

Prison Expert Group – Jim Watson. Short briefing for members.

Essentially the Prison Expert Group was set up by Wendy Sinclair-Gieben, the then Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland. The group acts in an advisory capacity to the Chief Inspector in order to improve the engagement with prisoners, facilitate the exchange of tacit knowledge and to help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the inspection processes. We are a small collective of people who have previously served a sentence who have been brought together to examine the elements stated below, which have been lifted from the terms of reference, or on any other matter that the Inspectorate wishes to draw to our attention. The current inspector Sara Snell supports the PEG and engages whenever she thinks it appropriate

Background (lifted from PEG terms of reference)

HMIPS are aware of the need to improve our understanding of the needs of prisoners, and to improve our engagement with prisoners, to ensure the work we do is relevant to their experiences. Whilst we hear from prisoners during inspections and monitoring it is agreed that more focus needs to go into ensuring these aspects of our work are as effective as possible.

The proposal is to create an Advisory Group for HMIPS, comprised of people with lived experience of imprisonment. The group would be invited to provide advice on areas such as, but not limited to:

1. To provide constructive advice from people with lived experience of imprisonments perspective on the effectiveness of our inspection and monitoring systems and processes
2. To advise on how well prisoners understand our inspection and monitoring system and processes, what we can do for prisoners and what we can't do for prisoners
3. To advise from someone with lived experience of imprisonments perspective on how we could improve our monitoring and inspection systems and processes and improve our credibility as an organisation
4. To advise how we can improve communication with prisoners
5. To advise on how we can improve engagement with prisoners
6. To help us review and improve the effectiveness of our pre-inspection prison focus groups
7. To help us consider how to run prisoner surveys as effectively as possible
8. To provide feedback on selected draft HMIPS reports, as requested by HMIPS, ahead of publication.

The idea is to use the tacit knowledge that comes from being imprisoned to help improve the system itself. This is something that Wendy had been arguing for before lockdown. Our group comes from a variety of incarcerated backgrounds (lifers, short termers, women etc.) and we bring an eclectic mix of skills and strategic understanding to this arena. Currently three of us are undertaking advanced degrees whilst others have previously been an accountant, a social worker and gang members. However, we are now prepared to use our previous experience to help improve it for those following after us...

Jim Watson is the current Chair of the PEG. Jim also sits on the Independent Prison Monitoring Advisory Group (IPMAG), a statutory body set up to advise the inspector on the effectiveness of prison monitoring. IPMAG has always had someone with lived experience sitting on it since it was set up in 2015.

Jim served a short-term sentence in Low Moss in 2012. He then volunteered and worked for Positive Prison? Positive Futures trying to effect positive change in the criminal justice system. He helped develop a training course for mentors involved with throughcare for people leaving custody.

In 2016, he was recruited by the University of the West of Scotland as an associate lecturer teaching across a variety of modules in the undergraduate course. In 2019, he went back to Strathclyde University to get a master's in social policy (Research Methods).

Currently he is a part time lecturer at UWS teaching in the criminal justice and criminology programmes, and is finishing writing up his PhD at Dundee University examining the legitimacy of prison inspection processes from the perspective of prisoners.

He is also involved in the Release Research projects which is examining the supports available for people with mental health and/or substance issues as they leave prison. This is a multi-disciplinary project currently funded by the National Institute for Health Research and previously by the Chief Scientific Officer in Scotland. It is led by Dr Catriona Connell and others from Stirling University and involves others from the University of Glasgow, Napier University, NHS Scotland and Public Health Scotland.

Jim is an electronic monitoring champion.