



Article

‘Trying to make it matter’: The challenges of assimilating a resettlement culture into a ‘local’ prison

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Abstract

As part of the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms, 70 ‘local’ prisons in England and Wales were re-designated as resettlement prisons, in order to provide additional through-the-gate support to individuals serving short sentences. Drawing on staff and prisoner interviews in one case study resettlement prison, this article considers what challenges were involved with implementing a resettlement culture in a local prison. Findings first outline factors inhibiting the resettlement status of the prison; these include a tension between attempts to implement a more expansive resettlement remit into the prison, while also fulfilling more long-standing core institutional duties; the size and churn of the prison population; wide-scale apathy caused by change fatigue; and government austerity policies which caused significant difficulties in the day-to-day staffing of the prison. This article then turns to practitioner responses to the re-designation, finding that practitioners interpreted resettlement in two limited ways: top-down managerial attempts to instil a wider resettlement culture into the prison, and resistance from prison officers who felt unwilling or unable to expand their roles beyond custodial and security concerns. This article concludes by outlining how this set of inter-related barriers frustrated staff and prisoners alike, eroding a sense of hope and purpose and impeding true cultural change.

Keywords

Austerity, resettlement, prison cultures, prison policy, through the gate, transforming rehabilitation

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Introduction: Local prisons under transforming rehabilitation

Spearheaded by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, *Transforming Rehabilitation* (TR) oversaw the part-privatisation of the probation service, splitting probation trusts into two, forming community rehabilitation companies (CRCs), run by a mix of private providers and a public sector National Probation Service (Ministry of Justice (MoJ), 2013b). The architect of TR – Justice Minister Christopher Grayling – also introduced the Offender Rehabilitation Act (ORA) 2014, which aimed to provide statutory post-release support to a long-neglected cohort; individuals serving short sentences¹ (MoJ, 2014). Although considerable focus has been placed on how these reforms have played out in the community, TR has also impacted prisons – and in particular on category B ‘local’ prisons.

Auty and Liebling (2020) describe category B ‘local’ prisons² as closed facilities that hold adult males either on remand or post-conviction, before dispersing them to other prisons to serve the majority of their sentences (p. 9). They are prisons that receive their ‘local’ status from their role in serving the local Crown and Magistrates Courts. However, the launch of TR not only reconfigured the probation service, it also oversaw widespread alterations to the prison service and transformed the holding roles of category B prisons to engender a more expansive resettlement focus.

In 2013, the government announced that 70 of the 123 prisons in England and Wales were to be re-designated as ‘resettlement prisons’. The aims of this re-designation involve prisoners ‘working towards their rehabilitation’ from the moment they are imprisoned. They should be provided with a needs assessment upon reception to prison and then provided with a ‘tailored package of supervision and support’ to help them to desist from offending (MoJ, 2013a: paragraph 8). Individuals serving short sentences should spend their prison sentence within a resettlement prison close to their release address, in order to ensure they are released back into the communities they reside in. Furthermore, ‘Through-the-gate’ resettlement services have also been introduced into resettlement prisons, delivered by CRC practitioners, who are tasked with identifying prisoners’ resettlement needs and then referring to relevant services, with the aim to ensure continuity of support as each individual transitions from prison back into the community.

There is no universally agreed definition of resettlement – or what is termed re-entry in the United States. However, Maguire and Raynor (2017) describe resettlement as a multi-stage case management process that should begin before someone is released, and should pay equal attention to the practical problems an individual faces, alongside their thinking and attitudes. However, the government’s TR reforms primarily interprets resettlement as a practical process, designed to reduce high reoffending rates of the short sentence population, and the resultant costs to society (MoJ, 2013b), ignoring the importance of addressing thinking and attitudes.

This is not the first attempt to provide resettlement services for individuals serving short prison sentences. Indeed, New Labour funded the ‘Pathfinder’ project, which provided post-release support to individuals serving short prison sentences on a voluntary basis in seven pilot areas between 1999 and 2003 (Clancy et al., 2006). As part of the

2003 Criminal Justice Act, the ‘custody plus’ sentence was also introduced, providing a mandatory 12 months post-sentence community order for individuals serving short sentences. However, the custody plus proposal was never enacted, with claims that resources needed to be reserved for higher-risk of harm cases (Cracknell, 2020) and although the short-lived Pathfinder projects showed some evidence of reduced re-offending, these approaches were not followed up when the Pathfinder projects ended (Raynor, 2020). These examples typify the ‘history of neglect’ individuals serving short sentences face (Clancy et al., 2006: 2).

The latest through-the-gate reforms were acclaimed by the Coalition Government as the flagship policy of the TR reforms that would finally provide meaningful support to this neglected cohort (MoJ, 2013b). However, since the implementation of these reforms, academic research has outlined extensive concerns regarding the implementation of through-the-gate efforts (Millings et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2017). A Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (CJJI, 2016) report was also highly critical of through-the-gate services and laid much of the blame on poor support provided by CRC practitioners, including inadequate resettlement planning and support that overtly focused on processes and lacked creativity and innovation. This article also takes a critical perspective on the implementation of these reforms, but finds that practitioners’ ability to provide an effective through-the-gate service was constrained by a set of barriers that impeded cultural change within the prison, and therefore blame should not fall on a practitioner level.

These radical policy changes enacted by the Coalition Government have also been implemented in a time of significant economic upheaval and political instability (Bennett, 2019). The 2008 financial crisis led to the introduction of austerity policies, with the Ministry of Justice being the hardest hit government department, with budget reductions of over 23%, resulting in a 27% reduction in frontline prison officers (Garside and Ford, 2015). Austerity has had significant implications for the management of prisons, with a combination of understaffing and overcrowding leading to detrimental outcomes such as increases in staff assaults, violence among prisoners and prisoner self-harm and suicide (Bennett, 2015).

In 2018 – the year the fieldwork was undertaken for this study – highly concerning inspectorate reports were issued for a number of category B prisons (HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMI Prisons), 2019). These reports underscore a prison system replete with squalid conditions, numerous safety and security issues and unproductive daily regimes. This also raised serious questions regarding the suitability of these facilities as a basis for effective resettlement. It is within this challenging environment that practitioners and service user views were sought in order to gain a better understanding of the challenges of changing a local prisons’ culture to one supportive of resettlement and how the various actors within the prison respond to, interpret – and potentially resist – change.

Prison cultures and prison actors

Developing rehabilitative cultures in prisons has attracted recent academic interest (Jewkes and Gooch, 2019; Liebling et al., 2019) and viewed with increasing priority within HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) (Mann et al., 2018). However, altering the culture of prisons has faced significant difficulties. Bennett (2016) writes that

attempts at reforming prisons are often ‘undermined, adapted and resisted to preserve the fundamental conditions’ of the carceral establishment (p. 4). In a recent article on prison reform in England and Wales, Bennett (2019: 45) analyses the resilience of managerialism in contemporary penalty. He explains that various attempts to construct greater autonomy for prisons engender a retreat from these intentions and causes a resulting counter-reformation that re-asserts centralised managerial hegemony. Bennett describes this process as ‘managerial clawback’.

A central means of securing prison reform is through frontline staff. Mann et al. (2018) assert that to translate a rehabilitative culture into something enduring, substantial and more than ‘the latest buzzword’, every member of staff has a responsibility and role to play in rehabilitation (p. 4). This ‘whole prison approach’ involves collective ‘buy-in’ from staff in the belief that change is possible and that rehabilitation is not just the responsibility of a single department, but an intrinsic and deep-rooted belief system that inhabits all corners of the prison. In particular, prison officers play a central role in implementing new penal policies on the ground (Vuolo and Kruttschnitt, 2008) and as the primary ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 2010) transform policy ideas into action. Arnold (2016) sets out the important role that frontline officers play as the ‘key regulators of the quality and purpose of confinement’ which can determine the perceived legitimacy of the prison (p. 265). Liebling and Price (2001) also attest to the fundamental importance of the prison officer role, describing prison officers as ‘instruments of change and deliverers and interpreters of policy’ (p. 86). Without significant buy-in from these frontline staff, any new policy change has little chance of success (Lin, 2002).

Numerous penological research studies have attempted to uncover how prison officers understand their roles and responsibilities, predominately underlining that officers do not view resettlement and rehabilitation practices as their primary concern and that this should be tasked to other departments whose main objectives cover rehabilitative support (Bullock and Bunce, 2020; Crewe, 2011; Lin, 2002). Developing this theme, Lerman and Page’s (2012) comparative study of prison officers in two American states finds that officers are generally supportive of rehabilitative programmes, but only to the extent that these programmes have a clear utility that contributes towards the effective running of the establishment and these programmes do not alter or challenge officers’ core custodial remit. Consequentially, their research finds that officers are generally not supportive of rehabilitation as a pervasive ideology in prisons, as this could inhibit the core aims of safety and security.

Arnold (2016) notes that prison officer training and interaction with fellow officers acts as a form of ‘occupational socialization’ and shape values that promote ‘security, protection, loyalty and distrust’ over other elements of the job (p. 270). Rehabilitative ideals become subjugated, which contributes towards a more procedural and instrumental relationship with prisoners that serves to distance officers from the incarcerated. Occupational socialization also fosters the predominance of security in the work of officers and through this process, it becomes internalised as the core purpose or at ‘the base of this “role hierarchy”’ (Arnold, 2016: 271) which underpins all other elements of the prison officer role. Arnold contends that if prison officers are tasked with a more rehabilitative approach, this could lead to role conflict and incompatibility with the prison officer habitus and a ‘tension between security and care’ (Arnold, 2016). When these

tensions and ambiguities emerge, officers often revert ‘back to the basics’ or what Arnold terms ‘security in security’ (Arnold, 2016).

Bailey-Noblett’s (2019) prison research based in Scotland finds that staff preoccupations with the movement of people and goods on the residential wings of the prison directly limits their ability to play a rehabilitative role with prisoners and makes supporting prisoners a secondary role to the logistical concerns of the prison. Furthermore, these imperatives confine prison officers to the residential wings, meaning staff are often not aware of the wider rehabilitative opportunities in the prison and the activities prisoners engaged in outside of the wing.

Collectively, the above literature underlines the ‘ever-present tension within imprisonment and prison officer work’ (Maycock et al., 2020: 362) between maintaining security within the prison and promoting rehabilitation. This inherent tension is explored within this article, capturing the perspectives of frontline staff, in order to understand how the re-designation of the prison operated in practice and how staff understood their roles within the resettlement prison.

Methods

The findings presented in this article are part of a doctoral thesis which main aim is to understand practitioner and service user on the ground experiences of the ORA 2014. This article draws upon one specific empirical chapter of the thesis, which is concerned with understanding the challenges of implementing a resettlement culture in a local prison and how the resettlement prison operates in practice. This research has used a case study design, which Creswell (2013) defines as ‘a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection’ (p. 97).

For this study, the case in question was a geographic area in England that housed a re-designated category B resettlement prison and a CRC probation office. The case study prison was a category B facility, situated within a metropolitan city. The prison housed over 1,200 males – making it one of the largest prisons in England and Wales. Of this population, just under a quarter were serving a short sentence and 20% of the population were being held on remand. The remaining 55% were serving determinate sentences of over 1 year.

In total for the thesis, 35 semi-structured interviews took place in the prison and in the community, however, this article draws from 18 interviews within the case study prison. This includes 10 interviews with practitioners, including a Deputy prison Governor, prison officers, CRC through-the-gate practitioners and an array of practitioners working in areas such as housing, mental health, substance misuse and education, training and employment, along with interview data from eight individuals who were serving the custodial portion of a short sentence in the case study prison.

The author gained ethical approval for this study, first internally through the university where the PhD was supervised before permission was granted through the NOMS National Research Committee. The governor of the case study prison also subsequently permitted the author to undertake fieldwork, which was completed in March 2018. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure a variety of service user experiences of

the criminal justice system and different roles within the prison. A gatekeeper assigned to the author played an intrinsic role in this process. Although this could lead to issues regarding the representativeness of the sample and self-selection bias, it is widely acknowledged that gatekeepers play a pivotal role in the sampling for penal research (Liebling, 1999). The gatekeeper first helped the author to map out available services within the prison, in order to purposively sample staff in different roles and positions within the prison concerning resettlement. The gatekeeper also assisted in the formulation of inclusion/exclusion criteria for sampling of the prison population.³

All participants were given information sheets and consent forms to sign before interviews took place, they were interviewed by the author on one occasion, with interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. All service users have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and the case study prison is not specifically identified to ensure confidentiality for all participants of this study. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author. All coding was completed manually, with data analysed using the grounded theory method. This allows a three-stage process of open, axial and then selective coding (Strauss, 1987).

Tensions between the local and resettlement status of the prison

As outlined above, the case study prison housed a significant number of remand prisoners. The proportion of un-sentenced prisoners reflected the prison's inveterate function as a facility that primarily served the local court system. However, the renewed vision for the prison under TR following its re-designation as a resettlement prison required practitioners to focus on a competing set of priorities. In addition to facilitating the long-established court-based function of the prison, staff also had to achieve the more nascent objective of providing through-the-gate resettlement support. However, the re-designation of the prison led to numerous practical challenges. Reflecting this, the prison Deputy Governor highlighted concerns about the extent to which they could achieve resettlement:

We are a local prison, we are not set up for resettlement services at all. If they're in a cat C prison their function is to run the courses, that is what they do, our function is to serve the courts. So if we cancel something, we will cancel resettlement, so we can serve the court. We are not a resettlement prison, but we have prisoners that should be in the resettlement process.

This quote illustrated wider resistance to the new resettlement status of the prison felt by many staff interviewed and suggested that the prison was not viewed by staff as a site of rehabilitation and resettlement and that this should instead take place elsewhere, within a prison that is specifically set up for resettlement. This highlighted how facilitating movement to the court was an immovable objective for the category B prison, despite any changes in policy and legislation. Facilitating court movement took precedence over other objectives and ultimately dictated the core priorities of the prison. In this sense, the court acted as an unavoidable pull factor that deprioritised resettlement and restricted staff from engaging with it. This effectively undermined the re-designation of resettlement prisons imagined under TR.

The view that the prison was primarily concerned with serving the courts rather than supporting resettlement was also shared by several prisoners. For example, Tony, a man serving a short sentence within the case study prison, revealed the limited space for resettlement within the prison:

Only if you're doing a year you get sentence planning. But this prison isn't for that, it's a remand centre.

As a result of his short sentence and his belief that the prison was primarily concerned with those on remand, his resettlement needs were neglected. By trying to ensure that “the vast majority of offenders are released from prisons in, or close to, the area in which they will live” (MoJ, 2013a: paragraph 2), the TR policy meant that individuals subject to a short sentence were often kept in the same establishment for their entire sentence and therefore unable to transfer to a prison better equipped to serve their needs. This had an iatrogenic effect of trapping individuals in an environment that did not prioritise or adequately provide for their resettlement needs.

This practice of holding an individual in one prison appeared in contrast to previous research findings on the experiences of individuals serving short sentences. Trebilcock (2011), for example, reports that individuals subject to a short sentence were frequently moved around prisons, primarily due to their low-risk categorisations and unsuitability to completing courses, outlining the short sentence group as a portable entity. While ‘resettlement’ prisons have sought to resolve this issue, it created a different problem of individuals being held in a facility that did not have adequate resettlement services. Some individuals serving a short sentence in the case study prison, such as Chris, expressed the frustration that was caused by the inability to move to a prison that was more equipped to meet their needs:

A short sentence is worse than a long sentence. In a longer sentence, you get more settled into the system and think about if you can go to a better jail like a C cat or a D cat, and that's what you look forward to.

This indicates that this policy has resulted in inhibiting a sense of progression through the sentence, as this procedure denied opportunities for an individual to transfer to a lower security prison that provided greater freedom within the daily regime and more opportunities to undertake meaningful activities, interventions and courses. In effect, findings from this article suggest that this practice served to ensure individuals became ‘stuck’ within ‘local’ prisons that were deemed unsatisfactory in meeting their needs. Moreover, short sentences were seen unfavourably in comparison to longer sentences by prisoners interviewed in this study, because they offered fewer opportunities for progression.

The mix and churn of the prison population

A further feature of the case study prison was the mix of the prisoner population; this included short-term and fixed-recall sentences alongside those held on remand. Staff faced difficulties in balancing the various demands of these sentences. A HM prisons

inspectorate report noted that primarily due to their 'high through-put', Category B prisons caused the most concern (HMI Prisons, 2019: 9). Managing these populations also made achieving the resettlement objectives of the prison more difficult. In particular, practitioners with resettlement-focused roles faced challenges in attempts to facilitate resettlement for the divergent sentenced and un-sentenced populations in the prison.

Since the inception of the ORA 2014, recalls to custody have become a defining feature of the short prison sentence (Revolving Doors, 2018), with an exponential rise in their use. This had caused issues within the case study prison. They were viewed as a frustrating experience by many practitioners and prisoners, who believed that these short returns to custody caused added pressures and strains on a workforce that already faced numerous constrictions in their day-to-day practice. A CRC resettlement worker outlined her views and attitudes towards recalls and the difficulties she has in facilitating the resettlement needs for these individuals:

We'll have people come in on a 7-day recall. By the time we get their notification of them being here, they've got 5 days left. That's not enough time for us to hand over or refer to the relevant people. Sentences like 7 days are pointless. It's just harder for us, it's more work, but there's no outcome. Some of the prisoners refuse to engage, so even they see no point to it.

Taken together the often overlapping mix of remand, short sentence and recall populations served to undermine the implementation of the resettlement prison. The inability to affect change with this difficult mix of prisoners caused a perpetual sense of 'churn' (Revolving Doors, 2018) to the prison, which reinforced the idea of the prison as a warehouse, or a place in constant transition, with an endless stream of people to be moved and processed. The balancing act of managing the core functions of the prison left practitioners with difficult choices as to what could and could not be prioritised and achieved, as they negotiated a competing set of priorities, forcing frontline staff to make decisions between what was desirable in theory and what was achievable in reality.

This was exacerbated by the size of the prison, which further amplified the difficulties in providing a cohesive focus on resettlement for all prisoners. Recent penal research has outlined how larger prisons could inhibit a rehabilitative culture, their size contributes towards diminished rehabilitative outcomes (Liebling et al., 2019), negatively impacts staff cultures (Warr, 2014) and exacerbates poor and unsafe conditions (Jewkes, 2014). According to prisoners in the case study prison, the spatial conditions of the establishment further appeared to undermine the resettlement process, as one individual, Chris, attested:

If you have to enrol on a course, there's 1,200 people in here and you're bottom of the list when you come in, so by the time you get on a course your sentence isn't long enough.

Chris' reflections further conveyed a message to individuals subject to a short sentence that the case study prison was not a suitable site for resettlement. The size and scale of the prison, combined with the mix of the population and the resultant churn, were all immutable factors that preceded the re-designation of resettlement prisons. These pre-existing aspects combined to exacerbate the difficulties of re-establishing the prison as a place suitable and able to provide resettlement support.

Practitioner and service user experiences of time

The brevity of the short sentence and the insufficient time that this provided to address needs, has been previously established as a key theme from relevant literature (Armstrong and Weaver, 2013; Trebilcock, 2011). Data from the case study prison also suggested that the re-designation of the resettlement prison had not been able to resolve this irreconcilable issue, as staff still had to operate within these debilitating time constraints. In reality, the introduction of some of the requirements of through-the-gate practice added additional pressures onto staff. The new requirement of undertaking the basic custody screening tool (BCST)⁴ with each prisoner within a specific timeframe added constraints onto staff time. To ensure completion targets were met, the quality of the BCST could be sacrificed as illustrated by one CRC resettlement practitioner:

It depends on how much time you get to do the assessments, especially if you've got a large influx of receptions. If you've got a deadline you're minimised with the time you get to spend with someone because you have to get through the numbers.

Staff constraints meant that the BCST had become reconfigured as a quantitative measurement, rather than a qualitative aid to help plan resettlement needs, devaluing the assessment and its attendant value in the resettlement process. As a result, the opportunities to discuss needs and fully involve individuals in their resettlement may have been lost. Instead, the limitations on staff time meant the assessment became a rushed process, which demoted the importance of engagement and practitioners adopted an attitude that encouraged a need to 'get through the numbers', rather than meaningfully engaging with prisoners.

The insufficient time to establish resettlement needs was further impacted by the high levels of multi-systemic issues presented by short sentence prisoners. Several practitioners noted they had limited time to put adequate support services in place, viewing the short sentence cohort as one that dominated their time, but also infrequently produced opportunities for meaningful change. Some staff highlighted that all that could be achieved in the short timeframe would be to produce an assessment flagging up any needs an individual had but offered no opportunity to significantly address these needs in any meaningful depth. This meant that many practitioners enacted a form of resettlement work that was superficial in its reach and scope. This could often be a frustrating and dispiriting experience as practitioners would have liked to have done more but were limited by the short sentence length. Often only the most immediate practical issues could be addressed, which meant more complex and underlying issues were potentially neglected. Reflecting this, one housing practitioner observed:

In such a short space of time, it's impossible to address all of their needs, there is very rarely enough time to focus on everything that needed attention. In terms of the real intense therapeutic work, you can't even touch the surface in the time they're there. Sometimes all we can do is advise them to present at the council as homeless.

The above quote illustrates practitioners' understanding that this support would not be sufficient to prevent individuals from re-offending and felt frustrated that the limitations

of the sentence curtailed their ability to promote more sustained change. This also outlined how despite the efforts to re-designate the prison to its resettlement status, insufficient time to work with individuals remained an insurmountable and abiding issue of the short sentence.

For service users, the short sentence was seen as wasted time, with this experience offering no sense of productivity. Lee, a prisoner in the case study prison, articulated how these short sentences were viewed by those subject to them, seeing them as a pointless exercise that did not offer any rehabilitative support. The constraints placed upon staff time could be interpreted as indifference. Lee felt that he was largely left alone to his own devices and would ultimately leave the prison without having to address any issues:

It's so understaffed in here, the routine is so bad and there's so many drugs coming in, that if you come here for two weeks, you're just smoking weed all the time, watching TV, and you just think, what's the point.

Promoting resettlement in the context of austerity

One factor that appeared to have impacted upon staff and services in the prison was the considerable budget cuts to prisons, as part of wider macro-level austerity policies implemented by the government. Cuts to the Ministry of Justice budget have had a direct effect on staffing levels (Garside and Ford, 2015). The case study prison was no exception to these austerity measures, with many staff noting that the previous 18 months had been particularly difficult as a result of significant staff shortages that limited the prison's ability to run a productive daily regime. In particular, challenges with the retention and recruitment of prison officers were reported to have made it difficult to get prisoners out of their residential wings and into suitable activities and programmes. While some staff felt the prison was beginning to get back to normality in terms of returning to pre-austerity staff capacity levels, there was a sense that staffing issues had led to the prison management to advocate a 'back to basics' approach. Under this approach, managers in the prison were criticised for having tolerated underperformance from staff to retain existing officers, rather than supporting a bold reimagining of prison officer roles to something more expansive and ambitious. For example, the Head of Education noted,

I think the prison has had a particular culture. A culture where there's not been consequences of underperformance. You see that with staff who are frankly embarrassingly poor at their jobs but still getting paid, still not being performance managed.

The poor management of underperformance of officers as a result of wider staffing and financial challenges that were reported suggested the Conservative government's austerity agenda had served to actively undermine the development of resettlement prisons as envisioned by TR. Although the cuts had clearly been detrimental to staff operating within the prison and the attempts to remodel it as a facility equipped for resettlement, it was the prisoners who resided within the establishment who experienced the most grievous impacts of austerity. One individual, Jon, described how austerity was impacting the day-to-day reality on the residential wings:

The purpose of prison is rehabilitation and there's not a lot of rehabilitation. That's not the fault of the prison, it falls at a House of Commons level, that's how deep-rooted it is. I've seen how stretched they are, sometimes there's just one officer on the landing. It's really difficult, because of staffing levels.

Unsurprisingly, many prisoners articulated frustration about the repercussions of austerity in the daily regime of the prison and the general condition of the estate. Budget cuts were seen as undermining the ability of the prison to offer rehabilitative activities and provide resettlement support, which, in turn, was felt to generate a sense of apathy among prisoners. Reflecting this, one prisoner reported,

It's just lock you in a cell, 23 hours a day, let you get on with your own devices. There ain't no resettlement, there ain't no help, I'm still the same now as I came in.

Prison officer shortages had placed significant constraints on the day-to-day operation of the prison and when chronic staffing issues occurred, the prison was only equipped to undertake core functions. This impacted the ability of non-operational staff to undertake their jobs and undermined the resettlement services the prison could offer. This failing was echoed by another CRC resettlement worker, who articulated a concern that an under-resourced prison officer population placed constraints on resettlement practitioners' access to prisoners and could result in individuals being unable to receive the resettlement support envisioned under the TR plans. The lack of staff placed restrictions on prisoner movement around the establishment, leaving prisoners contained to their residential wings.

I think our biggest constraint is access, there isn't enough prison officers, so prisoners won't be able to go to the surgery if they're booked in. Resettlement is often the first thing to be cancelled if there's a shortage of staff.

This article has already described the constraints staff face between the local and resettlement demands of the prison. However, austerity measures implemented in the case study prison had exacerbated these difficulties, placing further constraints on staff capacity. This demonstrated that the re-designation of the prison towards a through-the-gate ethos has been undermined and devalued by macro-level political decisions.

Practitioner perspectives of their role concerning resettlement

As established above, there has been renewed interest concerning the culture of prisons and the central role staff can play in developing particular cultures in prisons. However, within the case study prison, there were several difficulties in developing a wider cultural uptake in support of resettlement.

First, many practitioners did not view resettlement as central to their role. Resettlement was often understood as a specific department, with named staff primarily responsible for this task, rather than a central responsibility and aim of the entire prison workforce.

This indicated a failure to administer a ‘whole prisons approach’ (Mann et al., 2018: 4) within the resettlement prison. Moreover, this reduced resettlement to a technical process, with responsibility confined to one department, as a prison officer outlined when asked how he perceived his role concerning resettlement:

I’ll be honest, it probably doesn’t. . . With regards to resettlement, it’s going to be referring to the resettlement department. It’s a signposting process.

This reflected how several practitioners – in particular, prison officers – working within the case study prison did not view rehabilitation or resettlement work as part of their wider remit; this was viewed as a job for a particular department and not frontline officers. A clear distinction existed between practitioners who viewed their roles as those concerning security and control and those whose roles were more closely associated with resettlement. As a result, the re-designation of the prison towards resettlement not only presented challenges to the primary function of the prison but also created significant tensions concerning the roles and duties of different practitioners operating within this space. This tension had particularly affected prison officers, who were now expected to take a wider interest in the needs of the prisoner, beyond the core concerns of security and safety. Some officers exhibited some resistance to addressing both aims. For example, one officer revealed that

Some of them you feel sorry for because you know they want to change, but others don’t care and you don’t feel bad because it’s ‘yeah, you’re getting out tomorrow but I’ll see you in three days’. Because we know that you’re going to go out and do exactly the same. If I see they’re not bothered, then I’ll only help to the extent I need to, I won’t do the extra miles because I know the extra miles isn’t going to make any difference.

This viewpoint underlined resettlement support as an optional supplemental element of the prison officer role, that was only imparted to certain prisoners, in particular those who were deemed likely to engage with the help available. This apathetic attitude towards providing more extensive support stemmed from a lack of belief that undertaking these ‘extra miles’ would make any discernible difference or have positive benefits to some of the individuals within the prison. This was indicative of a wider attitude that change was not possible for some prisoners. Problematically, it appeared that people serving short prison sentences were most frequently consigned to this label, particularly the ‘revolving door’ prisoners, where officers seemed resigned that they were likely to fail and return to custody. These individuals were often viewed as beyond help due to the time constraints of the sentence and due to the belief that they were unwilling and unmotivated to change. This in turn may have labelled them as undeserving recipients of resettlement support.

It was evident that for several officers, there had not been an internalisation of a wider resettlement philosophy that was supposed to underpin the prison. The failure to assimilate a wider culture supportive of the resettlement prison status was problematic because as discussed above, prison officers play an important role in implementing new penal policies on the ground and have the autonomy to subvert practice. Yet, despite recent efforts to enhance the relational role of prison officers (Tate et al., 2017), the prisoners’

view of the role officers play in the resettlement process indicated a distant and disconnected relationship between prisoners and officers:

I don't know if the officers are actually talking to prisoners, maybe they need to educate some of the officers and train them how to influence inmates so they don't come back to prison. I haven't sat down with anyone to say, 'why did you do the crime, and here's what you need to do'. It's something I really want to do.

The absence of meaningful interaction between officers and prisoners suggested a failure to alter the core security role of prison officers to one that was more conducive to facilitating resettlement. The prisoner above appeared to perceive officers as unequipped to carry out such interactions, which may have served to reinforce the belief among individuals serving short sentences that there was an absence of support available to them.

Although the resettlement prison re-designation primarily tasks specialist providers with facilitating resettlement services, the 'whole prisons' approach encouraged by HMPPS, also places more emphasis on prison staff to contribute towards a wider resettlement ethos. However, findings from this article question the efficacy of asking prison officers to expand their roles beyond core security concerns. In particular, cuts to staffing levels have already added further pressure onto prisons and inhibits a cultural re-imagining of the prison officer role.

Managerial attempts at instilling a resettlement culture

Managerial attempts to instil a wider culture supportive of resettlement had failed to take shape in a meaningful way, according to several frontline practitioners. Within the case study prison, resettlement was regarded by many of the practitioners' interviewed, as primarily driven by managerial targets and financial necessities imposed by central government, rather than following from ideological and altruistic buy-in. Practitioners in the case study prison, therefore, felt that these changes had predominately been imposed within a top-down managerial framework and had not filtered down and assimilated into the staff on the ground. As such, the further down the hierarchical chain of the prison you went (and the closer to the frontline roles), the more fragmented and less embedded the cultural purchase of resettlement was, predominately due to the competing set of priorities that frontline practitioners faced. Illustrating this, an education practitioner outlined the difficulties involved in the importance of purposeful activity filtering down from management to frontline officers who unlock prisoners on the residential wings:

The senior management team want it to work and there are a lot of key performance targets and drivers. That message doesn't go down to the officers who are unlocking prisoners . . . it gets fragmented, In terms of them getting people unlocked, there are competing priorities.

The practitioner above outlined the difficulties in altering, or 'turning around' a culture, particularly one that had been ingrained over a prolonged period. Mann et al. (2018) caution that instilling cultural change can take time, but that it should not be 'imposed by the central administration' but by managers empowering their staff (p. 9). In the case

study prison, the use of targets to drive reform had not successfully filtered down to ground-level practitioners to promote a renewed resettlement culture, but instead led to a ‘fracturing’ between management and frontline practitioners, each with their own visions and perspectives of the functions of the prison.

By focusing on targets, resettlement was repositioned as a rubric. It was not properly articulated but was re-appropriated as a set of managerial priorities to be measured and quantified. This contributed to an absence of a shared culture between senior management and frontline staff, which undermined a clear collective resettlement ethos. However, in the case study prison, it was apparent that this pessimism had permeated into a wider organisational apathy. This was captured by the Head of Education:

There is this miss-match; the more senior you become, the more inside you are. Some rank and file officers are good, but it doesn't take that many to throw a spanner in the works and I think there is some organisational apathy. I don't think it has mattered historically and trying to make it matter really is quite difficult. You're trying to change a culture of a place this big and it will take ages to change direction.

This quote not only suggested that there were different levels of ‘buy-in’ to the new resettlement ethos that was supposed to underpin the prison, but also reflected how different types of staff were under different pressures and motivated in different ways to achieve this. Senior managers and frontline staff appeared to promote resettlement in distinct and limited forms. Managerial support for resettlement was actualised in a measurable sense, where it was translated into a set of targets to be met. While officers understood resettlement to be the responsibility of a specific department operating in the prison and would only provide resettlement support to a limited number of motivated prisoners and only when this did not undermine what they perceived to be the core priorities of the prison officer role. Neither of these perspectives promoted a wider culture of resettlement.

Change fatigue

‘Change fatigue’, the tension that is caused by relentless policy change and the constant implementation of new initiatives (Robinson and Burnett, 2007: 333), was another source of the organisational apathy felt by practitioners. In the case study prison, staff had been unsettled by the scale and pace of TR and had led to cynicism about the wider reform agenda. For example, the Deputy prison Governor, reported feeling fatigued from the constant introductions of new policies, as well as distrustful of new policies to make a meaningful difference, exclaimed that

You get a new minister and they have new ideas. You get a new government and they have completely new ideas. Nothing is ever embedded. I've been in the job for over 30 years and it's circular.

The constant and circular nature of policy reform that the Deputy Governor reported was felt to leave inadequate time and space to allow a new culture to assimilate, fostering

a deep sense of cynicism and fatigue towards reform among prison staff, which had come to be seen as an enduring element of penal policy.

Discussion and conclusion

In 2019, Justice Minister David Gauke announced that the TR model would be disbanded, with all offender management to be undertaken by a re-unified National Probation Service, ending the organisational split (MoJ, 2018). Part of the government's new probation strategy has involved the introduction of a revised resettlement model. This new model will continue with the 'resettlement prisons' function and introduce Offender Management in Custody (OMiC). This involves the amalgamation of two functions; through-the-gate work of resettlement planning alongside prison-based offender management, who typically undertake sentence planning and risk assessment responsibilities (HMPPS, 2020). The aim of this is to avoid the duplication and poor communication that has previously existed between these functions. This model places significantly more responsibility on prisons for resettlement. Prison staff will become the organisation with prime responsibility for resettlement planning, only 'handing over' this responsibility at a designated point shortly before release. Furthermore, prison officers will be expected to undertake weekly keywork sessions with prisoners, expanding their duties beyond core security concerns. This is potentially concerning, as this article, alongside Raynor (2020), questions if prison officers have the time and capacity to provide meaningful rehabilitative support, particularly in light of the cuts to prison staff in recent years.

This article has shown that there are several inter-connected barriers and blockages that inhibited the resettlement prison from effectively facilitating resettlement or true cultural change. These include the pre-existing institutional imperatives of serving the court in the local prison, which often takes precedence over resettlement work; the spatial conditions of the prison, replete with the mix and churn of the prison population; temporal barriers which meant practitioners often felt they had insufficient time to undertake any meaningful work or make progress with resettlement planning; and political-economic barriers which are a central cause of staff cuts in the prison, which effectively undermined the expansive resettlement ethos that government charged prisons with.

These institutional, temporal and political-economic barriers served to frustrate the goals of the resettlement prison and eroded a sense of hope and purpose among prisoners and prison staff. Both simultaneously experience the short sentence as unproductive 'wasted' time, insufficient to make positive changes. Both parties also lacked the agency to challenge and overcome these systematic forces impacting the institution. In turn, the local prison remained a site not purposed for rehabilitative support, yet its prisoners and staff remained 'stuck' within its walls, unable to move forward.

The policy ideals behind 'resettlement prisons' provides us with a further opportunity to question what the functions of our prisons are. Are they 'holding pens' primarily responsible for processing an endless churn of individuals as they circulate between the courts and community, or should they play a more expansive role – supporting resettlement and engendering change? If we are to ask prisons to do more, we must provide its practitioners with adequate space and tools to achieve these aims,

otherwise, the addendum of ‘resettlement’ to the prisons’ function risks being a superfluous ‘window dressing’ to the pre-eminent ‘local’ function.

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Notes

1. A short prison sentence is commonly defined as a period of incarceration that is less than 12 months and more than 1 day in length. It is a term widely used in government terminology (MoJ, 2013b). Prior to the ORA 2014, individuals serving a short sentence were released unconditionally once they had served half of their sentence. The ORA 2014 bought in a mandatory 12 months post-release supervision for everyone serving a short sentence.
2. There are four categories of prisons in England and Wales; A, B, C and D. These categories are related to the security classifications of the prisoners that they hold, with category A prisons holding the highest security category and category D the lowest.
3. Inclusionary criteria for service users included male, over-21, serving a short sentence, released into the case study area. Exclusionary criteria included diagnosis of severe mental health/psychotic issues, assessed as a high risk of harm, or currently subject to the prisons’ control and segregation or healthcare units.
4. BCST is used to identify the needs of each individual and to then formulate a resettlement plan. This should take place upon reception into prison (National Offender Management Service (NOMS), 2015).

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Author biography

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