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Closing Prisons? The Howard League for Penal Reform meets Coaching Inside and Out and The Longford Trust.

By Dr Felicity Gerry KC

This article accompanies our Libertas Chambers webinar on closing prisons which you can watch here – [Libertas YouTube](#)

The webinar explored penal policy and prisoner potential with Andrea Coomber KC(Hon), CEO of the *Howard League for Penal Reform*, Clare McGregor, Founder of *Coaching Inside and Out*, Abi Andrews, Employability Manager at *The Longford Trust*. Presented by our Dr Felicity Gerry KC, these pioneering women discussed legal services as a lifeline and the impact alternatives such as coaching and employability projects, can have for those who find themselves 'behind bars'.

Felicity kicked off our webinar by quoting Dickens who wrote when the Marshalsea prison was closed: "*the world is none the worse without it.*" Felicity has spent decades researching and campaigning on injustices for prisoners, particularly, women, IPP prisoners and those convicted of 'joint enterprise'. She discussed the abject failure of sentencing guidelines, the appalling 'container' mentality of penal policy and the need for a totally new approach to close prisons, not build them as part of legitimate alternative frameworks that the public can and would accept as a sensible and evidence-based approach to crime prevention.

Felicity explained that prisons are an expensive failure. There are over 80,000 people in prisons and young offender institutions in England and Wales. Most are vulnerable. A huge number are on remand, not convicted of any crime and supposedly presumed innocent. Many are held in closed conditions for minor offences where reasonable alternatives are known to be effective. Some are detained for very long sentences for very little contribution to a crime through the disgraced approach to "joint enterprise" and others with mental health issues and neurodiversity suffer extraordinary effects of incarceration, particularly those who are over tariff because of the failed IPP laws. The criminal justice system fails them and fails to prevent crime. It is a brutal lack of a solution

maintained by click bait political and media nonsense. Defence lawyers, like Felicity, have a unique insight into the inhumanity and lack of logic around over criminalisation and over incarceration.

The Howard League

Andrea followed up with a description of the work of The Howard League and their latest campaigns:

The Howard League was set up in 1866 in honour of the great prison reformer John Howard. It is a membership organisation of nearly 10,000, including people in prison and their families, who advocate for less crime, safer communities, and fewer people in prison. The Howard League works on policy and with the media, and have a legal team, who every day receive calls from children and young people in custody, who they advise and represent on issues such as their conditions, safety, resettlement and parole.

Why does the Howard League advocate for closing prisons? In short, they don't work, ruin lives and cost a fortune. They make crime more likely rather than less likely, and yet we are overly reliant on prison as the solution to crime. We lock up more people than anywhere else in Western Europe, except Scotland. Though the trajectory there is towards less incarceration, in England and Wales we have a government pledging to increase the population by 20,000 by 2026.

“Prison doesn't work. While it is very good at punishing people, it doesn't act as a deterrent to crime and doesn't sufficiently focus on rehabilitation. How could it? There are far too many people in prison who just shouldn't be there. To the extent we have prison, it needs to be for people from whom the public needs protection – dangerous people, for as long as they pose a danger. And yet we lock up many people because we are mad at them, and for ever longer sentences for an ever-wider range of crimes.”

Andrea went on to explain that prison is full of people who have taken bad decision in bad circumstances, and many of them never seen good circumstances. It is well known that very many people in custody have grown up in care, have experienced childhood violence, and have problems with mental health and drug dependency. We lock up far too many people who have neurodivergent conditions – which our justice system just doesn't understand or make appropriate accommodation for. And far too many people from racialised minorities, who are overrepresented as secondaries in joint enterprise, for example.

She observed that we have nearly 3,000 people who remain in prison under the IPP sentence, though it was abolished ten years ago. She recently received a

letter from a man who was sentenced to a minimum tariff of 18 months – he's been in prison for 19 years. On Tuesday, the Secretary of State for Justice refused to follow the recommendation of the Justice Committee, which suggested a resentencing exercise that would give IPP prisoners a sense of finality to their sentences.

There are also far too many people in prison who haven't been convicted or sentenced at all. Up and down the country, local jails are full of people denied bail and remanded to custody. Across the prison estate, where they are held with convicted and sentenced prisoners, they are the prisoners most likely to self-harm or commit suicide. And it's barely a surprise - more than half will be found not guilty or will be sentenced to less time than they have served.

"Most people in prison have been let down by society, they have been set up to fail. And when they fail and offend against society, we punish them in a way that the government's own evidence base shows us is likely to result in them reoffending. It is hard to imagine any area of public policy where government policy is developed so directly against the government's own evidence base. Government knows what works and what doesn't work – for example, that community sentences result in less reoffending than short sentences – and yet extends magistrates powers to doll out short sentences. It knows that prison provides no general deterrent, and yet sentence lengths increase in the name of deterrence. It is a disgrace."

It also costs far too much. The current orgy of prison building will cost more than £3.5 billion, and that doesn't include the ongoing cost of holding a woman prisoner at £52k, a man between £30 and 70K and the cost of each place for a child being between £300 and 350k.

The Longford Trust

Andrea expanded on all this information during the Q and A you can see in the webinar but before then we heard from Abi Andrews, employability manager at the Longford Trust who has lived experience of prison:

"It's safe to say that going to prison at nineteen opened my eyes to a system most only ever encounter from a safe distance. Armed with the punitive ideology that is so efficiently endorsed by sensational journalism, I was truly unprepared for the harsh realities of our penal system. Less than twenty-four hours into my sentence, I'd already figured out that our prison population is made up almost entirely of the deprived, rather than the depraved."

The work of the Longford Trust recognises that the criminal justice system polarises victims and offenders, though the overlap between the two categories could not be more evident. 53% of women in prison have experienced abuse as a child and 57% are survivors of domestic violence. There are also stubbornly high rates of substance misuse across the entire prison population and a concerning prevalence of mental health problems. It is estimated that two-thirds of prisoners suffer from personality disorders, over half suffer from depression and anxiety, 60% have experienced a traumatic brain injury, and around 8% suffer from psychosis.

Abi explained how prison has become a readily available short-term solution for all the issues society does not wish to see. We look at prisoners as 'others', yet all convicted prisoners commit their crimes in an unequal and segregated society. It is wholly illogical to expect prisoners to rehabilitate when we are doing less and less to tackle the root causes of criminality. 29 years since Tony Blair insisted on becoming 'tough on crime and tough on the underlying causes of crime', we are still a long way from addressing the deprivation, poverty and trauma that lie at the heart of most criminality. For example, 81% of people in custody were unemployed prior to imprisonment and 47% of prisoners have no qualifications. It is, therefore, my belief that prisons should become places of opportunity. If we want a prison system that releases compliant and productive members of society, we must start treating prisoners as people with potential. Without providing meaningful opportunities and without working individually with people in prison to address the true causes of their offending, it is the sad reality that we will go on to create more victims of crime.

"Five years since I was sentenced, I am now the Employability Manager of the Longford Trust and a part-time lecturer. The Longford Trust supports young serving and ex-prisoners to go to university to continue their rehabilitation. 85% of scholars graduate and move forward to have careers, to settle down, and to start families. Only 3% go on to reoffend compared with a national reoffending rate of 66% within three years of release. Rather than seeing people in prison as a problem for society, we work with them individually to make true rehabilitation a reality."

Coaching Inside and Out

One question Felicity asked our guests was how to make alternatives legitimate to the public, the media and politicians. Coaching Inside and Out (CIAO) provides a powerful example:

Clare explained that CIAO began in 2010 when Clare saw the first-hand the problems Abi and Andrea so clearly described. Clare decided to focus her energy on those with the real ability to change things in the criminal justice system – the people in it – rather than focusing on the system itself. She was working at

the hard end of social justice as a consultant helping charities, government and others reduce inequality with those dealt the toughest hands in life; but training as a coach taught her the power every single one of us has to solve our own problems without being told what to do.

“We can all help others unlock their potential just by asking more questions, rather than giving them the benefit of our great wisdom (it took me until I was 30 to work that out..).”

CIAO believes people can change their own lives and wants everyone in prison and those convicted of offences in our communities to be offered life coaching that challenges and supports them, so they can help themselves and others. The charity's coached around 1,500 men, women and children (including their families, staff working with them and those at risk of offending).

You can read on CIAO's website coachinginsideandout.org.uk how their coaches give clients the time, support and space to think so that they can work things out for themselves and choose what's best for them. Taking a “This is your life, and no one knows it better than you.” Allows for the bespoke alternatives that can actually work and don't require incarceration to be effective.

“Why do we do this? For me it's a mixture of anger, love and luck. I could so easily be in prison myself if I'd been dealt a different hand and I think there's much to change in the world. There's also more potential in any one of our prisons than an Oxbridge college and the impact of working with extraordinary people is similarly great if you work with everyone as humans looking to the future (rather than as offenders dwelling on the past).”

CIAO clients do better and cause less harm (to others and to themselves). Many whose guilt and life history made them feel worthless and who'd never dared hope for anything better have become fully contributing members of society. Clients repeatedly say coaching enabled them to understand what they really want in life and to change how they saw the world and their place in it. They come off drugs, take up education, get fit, get jobs, start their own businesses, and find more ways to help others.

So, what did we conclude?

Prisons waste lives, waste money, and make the public less safe. Every single person can make a positive difference, if given a realistic chance. This means closing prisons for all but the truly dangerous and implementing alternatives for the vast majority of crime without knee jerk reactions from headline cases -

working towards a criminal justice system that functions for victims, offenders and the wider community.

What can you do?

- Get in touch with CIAO if you're curious or want to work with them. You can read more, including how Clare got stuck in prison by mistake, in the [book 'Coaching Behind Bars'](#) and she'll send you 'Coaching: Tough Questions, Brave Answers' (a free chapter on work with men and boys) if you email clare@coachinginsideandout.org.uk.
- Please learn more about prison policy and life in prison – for example, read Angela Kirwan's *Criminal* or listen to the *Life after Prison* podcast.
- Talk to everyone you meet about what you learn!
- Don't succumb to click bait nonsense – it is bonkers not to release people and close prisons where sensible alternative solutions are evidence based and known to work.
- Write to your MP about implementing the Justice Committee's recommendations on IPPs. And find ways to get into prisons and support prisoners.
- Join an Independent Monitoring Board; become a Prison Visitor.
- Become a mentor for the [Longford Trust](#) or explore supporting one of the hundreds of amazing third sector initiatives in prisons up and down the country.
- And if you have a business of any kind, explore proactively employing staff who are prison leavers – you'll never regret it.
- Please join [The Howard League](#) to put your voice and support behind evidence based, humane prison policy.
- Get in touch with Felicity who works on appeals in unjust cases and submissions to governments to create legal reform clerks@libertaschambers.com.

A version of this article has been published in Prospect Magazine which you can read here <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/close-prisons-ministry-of-justice-backlog-police-jail-cell>

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