettlement. There is a strong consensus in the research literature that planning for resettlement should begin long before release/early in a sentence, but also that there are a number of barriers which must be overcome.

Firstly, prisons must strive to create a positive climate which is supportive of change and can maintain motivation. This can be difficult in an environment of overcrowding and scarce resources [i].

Secondly, the poverty and structural disadvantages prisoners experience upon release must be recognised and planned for[ii]. These include: returning to marginalised communities with limited social and employment opportunities; suffering the stigma associated with a criminal record; and potential difficulties with family relationships, poor mental health, problematic drug or alcohol use, and difficulties accessing much needed services such as housing, health care, or benefit entitlements.

Thirdly, there is a lack of coherent connection between the dominant means of preparing people for release (often through risk-focused offender behaviour programmes) and these ingrained difficulties and disadvantages. Consequently, there is a need for a broader and more holistic approach to supporting progression and rehabilitation within prisons.



STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES AND INSIGHTS

During the event, attendees were asked to participate in a 'traffic light' exercise where they were asked to write on coloured post-its what was working well (green), where improvement is needed (orange), and what was not currently working (pink) in terms of progression and the prisoner pathway within the Scottish Prison estate. Using thematic analysis[i] the contents of the post-its was analysed to identify patterns in the responses, which were subsequently grouped into clearly defined themes.

What is working well?

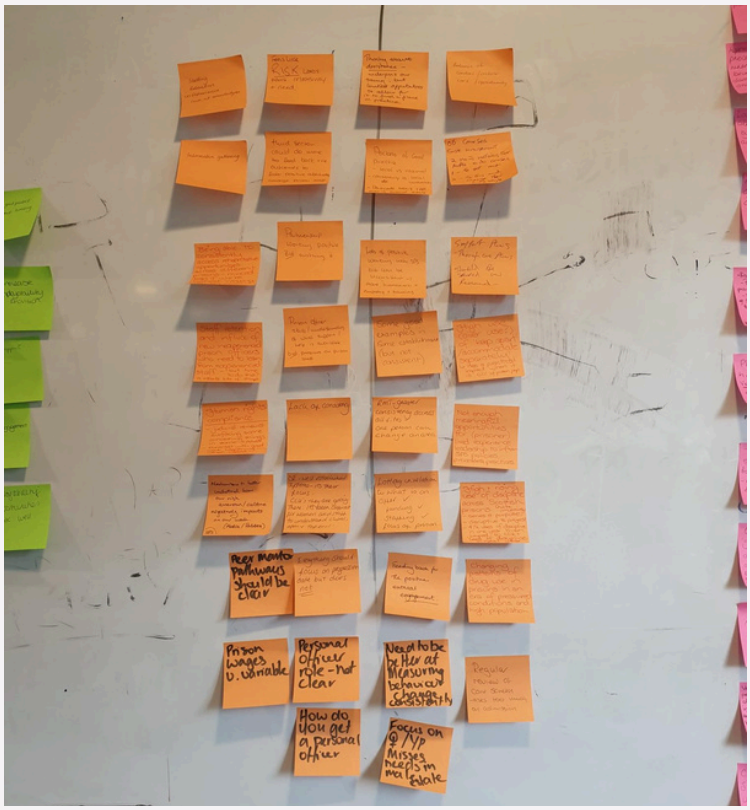
The top 3 themes identified from the responses of what was working well were 'good practice', 'partnership working' and 'relationship building'. The attendees identified several examples of good practice that they felt were working well within the SPS. A number of these were programme specific and highlighted examples such as HMP Barlinnie's Scottish Autism Parenting Programme, Sycamore Tree restorative justice programme, The Positive Lifestyles Project and Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids. Some of these were identified more than once from attendees suggesting they are well-known examples of good practice which would be of benefit throughout the prison estate. Good practice at individual establishments were also highlighted. For example, the Link Centre and the Resource Hub at HMP Barlinnie, HMP & YOI Polmont's use of the whole systems approach, and HMP & YOI Grampian's virtual court release process, Case Management board and Outreach Team. These examples stood out as positive to the attendees which suggests there is learning that can be taken from how specific establishments operate and how these can perhaps be rolled out to benefit the rest of the prison estate. Attendees also welcomed this event, noting that it showed real drive and ambition from the SPS to improve case management for those currently living in prisons in Scotland.

The second most prominent theme that attendees identified as working well was 'partnership working'. As well as the SPS working well with relevant stakeholders in general, specific partnerships such as those with the Citizen's Advice Bureau were noted. The increase and improvement on working with external partners since COVID was also appreciated by those in attendance. Alongside this, the increase in number of services and agencies who are going into the prison was viewed as essential to providing support and offering increased choice and opportunities. Closely linked to 'partnership working' is the third most identified theme which was 'relationship building'. As well as noticing an improvement in the relationship between the SPS and relevant external partners, how the SPS helps people in prison foster good relationships with their families was valued by those in attendance. These link back to the examples of 'good practice' highlighted earlier in terms of programmes geared towards parenting taking place in HMP Barlinnie.

Where is improvement needed?

Whilst it is encouraging to see positive examples highlighted, these were also described as 'pockets of good practice' suggesting that they are not applied consistently throughout the prison estate. Indeed, one of the most identified themes in terms of where improvement is needed was 'consistency' or, to be more specific, the lack of consistency attendees felt there was within the prison estate whereby excellent programmes and initiative were not available or accessible in every establishment. This was seen as a 'postcode lottery' depending on which prison you were sent in Scotland, resulting in inconsistent access to rehabilitation opportunities disadvantaging those who were unable to access these. Again, attendees recognised that there were good examples of practice but that resource issues such as staffing and funding had an impact on where and when these were implemented.

Following on from this, 'staffing' related issues were also seen as an area for improvement. Various issues to do with 'staffing' were identified with concerns surrounding staff retention and the knock-on impact of this for the day-to-day running of the prisons. Closely related to this, attendees felt that there has been a recent influx of new prison officers to address staffing issues, but they lacked the experience and knowledge inherent in long-term staff. From the feedback given, there appeared to be a great need for new officers but that the training and time they were given to prepare for the role has not been sufficient, resulting in inexperienced staff and a general lack of knowledge. This situation has real consequences for the experience of those living in prison in terms of access to vital information and supports. Resonating with the HMIPS thematic inspection on progression referred to above, there was a perception of confusion around the personal officer role and the process for securing a personal officer if you were in prison.



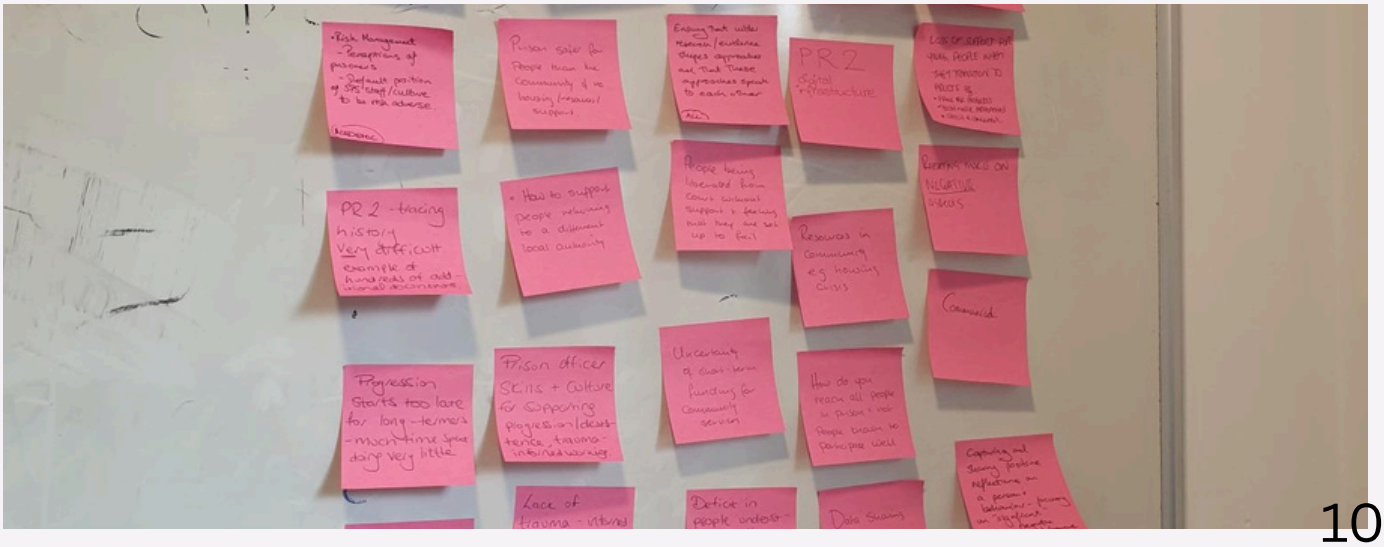
Administrative' issues were identified as an important theme for improvement. Some of these centred around the recording and measuring positive changes within people living in prison as well as the general admissions process. Regarding the latter, some expressed concerns that this process is too cumbersome for someone just entering prison and that regular reviews of this process should be implemented. Other participants noted challenges in maintaining the balance between control, order and care within the prison setting, and that this could in turn shape how those in custody engage with case management processes. Throughcare plans were also identified as an area for improvement, although participants also recognised that a new National Prison Throughcare service is to be introduced this year[i].

What is not working?

Mirroring the above, several 'administrative' issues were highlighted by attendees as not currently working. Issues with repetition of processes were mentioned – not only for their increased administrative burden but for different processes asking individuals the same questions repeatedly despite it already being recorded. This can not only cause frustration but also re-traumatisation if asking about difficult and sensitive topics. When working with multiple agencies, this repetition of procedures, systems and documentation can cause complications and impact on the service provision and timely support for those living in prison. PR2 and the digital infrastructure in general was said to be difficult to navigate, especially when it came to tracing individuals' history. Within this, some felt that the communication of administrative processes and how they work was not done effectively. The example given was that people were not aware of the case management process or what it meant so they declined the appointment without being fully aware of the impact of this. Therefore, there may be a need here to communicate what these processes are, how they work and why they are needed to ensure increased uptake and access to supports. Concerns were also raised around long waiting lists and lack of trained staff to deliver important programmes to facilitate progression.

Related to the above, 'communication' was also highlighted as something that is not currently working within the SPS in terms of progression and prisoner pathways. This refers to communication in a number of ways; between people, between systems and between partners. Participants felt that the different systems in place did not link up well resulting in confusion, repetition and possible important information being missed. Linked to this are issues with data sharing within and outwith the prison walls impacting on service provision and possibly impacting the opportunities available. In terms of case management, it was felt that this process was not communicated well to families who were not informed or involved enough, which can have a detrimental impact on them and their loved one in prison. Similarly, delegates expressed concerns that people in custody did not always understand case management processes and even licence conditions, potentially undermining successful resettlement.

'Staffing' was not only identified as an area of improvement, but as something that is not currently working in this context. The matter of staff training and lack of sufficiently trained trauma-informed staff was emphasised, alongside the ability to retain experienced staff by providing adequate support to reduce burnout and vicarious trauma. There was an awareness of the pressures that exist for prison staff in the context of challenging environments and the consequences of this going unsupported. Confusion around what the role as a prison officer should be was also highlighted, potentially impacting their ability to deliver innovations and strategic priorities. A suggestion was made that there should be officers trained in specialised areas within prisons instead of a one-size-fits-all role where there is an expectation on them to have a wide range of knowledge. Ultimately, there was a consensus that for the facilitation of progression, staff need to be well-trained, knowledgeable and supported to create the environment required to achieve this.



What actions must be taken?

As translating the recognition of complex systemic problems into concrete, achievable actions can be challenging, we incorporated multiple activities into the event which encouraged stakeholders to identify specific, practicable steps which should be taken to address the issues identified above.

Participants' suggestions for actionable improvements broadly related to the key themes of stakeholder engagement and strategic planning, case management principles and processes, and staff development. These are outlined below.

Stakeholder engagement and strategic planning

- Participants felt that the conversations at this event had been valuable and should be continued through a more formal stakeholder group or network.
- Any stakeholder group should also engage with the Scottish Government, in recognition that many of these systemic issues cannot be resolved by the Scottish Prison Service alone.
- Opportunities must be found to maximise the participation of people in custody in these discussions, and to amplify user voices.
- Recognition must also be given to the complex ways in which local and national contexts play out across the prison estate, with some prisons holding people who may be returning to any one of Scotland's 32 Local Authorities.
- Relatedly, additional reflection is required as to who should be responsible for capturing, sharing and implementing best practice.

Case management principles

- Each pathway to progression should be mapped out in an accessible format to be shared with people in custody, their families, prison staff and other professionals, perhaps in a similar format to the current guidance on Home Detention Curfew.
- This should be underpinned by a consistent and comprehensible approach to pre-release planning for all cohorts (remand, young people, women, statutory supervision etc.).
- Further consideration should be given to the role of the navigator or advocate – who can help the person in custody on their case management and throughcare journey?
- Admissions processes should be reframed to be more strengths-based, with a specific aim of retaining or strengthening supports which are already present in the person's life in the community
- Mirroring the principles of procedural justice, participation of the person in custody should be maximised – their attendance and voice should be evident at each stage of the case management process.
- The parole process should allow for a wider range of practice and evidence to be considered when evaluating the positive progress made in custody and steps taken to reduce risk. This might require wider reflection on how risk is defined and understood.

Case management processes and practicalities

- People in custody should be given more opportunities to engage in purposeful activities linked to progression early in their sentence, supported by a clear plan for their release and reintegration.
- Case management paperwork and administrative systems should be revised and refreshed with a focus on simplification and the prevention of duplication. Careful consideration should be given to the language and terminology used to promote strengths-based and trauma informed ways of working.
- Consideration should be given to how information sharing and records management practices could be improved to facilitate partnership working in delivering case management. This may require investment in IT systems.
- Innovation is required for records management systems to be able to better capture evidence of positive progress and achievement.
- Opportunities for engagement with services which reach into the community – such as maintaining a dedicated housing officer or Citizens' Advice Bureau service in each prison – should be maximised.

Staff development and skill utilisation

- Staff should be provided with guidance on how to make the best use of records management systems, what to record, how to access the most relevant information, how to capture examples of positive development, and how to share information well.
- Greater attention should be directed toward how to retain experienced and skilled staff, and how to prevent vicarious trauma and burnout. This might include establishing a system of staff supervision, as is common in other caring or human services roles.
- Consideration should be given as to whether existing staff training and induction practices around case management are fit for purpose. This should be linked to a clearly articulated plan for developing a staff culture which is supportive of prisoners' needs, progression, and partnership working

NEXT STEPS AND CONCLUSION

Below, next steps are outline by SPS colleagues:

'The next steps for the SPS will be to complete the scoping and design phase of the programme of work, which will involve further consultation with establishments including focus groups with prisoners and will commence a formal consultation period with both internal and external stakeholders. By the close of 2025 the research period shall conclude, and evaluation of all findings can then take place. Thereafter, product development and testing will commence. All research undertaken during the scoping phase will be used to inform the product development and the operational delivery of revised policy and practices. The proposed individualised approach to case management via the prisoner pathway process will ensure that prisoners and their families are actively involved in planning their journey through custody and preparing for release. The programme of work is due to conclude by 2028.'

Conclusion

Many of the challenges outlined above are both well-documented and complex. Indeed, discussions amongst delegates resonated with a number of the themes identified in our review of the literature, such as the importance of recognising strengths, supporting family ties, maximising opportunities for voice and agency, and working collaboratively to attempt to overcome often entrenched social disadvantage. Consequently, achieving meaningful reform in case management and progression cannot be achieved solely by the SPS; it requires a collaborative, multi-agency approach that includes key stakeholders and organisations, as well as those with lived experience of imprisonment.

We suggest that the value of such a collaborative approach is evident in the richness of the recommendations outlined above, and also in the enthusiasm of delegates for creating spaces where policy, practice, research and lived experience knowledge could be placed in dialogue to secure the meaningful reform of case management processes. However, these changes must also be sufficiently resourced through consistent and adequate funding if the changes necessary to deliver meaningful impact for people living in prison are to be not only envisaged, but also implemented.

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