

Solidarity with people in Barlinnie during the pandemic meeting - February 2021

In this meeting we highlighted the issues faced by people in prisons generally, but particularly in Barlinnie, during the pandemic. We were building on a conversation with prison management in Barlinnie, who had proved open to help from the outside to alleviate the long times served in cell. The session was introduced by Dave from the [Prisoner Solidarity Network](#).

Issues identified

- Mental health & access to health care in prisons: there are serious concerns about the mental health crisis raised by the Prisoner Solidarity Network, the Scotland in Lockdown study and others and that the impact of lockdown is being denied by the prison. Accounts of absence of healthcare as services have been moved remotely and are difficult to access
- Covid is being used as excuse for pre-existing problems: e.g. access to education/offending behaviour programmes (requirement of progression); systems of property/ finance transfer.
- Prison & staff interest in maintaining lockdown measures: Very public statements from POA (England & Wales) about conditions of increased confinement being beneficial/preferred working and living conditions
- Impact on Parole and Progression: Very real concerns about people not progressing to open estate, less secure conditions due to failure to complete programmes which can't be offered due to COVID/ mixing 'households'. Not released on parole as 'not been tested in community' or released with less/no support and preparation. But will downgrade.
- Use & Impact of Solitary confinement: Current campaign against Close Supervision Centres- public letter demanding accreditation is retracted
- Communication barriers: Concerns about surveillance of mail. PSN have had some contact and letters blocked. Number of issues with 'email a prisoner': expensive, restrictive, privacy, corporate.
- Need to be pushing back on security and risk discourse being used to block contact and support from outside- prisoners have right to be supported and people have right as local community to offer that support
- Prisoners are unable to mix/ socialise between wings/sections.
- Access to education & reading materials: Prisoners given kids activity books and same books

Summary of discussion

The Prisoner Solidarity Network originated in the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee- now a prison abolitionist organisation. Holistic approach to prison and experience of prisoners, not just prison labour. The emphasis is on solidarity not charity - network of members inside and outside



Campaigns so far: operate buddy system; complaints/ parole assistance; reintegration support; emergency fund due to COVID concerns (no eligibility criteria); campaign about overheating; concerns regarding separation of Welsh language speakers. Upcoming campaigns are on solitary confinement and the POA.

Challenges faced by PSN are how to offer membership of democratic organisation to people on the inside who can't attend meetings etc; use PSN info packs. They suspect that 'subversive' mail is being read/not arriving; no visits to provide opportunities to engage with family members.

Actions

To tackle the lack of activities for people in Barlinnie, we organised a book drive in our local communities and communities of interest, asking especially for books on true crime, biographies, self-help and fantasy. Around 30 boxes of books were dropped off to Barlinnie and distributed in halls, along with a poster expressing solidarity with the people in prison.

For people in Scottish prisons more broadly, the Glasgow Prisoner Solidarity group was already set up a letter writing group with a buddy system, which those attending were invited to contribute to. This group is ongoing, to get involved email: glasgowprisonersolidarity@protonmail.com

A group of people started recording regular podcasts which were then played over the Barlinnie radio.