



Response to Ministry of Justice *Prisons Strategy White Paper* (Dec. 2021) on behalf of Philosophy in Prison (reg.ch. 1177805, <https://www.philosophyinprison.com>)

We are an educational charity specialising in philosophical education within prisons; most of our comments on the White Paper are consequential on that. However, our experience in prisons also underpins concerns of a more general kind, which we outline below. Our responses bear especially on qus. 5, 6, 12, 13 and 14 in the list for consultation.

1. We applaud the fact that the estate, management, and purposes of the prison system are here put under scrutiny; we are very much in favour both of the bringing of the prison estate up to habitable standards and the improvement of communications and facilities within prisons, to engage and make valuable the lives of prisoners and to improve the possibilities of education and rehabilitation in this way. We are not convinced that the strategy of simply enlarging the prison population is the right way forward in dealing with the justice system. But we agree that if those convicted are to be imprisoned, this must happen in ways that are humane and decent.
2. We acknowledge the risks and difficulties that are present in the prison estate, both in terms of individual prisoners and in terms of the exploitation of the prison situation by organised crime. The measures that are proposed here show that the improvement of security both for officers and for prisoners is being taken seriously.
3. We applaud the emphasis on trauma-responsive procedures in women's prisons, which is vital especially given recent research on the prevalence of historic abuse suffered by women prisoners (ch.4). However, there is little account given here of why the approach is not extended to the men's estate (especially considering the careful account of neurodiversity §35 and note). This strikes us as both sexist and mistaken. We urge that the trauma-responsive approach be adopted throughout and foregrounded in the accounts to be given of the working of all prisons.
4. There is due recognition here that (especially after the profound difficulties for prisoners under Covid) one important and urgent objective is to have an environment that is respectful, both of officers and of prisoners; and some point is made of the significance of hope for prisoners (e.g. preamble to ch.2).
5. However, both respect and hope are fragile and difficult. Our view is that the means to provide them are not taken seriously enough here. In our observations below we suggest that there are three distinct areas where respect and hope can be encouraged and enhanced, and where opportunities may be missed by the programme of the White Paper. Those opportunities concern relations with the community 'outside'; relations 'inside'; and the nature and role of prison education.



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6. First, the community of 'outside', of family and friends and support both during and after sentence. The White Paper acknowledges that family support is essential not merely for good prospects of rehabilitation but also for some kind of peace of mind for those incarcerated (e.g. §75). However, while the importance of visits and communication with outside is regularly recognised here, the programme of building huge prisons away from local areas is inimical to visiting on a regular basis: this is especially so if poverty is (as surely it can be) a cause of the initial crime. Conversely, city prisons make for far better communications and integrate the prison system into local communities, allowing, we propose, for a far more serious and thoughtful response of the public to the penal system. In this respect, then we urge reconsideration of these major projects in favour of restoring the existing prison estate and, if building must be done, small building projects focussed on the local community. In each case, attention should be paid to the location of the prison so that travel to visit is easy and as cheap as possible.
7. Second, the community of 'inside'. While the risks of an inside community heavily embedded in criminal connections are observed here (ch.2 and throughout), it is still essential for there to be a good, decent, humane and respectful community inside prisons. This too may be difficult to achieve in a huge establishment. In our work providing philosophical conversations for groups of prisoners, the possibility of coming to see and understand different points of view, of coming to respect someone else's point of view, and of developing respectful relations from that, is a focus of all the positive feedback from participants in our courses. It is also marked by officers, who report a far more thoughtful atmosphere on the wing after a philosophy session, even among those who did not attend. There are many such educational initiatives, whose capacity for improving the community between participants is underestimated in the White Paper (which considers the role of education primarily in terms of work placement, e.g. §§16, 87). The 'inside' community may thus provide a context for improving the everyday confidence and care in each prisoner, over and above the promise of rehabilitation. Indeed, founding rehabilitation on a better sense of self and others has far better prospects of success than mere habit.
8. Third, the White Paper takes far too limited a view of the purposes of education, focussing especially on the functional features of education in terms of learning skills and capabilities in basic education (§§103-109 and elsewhere). But this both underestimates and limits those educational activities which are both useful (such as the development of analytic powers) and worth doing in themselves: activities which provide satisfaction and even joy in the doing of them, which allow the exercise of skills which are intrinsically satisfying, and which allow the careful development of fulfilling community relations. Education can provide a space of ideas and thought that is profoundly valuable in itself, a bulwark against despair. One of the dangers of prison life is boredom and tedium, the ways in which both in-cell existence and the working tasks of the prisoner's life can be solitary, repetitive or simply banal. Finding meaning is hard



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under such circumstances (§72), especially for prisoners serving long sentences, where motivation to do anything can be hard to find. We urge the government to take a much richer approach to prison education and its content, especially enhancing the role of the learning for its own sake of material that is valuable for its own sake. This, in our view, is the humane way to proceed, one in which the dangers of boredom and inertia are averted, and one in which skills of thought and reason are improved.

9. In this respect the provisions of the white paper for improving in-cell technology are very much to be welcomed. But since security requires that this provision for prisoners be off-line (except under supervision), there needs to be a great deal more thought taken about the supply of materials to in-cell laptops, tablets etc (so software as well as hardware: but compare §35). Educational material of this kind is extremely labour-intensive to provide, and serious thought needs to be given to how these provisions will be made, how they will be scrutinised, and how they will be regularly brought up to date.

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