



BEING

DOING

BUILDING A RESTORATIVE CULTURE IN PRISONS

Volume One

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1: FORWARD

In 2016, the Restorative Justice Council published *Restorative justice in custodial settings: Information pack* (Restorative Justice Council, February 2016), in which it discussed developing the capacity internally for restorative justice to take place within custodial settings and creating the conditions for external agencies to come into custodial settings to deliver restorative justice. As a follow-up to that work, since 2022, the Restorative Justice Council has been collaborating with Dr Katherine Doolin (Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland) on a programme of research exploring the implementation and impact of restorative justice in prisons. This briefing paper— the first volume in a series— explores the opportunities and challenges of using restorative justice in prison, and of working towards building a restorative culture in prison.

Drawing on our research, case studies, and policy developments, the aim of the briefing paper is to inform policymakers and stakeholders, including prison and probation management and staff, and restorative justice providers and practitioners, about the opportunities, benefits, and challenges of ‘doing’ and ‘being’ restorative within prisons. Our research reveals that, in the pursuit of fostering a restorative culture within prisons, it is essential to understand the distinction between ‘doing’ restorative justice and ‘being’ restorative. In this context, ‘doing’ restorative justice refers to an intervention-based restorative approach or process that responds to harm after an incident. In contrast, ‘being’ restorative embodies the creation of a culture that proactively supports restorative practices, emphasising values and principles that prioritise healing, accountability, and connection among individuals.

This briefing paper draws on knowledge-exchange events held between 2023 and 2025 in England, Northern Ireland, and Aotearoa New Zealand, which focused on key issues related to the implementation of restorative justice in prisons. These events involved a diverse range of participants, including policymakers, prison leaders, custodial and non-custodial staff, restorative justice practitioners, community-based organisations, and individuals with lived experience of restorative justice, whether as victims or perpetrators of harm. We are grateful for the engagement and insights shared by all participants. While this briefing paper provides specific examples from UK prisons, the themes discussed are relevant to correctional settings more broadly.

Our findings reflect the various knowledge exchange events that have enriched our understanding of restorative practices. Significant gatherings include "Reimagining Opportunities for Restorative Justice in Prison" at HMP Peterborough in May 2023, and "Restorative Justice in Prisons: Maximising Opportunities to Influence Change" in London in July 2024. Further contributions came from discussions on "Building a Restorative Culture in Prisons" at Ulster University, Belfast, also in July 2024, and participation in the "Creating Opportunities for Restorative Justice in Prisons: Mobilising Change and Building Capacity" workshops in Palmerston North, New Zealand in March 2025. Our time with Ara Poutama Aotearoa/ Department of Corrections New Zealand and the critical analysis forum "Prisons and Communities Together" in Belfast in September 2025 further deepened our insights into the importance of community-based restorative providers in embedding restorative practices in prisons. Additionally, our engagement with the Department of Justice Northern Ireland and HMP Hydebank Wood in September 2025 underscores our commitment to advancing restorative justice initiatives across borders.

Our next steps involve developing Volume Two of this publication, which will provide focused guidance on fostering a culture of restorative practices in prisons. This volume will provide practical tools and recommendations to equip stakeholders with the resources to build a restorative culture in prisons.

2: INTRODUCTION TO RESTORATIVE LANGUAGE

Throughout this briefing paper, we refer to ‘restorative justice,’ mindful that many may use related terms such as ‘restorative practice’ or ‘restorative approaches’. We recognise that each of these terms carries its own implications and contexts. Our choice to use ‘restorative justice’ is deliberate, as it is a term widely recognised within the criminal justice sector. As our efforts evolve, we aim to inform policymakers and the broader public about the nuanced differences and overlaps between restorative justice, restorative practice, and restorative approaches.

Restorative justice serves as the overarching philosophy that advocates for the involvement of those most affected by harm in discussing its causes and consequences. It empowers these individuals to make decisions about how to adequately respond to harm and resolve conflicts. It promotes a collaborative and consensus approach to decision-making to encourage accountability, repair harm, and seek to restore belonging and reintegration into the community. Generally reactive in nature, restorative justice involves a variety of restorative processes or approaches that are primarily implemented within the criminal justice system following incidents of harm.

Conversely, the use of the term restorative practice is more prevalent outside of the justice system. While it shares the same foundational values as restorative justice, restorative practice adopts a more proactive approach that aims to cultivate resilient relationships, equipping individuals to navigate conflict effectively. This encompasses a variety of activities designed to engage those affected by harm, facilitating communication about the impacts of behaviour, nurturing relationships, and collaboratively determining steps to acknowledge and, where possible, repair harm. Such practices may take various forms, including restorative dialogue, leadership techniques, and both direct and indirect restorative processes. The interplay between restorative justice and restorative practice, and the restorative approaches supporting them reveals a dynamic relationship:

Practice Emerges From Justice Processes: The principles of restorative justice lay the groundwork for numerous restorative practices. For example, restorative circles, restorative conferences, and mediation models can be utilised both in formal justice contexts and informal community settings, illustrating how methodologies can transcend specific applications.

Practice Strengthens Restorative Approaches: Everyday restorative practices, such as speaking and acting with respect, restorative conversations, and open communication, create a solid foundation for fostering a restorative culture. These small-scale initiatives can have significant implications at the macro level, enhancing the effectiveness of restorative approaches.

Restorative Approaches Provide the Policy Framework: A restorative approach establishes the essential environment in which restorative practices and restorative justice mechanisms can flourish. By aligning systems—whether in schools, prisons, justice agencies, or care organisations—with restorative values, staff training, policy development, and leadership behaviours can be positively influenced.

All Three Rely on Shared Values: Success in implementing restorative justice and restorative practices requires a collective commitment to core restorative principles. However, if the restorative approaches underpinning restorative justice and restorative practices are executed in a tokenistic manner—such as conducting a circle simply to demonstrate inclusivity without genuine engagement—this undermines their potential effectiveness. The intersection of these frameworks ensures that values guide actions, rather than the opposite.

3: RESTORATIVE PRINCIPLES

The Restorative Justice Council's restorative principles (Restorative Practice Guidance, July 2025) form the underpinning of an ethical framework for restorative justice. These principles should guide the facilitation of all restorative processes, whichever form they take.

Prioritising Relationships

At the core of restorative work is the belief that strong, respectful relationships form the foundation of healthy communities. Harm is understood primarily as a disruption in these relationships rather than merely a violation of rules or laws, highlighting the need for connection and understanding.

Voluntary Engagement

For restorative processes to be meaningful, participation must be voluntary. Coercion undermines the integrity of the process; individuals involved must genuinely wish to engage in order to foster true dialogue and healing.

Fostering Empowerment

Restorative processes must create opportunities for all participants to engage in meaningful dialogue that encourages individuals to acknowledge the impact of their actions, whilst empowering those affected to share their experiences, express their needs, and seek accountability in order to regain a sense of control and agency in their lives.

Cultivating Empathy and Understanding

Restorative approaches strive to enhance understanding among participants by creating spaces for listening and shared perspective-taking. This process is essential for rebuilding trust and facilitating meaningful connections between individuals who have experienced harm.

Ensuring a Safe and Supportive Environment

A priority in restorative work is the emotional and physical safety of all participants. Processes are designed to be trauma-informed and well-facilitated, treating everyone with dignity and respect. This environment promotes active listening, acknowledgment of diverse perspectives, and constructive engagement.

Repairing Harm Instead of Assigning Blame

The primary goal of restorative work is not punishment; rather, it focuses on understanding the impact of harm and working towards healing. This encompasses addressing emotional, psychological, and relational damages, alongside any material or legal consequences that may arise.

Promoting Inclusive and Participatory Processes

By prioritising the needs of vulnerable groups, including those with protected characteristics, and valuing the perspectives of neurodiverse individuals and those with mental health challenges, we ensure all voices are heard. We treat everyone equally, regardless of race, gender, sexual identity, or orientation, while acknowledging the importance of intersectionality.

Achieving Accountability Through Acknowledgement

True accountability requires individuals who have caused harm to accept responsibility for the impact of their actions and actively participate in making amends. This concept emphasises acknowledgment of impact and accepting responsibility rather than focusing on punishment.

Prioritising Participant Needs

Rather than concentrating solely on the specific rules broken or laws violated, restorative work prioritises understanding the needs of those affected. It examines the necessary steps to repair harm and prevent future occurrences, fostering a deeper sense of community and mutual respect.

4: PRISON AS A SETTING FOR RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

In recent years, there has been a shift in some prisons towards using restorative justice within prisons. This represents a significant step towards creating restorative opportunities both internally within prisons for staff and inmates, and for external victims to come into prison to meet with the person who has harmed them.

Implementing restorative justice within a prison aims to create a positive and supportive environment where people can express themselves honestly and openly, and work together to find a way forward that is mutually beneficial. By engaging in restorative approaches within prison, those who have caused harm can take responsibility for their actions and start to see themselves as part of a community, rather than simply as someone who has done something wrong. They can also begin to develop the skills and confidence needed to make positive changes in their lives. This may include starting the process of repairing relationships with their family and building support networks prior to their release.

Providing opportunities for victims of crime to meet with their offender in prison means the offer of restorative justice remains open to them despite the person who has harmed them serving a sentence in prison. There continues to be the opportunity for the victim to seek answers to questions, explain the impact of the offending on them, and work towards a sense of safety and moving forward.

However, implementing restorative justice within prisons is not without its challenges. It can be difficult to implement restorative justice in a prison environment and prison culture, which is often incompatible with restorative values. For example, the tension between restorative priorities of voluntariness, empowerment, and participation, and the coercive, mandatory nature of prisons and the often unsafe environment for both those living and working within them. Prison is an environment which, by its very nature, involves significant power imbalances between staff and prisoners. There is a risk that the restorative approach may be seen as soft on crime or unsuitable for more serious offences. There may also be resistance from victims of crimes, who may not wish to engage with offenders in a prison setting. More generally, prisons experience significant challenges, such as prisoner violence, staff assaults, prisoner self-harm and suicide, insufficient staffing levels, challenging working conditions with an associated risk of staff illness and loss of staff, and resource restraints. All these factors make implementing restorative justice within prisons more challenging and difficult to find sufficient resources to make it a priority.

This briefing paper acknowledges and is mindful of these challenges when considering the opportunities and obstacles (and ways to minimise such obstacles) in both 'doing' restorative justice and 'being' restorative in prisons.

5: 'DOING' RESTORATIVE JUSTICE VERSUS 'BEING' RESTORATIVE IN PRISON

Restorative justice within the prison context can typically be defined as those who are actively 'doing' restorative justice and those who are working towards 'being' restorative. This is not to say that either approach is better than the other; the differences lie in what is being offered and how embedded practice is within the setting.

When we refer to 'doing' restorative justice in prisons, we mean the offer of a range of intervention-based restorative processes or approaches that respond to harm after an incident. This can include restorative responses to the harm caused by an offender's index offence or as a response to internal harm within the prison, such as incidents of violence or conflicts between prisoners or prisoners and staff, or conflicts between staff and staff and management.

For index offences, this includes restorative processes, such as victim-offender dialogue or meetings where external victims meet with their offender in prison either pre-sentence or while the offender is serving their sentence. Most prisons in England and Wales now offer opportunities for this kind of communication, typically through their local commissioned restorative service. In addition to victim-offender dialogue or meetings, some prisons offer, or until recently offered, victim awareness/empathy programmes, which can be a precursor to prisoners engaging with more direct restorative processes. Internal use of restorative approaches in prison, such as restorative conferences or circles, are used to respond to fights or bullying between prisoners, or conflicts between prisoners and staff, or between staff.

Restorative justice is a complex process that requires skilled and trained practitioners to facilitate it effectively. Prisons in the UK who are 'doing' restorative justice generally work closely with their local commissioned restorative justice service. These services are able to provide highly trained practitioners who have the skills and experience to guide participants safely through a restorative process. Their presence also adds an element of neutrality, making the process fair and unbiased for all parties involved. Some prisons who offer restorative approaches as a way of dealing with internal harm or conflict also use trained internal prison staff or, in a few examples, prisoners trained in restorative justice, to facilitate the restorative processes.

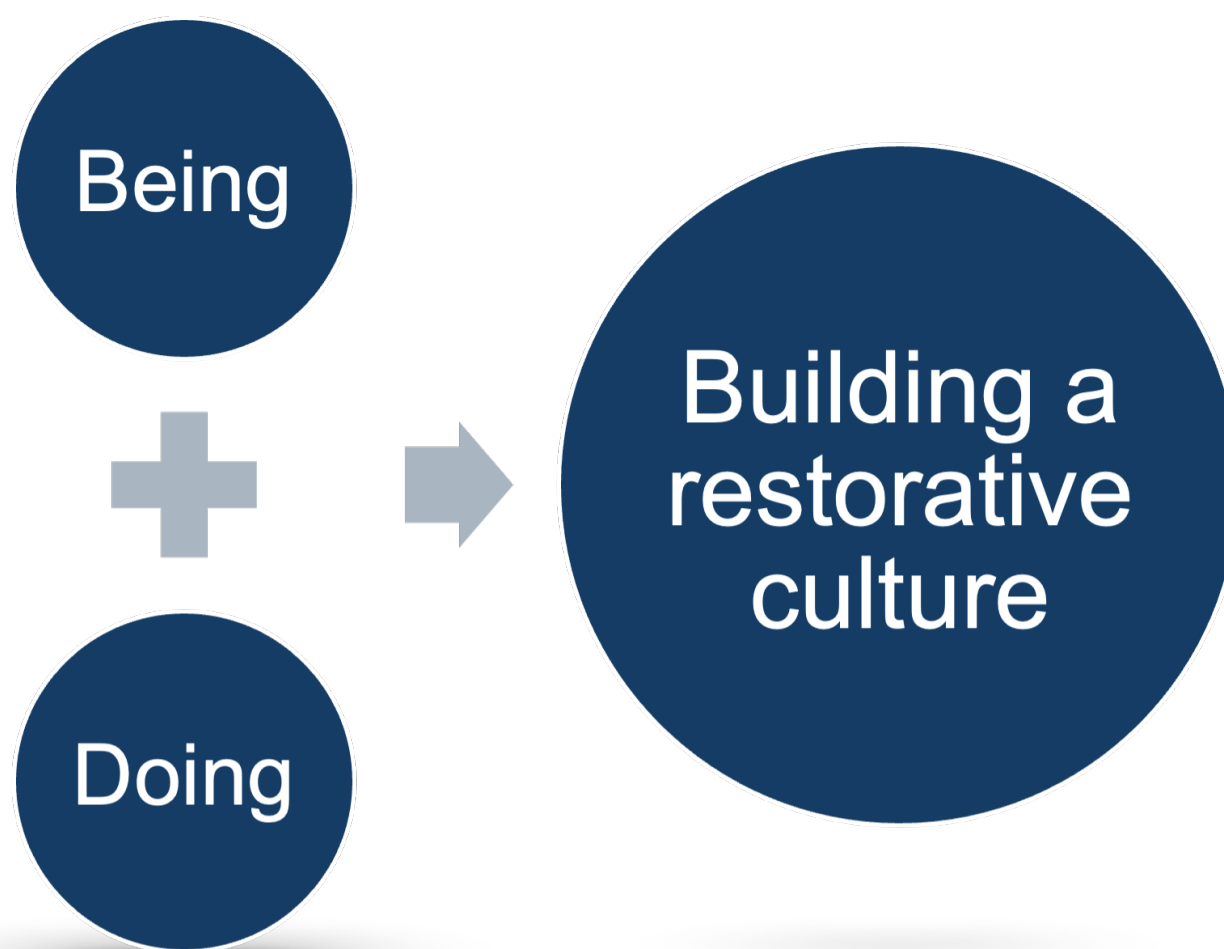
In comparison, 'being' restorative goes beyond utilising a specific restorative process or approach. It requires a fundamental shift in mindset and cultural transformation. At its core, 'being' restorative is values-led. It is a fundamental belief in the principles of restorative justice, including respect for all individuals, accountability, empowerment, and a focus on healing and repairing harm.

One of the key aspects of 'being' restorative is the involvement of the entire prison community, including staff and prisoners, external stakeholders, and the wider community services. By involving all stakeholders, it creates a sense of ownership and accountability for the outcomes of restorative justice, leading to a more sustainable and effective approach.

Leading by example is another crucial factor in 'being' restorative. It is not enough to simply espouse the values of restorative justice; it must be modelled by those in leadership roles. Prison management and staff should exemplify restorative practices and values, creating a culture of trust and accountability within the prison. This can have a ripple effect on prisoners, encouraging them to adopt restorative principles and behaviours.

Another essential element of 'being' restorative is its relational nature. Through restorative practices, stronger and more meaningful relationships can be built between prisoners, staff, and the wider community. This can lead to a better understanding and empathy towards each other, fostering a sense of community and belonging within the prison.

'Being' restorative means embedding restorative principles and practices within all aspects of the prison, from decision-making processes to daily interactions. This creates a cohesive and consistent whole-prison approach, rather than a one-off use of restorative practices. By making it a part of the culture, it ensures that restorative justice is not just a trend, but a long-lasting and effective solution.



6: 'DOING' RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN PRISON

The restorative justice landscape in prisons in the UK is currently characterised by a patchy framework, where the extent and nature of restorative work being conducted remains largely unclear. Owing to a lack of cohesive data collection methods, information about available restorative justice practices is frequently gathered through Freedom of Information requests, which can yield unreliable results. This inconsistency hampers a comprehensive understanding of restorative initiatives in prisons and their effectiveness across different regions. This highlights the need for more standardised data collection to inform policy and practice in restorative justice.

Nonetheless, it is clear that some prisons in England and Wales provide opportunities for various forms of victim-offender dialogue or meetings to take place in prison, usually facilitated through local commissioned restorative services. As detailed in the Restorative Justice Council's State of the Restorative Sector 2025 report, recent processes set in place by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service have significantly impacted access for victims of crime in England and Wales to participate in restorative justice where their offender is in prison. This is a missed opportunity for healing and

reconciliation, as studies have shown the effectiveness of this approach in reducing reoffending rates and promoting accountability for offenders.

In addition to victim-offender dialogue or meetings, many prisons in England and Wales until recently provided victim awareness/empathy programmes. A prominent example of this was the Prison Fellowship's Sycamore Tree programme, which allows offenders to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of their actions on victims and communities. These programmes aim to cultivate empathy and encourage a sense of responsibility among offenders, which can play a crucial role in their rehabilitation. Many prisons have observed that offenders who participated in victim awareness/empathy programmes often went on to engage in restorative processes. In this sense, not having victim awareness/empathy programmes being offered in prisons is a lost opportunity to raise awareness of restorative justice.

'Doing' restorative justice in prisons, however, goes beyond solely addressing index offences. Some prisons are actively employing restorative justice as a means to respond to internal harm, including violence among prisoners or conflicts with staff. Prisons, such as HMP Peterborough and HMP Forest Bank, along with secure mental health facilities, such as Broadmoor Hospital and South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, are implementing restorative justice approaches within their institutions and facilities to address internal challenges and promote a more peaceful and respectful environment. A key element of the restorative approaches adopted by HMP Peterborough and HMP Forest Bank has been the introduction of restorative champions—prisoners trained in restorative justice who manage low-level incidents on the wings under the oversight of a restorative lead (a staff member who reports directly to the senior management team).

Some prisons in England are beginning to examine how restorative justice can be incorporated into adjudication processes. While some may perceive restorative justice as a substitute for traditional disciplinary and adjudication methods, it can also be integrated with them. By employing restorative justice techniques, such as restorative questioning and victim-offender dialogue, during investigative procedures, the emphasis shifts from merely punishing the offender to addressing the harm caused and identifying solutions that are satisfactory for all parties involved.

Additionally, some prisons have taken proactive measures by engaging external providers to operate within their facilities, offering both internal and external restorative justice. Prisons such as HMP Coldingley, HMP The Mount, and HMP/YOI Isis have experienced the advantages of integrating restorative justice approaches into their daily operations.

Drawing on findings from our stakeholder knowledge-exchange events, the following three sub-sections explore the benefits, challenges, and ways to minimise those challenges, of 'doing' restorative justice in prison.

6A: BENEFITS OF 'DOING' RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN PRISON

'Doing' restorative justice in prison presents significant benefits that can be an effective way to address harm caused by conflicts and wrongdoings.

Resolve Unanswered Questions: Restorative justice allows victims to ask questions and seek clarity about the harm done to them, which can provide understanding and a sense of closure or moving forwards, which typical judicial processes may not offer.

Explain the Impact of Harm: The process provides a platform for victims to articulate the effects of the crime on their lives, providing them with an opportunity to tell of the impact in their own words unhindered by the evidential rules of judicial processes. This in turn helps offenders to understand the real-life consequences of their actions.

Gain a Sense of Empowerment: Participants in restorative justice often feel empowered as they have an active role in the process. Victims can express their feelings and needs, while offenders can contribute to making amends.

Increased Sense of Self-Worth: Victims may experience a boost in their self-esteem through the acknowledgment of their suffering and the recognition they receive during the restorative process. Offenders may experience an increased sense of self-worth through the opportunity to make amends and move forward.

Sense That Offending Is Taken Seriously: Restorative justice emphasises the severity of the offence and the hurt caused, ensuring that offenders recognise the seriousness of their actions.

Offender Can Take Responsibility: The restorative process encourages offenders to take accountability for their actions, fostering personal growth and a commitment to change, including being a catalyst for engaging in other rehabilitation programmes in prison.

Develop Empathy: Interactions between victims and offenders in restorative justice settings can facilitate empathy, as offenders hear firsthand about the pain they caused, and victims can see the human side of the offenders.

Let Go of Shame: Both victims and offenders can work through feelings of shame. Victims can reclaim their narrative, while offenders are given a chance to understand their behaviour and offer an apology, which can aid in their healing process.

‘Doing’ restorative justice offers a more meaningful and constructive approach to addressing crime, emphasising the importance of healing relationships and promoting understanding among all parties involved.

6B: CHALLENGES OF ‘DOING’ RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN PRISON

‘Doing’ restorative justice within a prison setting presents several challenges that must be addressed to ensure its effectiveness.

Difficulties of External Agencies in Accessing the Prison and Gatekeeping: Issues related to where certain individuals or institutions may control access to restorative justice processes in prison, potentially excluding those who would benefit most. Instances where there have been difficulties for external agencies in being allowed to access the prison to run restorative interventions, or where a preference has been given to statutory restorative providers rather than community-based restorative providers.

Professional Assumptions: Instances where professionals hinder the implementation of restorative justice in the prison, as some professionals may doubt its efficacy or be biased against it.

Risk of Revictimisation: The restorative process can be particularly demanding for victims, as it requires them to confront painful experiences and emotions. There is a risk of revictimisation, where victims may feel further harmed during the restorative process if not adequately supported.

Vulnerabilities of the Offender: Not all offenders in prison may be ready or able to engage in restorative processes, which are heavily dialogue and communication dependent, given the prevalence of those in prison with neurodivergent conditions. This is often compounded by life histories that include, for example, violence, neglect, and prior victimisation, as well as ongoing mental and physical health issues, and substance and alcohol misuse. For those prisoners who choose to take part in restorative approaches in prison, it may be the first time that they have allowed themselves to confront the realities of their offending behaviour. This is a high-risk time for them where a lack of support for them after the restorative process would be detrimental to their wellbeing.

Motivation of the Offender: The motivation to participate in a restorative process is crucial; offenders who do not genuinely wish to change may not engage meaningfully, undermining the goals of restorative justice. However, it is important to work with the offender in preparatory meetings to explore with them their motivation and readiness for participating in restorative approaches, as sometimes the preparation and the process itself can develop a positive motivation for taking part.

Poor Record-Keeping and Resistance to Evaluation: A resistance or oversight to the importance of good record-keeping and the need for evaluation means that a prison is unable to demonstrate how it measures and assesses the impact and change resulting from restorative justice approaches.

Addressing these challenges is essential for creating a successful restorative justice framework in a prison setting.

6C: MINIMISING CHALLENGES TO MAXIMISE ‘DOING’ RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN PRISON

To minimise the challenges associated with restorative justice, several key factors should be implemented.

Improving Access: Improving access to restorative justice programmes in prisons is essential to include those who could benefit from it and address barriers that may exclude potential participants.

Proactively Engaging Offenders: Engaging with offenders early can foster accountability and willingness to participate actively in the process. Key to this is to keep an open mind to restorative opportunities, as flexibility can lead to innovative solutions to challenges that may arise. Regularly conducting an ongoing assessment of suitability for the restorative justice process can help identify the right participants and timing.

Skilled and Experienced Practitioners: Using skilled and experienced restorative practitioners is crucial, as they can navigate the complexities of the process and ensure a supportive environment for all participants. This includes recognising and valuing the local and representative expertise of community-based practitioners and the unique expertise practitioners with lived experience offer.

Quality of Preparation: Maintaining high quality of preparation for both victims and offenders is vital to ensure they are ready to engage meaningfully.

Timing Matters: Recognising that timing matters can enhance the effectiveness of restorative justice, as allowing sufficient time for healing and preparation contributes to a more successful outcome.

Providing Wrap-Around Support for all Participants: Providing support for all participants, including prisoners, is critical to address their needs effectively, ensuring they feel safe and supported throughout the process, and in the days and weeks after the restorative process. Engagement with community services: Engagement with community organisations and services can enhance support and resources available for offenders during the restorative justice process while they are in prison, and also as part of supporting them post-release.

Record-Keeping: Keeping detailed records of restorative justice interventions, including successes and challenges faced, allows prisons to analyse trends, learn from experiences, and continuously improve their approach. Reflection is crucial for identifying what works and what needs adjustment.

Independent Evaluation: Seeking independent evaluation of restorative justice interventions can provide unbiased insights and recommendations. External evaluations can help prisons understand their impact, assess effectiveness, and identify areas for improvement from a fresh perspective.

By focusing on these factors, the challenges of implementing restorative justice can be better managed, leading to a more effective and supportive framework for ‘doing’ restorative justice in prison.

7: 'BEING' RESTORATIVE IN PRISON

‘Being’ restorative is to prioritise healing over punishment, understanding over blame, and community engagement over isolation. This holistic approach seeks to create a just and compassionate community where relationships can be restored and transformed. For a prison to move towards ‘being’ restorative, it requires a comprehensive whole-prison approach that prioritises healing, accountability, and community engagement. This involves several key elements:

The Language You Use: The language used in restorative practices is crucial; it should promote understanding, respect, and inclusivity. Choosing language that reflects empathy and cooperation helps to foster a supportive environment conducive to restoration.

Empowering the Whole Community: A restorative mindset emphasises the empowerment of not only individuals directly involved in a conflict but the entire community. This collective empowerment contributes to a shared sense of responsibility and involvement in the healing process.

Proactive: A restorative approach is inherently proactive, focusing on preventing harm and addressing issues before they escalate. By anticipating potential conflicts and engaging in preventative measures, communities can nurture healthier relationships.

Whole Prison Approach and Not a Bolt-On: Restorative practices should be integrated into the overall culture and operations of the prison rather than treated as an add-on. This holistic integration ensures that restorative values permeate all aspects of prison life and interactions.

Leading by Example at all Levels: Effective restorative practices require leadership commitment at every level — from management, senior leadership teams to frontline custodial staff and non-custodial staff. Leaders must embody restorative principles and set a precedent for others to follow, fostering an environment where these values thrive.

Agency: ‘Being’ restorative emphasises the significance of agency, allowing individuals to take responsibility for their actions and decisions. Empowering participants to make choices about their engagement in the restorative process enhances their sense of ownership and accountability.

Values Led: A restorative approach is grounded in core values such as empathy, respect, and justice. These values guide interactions and decision-making processes, reinforcing the commitment to restorative principles within the community.

A Mindset Shift: Transitioning to a restorative framework requires a fundamental shift in mindset for all participants. This shift involves moving away from punitive reactions towards a focus on healing and understanding.

Relational: Central to ‘being’ restorative is the recognition of the importance of relationships. Building and nurturing healthy relationships among individuals fosters trust, cooperation, and a supportive community atmosphere.

Internally Led: Building a restorative culture is best when it is led from within the community, allowing participants to take an active role in shaping their own restorative journey. This internal leadership promotes a sense of belonging and investment in the outcomes.

HMP Peterborough is over ten years into its restorative justice journey. The initiative began on a small scale, starting with one wing where the restorative process was primarily led by staff. As staff members gained confidence, they extended restorative practices to other areas of the prison. The development of this initiative has been supported by an independent expert in restorative justice, which has bolstered staff training and capacity. To ensure that all staff members are aligned with restorative principles, restorative awareness training has been incorporated into the staff induction process. A designated restorative lead reports directly to the senior management team, facilitating the integration of restorative practices throughout the prison, including overseeing the restorative champions (prisoners trained in restorative approaches to respond to low-level conflict on the wings) and initiatives aimed at supporting prisoners in repairing harm done to their families and building a support network for successful reintegration upon release.

HMP Forest Bank is over four years into its restorative journey and has placed a strong emphasis on staff leadership in the process. While they have only recently introduced restorative champions—primarily comprising longer-term prisoners—the involvement of these champions has enriched the prison’s restorative culture. One unique challenge faced by HMP Forest Bank is that approximately 80% of their population consists of remand prisoners. However, staff have proactively identified strategies to address these challenges and have made progress in fostering a restorative environment. Like HMP Peterborough, HMP Forest Bank has maintained a balance between ‘being’ restorative and ‘doing’ restorative, ensuring that restorative principles are applied in both individual interactions and broader prison practices.

Drawing on findings from our stakeholder knowledge-exchange events, the following three sub-sections explore the benefits, challenges, and ways to minimise those challenges, of ‘being’ restorative justice in prison.

7A: BENEFITS OF 'BEING' RESTORATIVE IN PRISON

Building a restorative culture in prisons can yield a multitude of benefits that enhance the overall environment for both prisoners and staff.

Conflict Resolution: By embracing restorative justice, prisons can potentially reduce small incidents from escalating into larger conflicts. This not only creates a safer environment but also promotes personal growth and responsibility among prisoners.

Improved Relationships: A restorative culture promotes healthier relationships among prisoners, staff, and the broader community. By emphasising communication, empathy, and understanding, it can help reduce tensions, conflicts, and violence within the prison environment.

Enhanced Emotional Well-Being: Restorative practices provide prisoners with an opportunity to express their feelings and experiences, which can foster emotional healing. This can lead to improved mental health outcomes and a more positive prison atmosphere.

Empowerment of Participants: Restorative cultures empower both victims and offenders by involving them in the resolution process. This can enhance the sense of agency among prisoners, making them feel valued and heard, which contributes to their overall dignity.

Community Reintegration: By focusing on repairing harm and building relationships, restorative practices can better prepare prisoners for reintegration into society. Programmes that involve families and community members can help to facilitate support systems that reduce the likelihood of reoffending upon release.

Comprehensive Support Systems: A restorative culture encourages the development of wrap-around support services, addressing the needs of prisoners holistically. This can include mental health resources, substance abuse programmes, and educational opportunities that promote rehabilitation.

Positive Staff Engagement: Staff members trained in restorative practices can experience increased job satisfaction and morale. When staff model and engage in restorative principles, it fosters a collaborative and supportive workplace culture.

Increased Accountability: Restorative cultures require prisoners to take responsibility for their actions. This accountability fosters personal growth and encourages offenders to engage in self-reflection, ultimately leading to behaviour change.

Promoting Safety: By reducing conflict and violence through improved relationships and communication, a restorative culture can lead to a safer environment for both prisoners and staff.

Cultural Shift: Implementing restorative practices can lead to a broader cultural shift within the prison, moving from a punitive focus to one that prioritises rehabilitation, healing, and community involvement.

Building a restorative culture within prisons can transform the correctional environment, promoting healing, improving safety, and fostering a supportive community for both prisoners and staff.

7B: CHALLENGES OF 'BEING' RESTORATIVE IN PRISON

Building a restorative culture within a prison setting presents several significant challenges that can hinder the effectiveness and sustainability of such initiatives.

Prevailing Punitive Discourse: The prevailing punitive discourse within prisons and the criminal justice system more generally can undermine restorative initiatives within a prison environment. When the dominant narrative emphasises punishment over rehabilitation, it can create an environment where restorative practices are viewed as secondary or ineffective, or are subsumed within the more dominant punitive framework of a prison.

Organisational Culture: The existing organisational culture within a prison can pose barriers to the adoption of restorative practices. A culture that prioritises control and discipline over relationship-building may clash with the collaborative and relational nature of restorative justice. In many cases, restorative practices may not be viewed as a central aspect of a prison's mission. This perception can lead to a lack of prioritisation, funding, and support, ultimately undermining the potential impact of restorative initiatives.

A Lack of Buy-in From Staff and Prisoners: Many staff may be accustomed to traditional punitive approaches and may resist shifting to a restorative framework. Similarly, prisoners may be sceptical of the restorative process, particularly if they continue to experience a punitive environment.

A Lack of Resources: Implementing restorative practices often requires significant time and resources for training, preparation, and facilitation. In a prison environment, where staff are frequently overburdened and resources (both in terms of staffing levels and financial investment) are limited, finding the time to invest in restorative initiatives can be challenging.

Compromising Restorative Values: Maintaining fidelity to restorative values such as empathy, accountability, inclusion, and healing can be challenging in a prison setting, where institutional pressures may promote a more transactional approach to justice. This tension can lead to a dilution of restorative principles.

Characteristics of the Prison: Characteristics of a prison, such as security level, prisoner demographics, and the specific types of offences, can greatly influence the feasibility of implementing restorative practices. For instance, high-security facilities may present greater challenges due to institutional rigidity and the nature of the population.

Nature of the Prison Population: The dynamic nature of the prison population, including the frequent turnover of prisoners, can complicate the establishment of stable restorative practices. Prisoners who are only present for short durations may not fully engage in or benefit from restorative processes.

Inability To Develop Sustainable Restorative Practices: Developing sustainable restorative practices over the long term can be difficult. Continuous training, support, and resources are necessary to ensure that restorative initiatives do not fade away after initial implementation efforts.

Poor Record-Keeping and Resistance to Evaluation: A resistance or oversight to the importance of good record-keeping and the need for evaluation means that a prison is unable to demonstrate how it measures and assesses the impact and change of efforts to build a sustainable restorative culture.

External Pressures: Prisons face external pressures that can impact their focus on restorative practices. Media scrutiny, public perceptions of safety, and political agendas can create tension between restorative efforts and the expectation for strict punitive measures.

While the benefits of building a restorative culture in prison settings are significant, various challenges must be navigated. Addressing these obstacles requires commitment, support, and a concerted effort to integrate restorative values into the fabric of prison operations.

7C: MINIMISING CHALLENGES TO MAXIMISE ‘BEING’ RESTORATIVE IN PRISON

To work towards building a restorative culture in a prison setting and minimise associated challenges, institutions can adopt several strategic approaches.

Start Small-Scale: Initiating restorative practices on a small scale allows prisons to test and refine their approach before expanding. By identifying a pilot programme, such as focusing on a single wing or a specific group of prisoners, prisons can gather insights and build momentum while considering broader implementation goals.

Top-Down Support: Top-down support for restorative initiatives from the governor (prison director) and senior leadership team is crucial for building a restorative culture and for achieving buy-in from all staff and prisoners.

Achieving Buy-in: Buy-in from both staff at all levels (both custodial and non-custodial) and prisoners is crucial for the success of restorative practices within a prison. A unique feature of the prison environment is that those participating in restorative approaches in prison must continue to live and work together in the prison community. Buy-in from staff and prisoners is crucial so that restorative practices do not disappear with a change in prison leadership.

The Importance of Training: Continuous training is essential for all staff involved in restorative practices. Initial training should be supplemented with ongoing professional development to reinforce restorative principles and techniques. This ensures that staff remain engaged and knowledgeable about effective restorative practices and the evolving needs of prisoners. All custodial and non-custodial staff should receive restorative justice awareness training during their staff induction.

Having a Dedicated Restorative Lead: Appointing a staff member as a full-time, dedicated restorative lead who reports to the senior management team provides a clear point of accountability and oversight. This individual can champion restorative initiatives, coordinate training, and serve as a liaison between staff, prisoners, and administration, ensuring that restorative practices remain a priority.

Restorative Champions: Establishing restorative champions among the prison population can enhance the implementation of restorative practices. These trained individuals can facilitate restorative approaches with low-level incidents and promote restorative values, helping to create a peer-led support system that fosters a culture of accountability and healing.

Recognition and Reward: Recognising and rewarding successful restorative initiatives can motivate staff and prisoners alike. Celebrating achievements of staff and prisoners, whether small or large, helps to sustain enthusiasm and commitment to restorative practices, reinforcing their importance in the prison culture.

Leverage Available Resources: Prisons can leverage available resources, such as partnerships with community organisations, victim support services, and restorative justice experts, to enhance their programmes. Utilising these resources helps to enrich the restorative experience and provides additional support for both staff and prisoners.

Checks and Balances: Creating checks and balances within the restorative process can help maintain the integrity of restorative practices. Regular assessments, evaluations, and feedback mechanisms can ensure that the processes align with restorative values and allow for adjustments when necessary.

Record-Keeping: Keeping detailed records of restorative practices, including successes and challenges faced, allows prisons to analyse trends, learn from experiences, and continuously improve their approach. Reflection is crucial for identifying what works and what needs adjustment.

Independent Evaluation: Seeking independent evaluation of restorative practices can provide unbiased insights and recommendations. External evaluations can help prisons understand their impact, assess effectiveness, and identify areas for improvement from a fresh perspective.

Engage With External Expertise: Prisons should not hesitate to tap into external expertise, whether from restorative justice practitioners, academic institutions, or community organisations. Utilising experts can provide valuable guidance, resources, and best practices that enhance the effectiveness of restorative initiatives.

By adopting these strategies, prisons can minimise the challenges of ‘being’ restorative and create a sustainable, impactful framework that promotes healing, accountability, and community engagement for both staff and prisoners.

8: RESTORATIVE CULTURE READINESS CHECKLIST

For each statement, rate your organisation:

- 0 = Not in place
- 1 = Partially in place
- 2 = Fully in place

1. Leadership & Vision	
Senior leadership understands what a restorative culture means (beyond restorative practices)	
Leadership models restorative values in their own behaviour	
The organisational vision explicitly references relational values	
Leaders allocate resources (time, funding, staff capacity) to support implementation	
Governance and accountability for embedding restorative culture are clear	
Section Score /10	
2. People & Capacity	
Staff at all levels have had an introduction to restorative principles and values.	
A core group of staff is trained and confident in restorative approaches	
Staff have time and willingness to prioritise restorative conversations	
Wellbeing and support structures (supervision, peer support) are in place	
Staff feel safe to raise concerns and engage in open dialogue	
Section Score /10	
3. Processes & Practice	
Policies (e.g. HR, complaints, safeguarding, behaviour management) align with restorative values and practices	
Clear pathways exist for handling conflict/harm restoratively	
Restorative practices are embedded in day-to-day routines (e.g. meetings, check-ins)	
Systems monitor and evaluate the impact of restorative practice	
Existing procedures are flexible and support restorative work	
Section Score /10	
4. Culture & Environment	
Relationships are valued as much as outcomes	
Communication norms encourage listening, empathy, and accountability	
Diversity, equity, and inclusion are actively safeguarded	
The environment feels safe and respectful for staff, service users, and partners	
Stories of restorative success are recognised and shared	
Section Score /10	
5. Sustainability & Growth	
Long-term plan exists for training, mentoring, and leadership succession	
Resources are allocated for continuous development	
Partnerships with restorative networks or community organisations are in place	
The organisation reflects and adapts as learning emerges	
Commitment extends beyond projects/funding cycles—restorative culture is embedded	
Section Score /10	
Total Readiness Score:	

Interpreting Your Score


0–15 (Low Readiness): Foundations not yet in place. Significant preparation is needed before implementation.

16–30 (Developing Readiness): Some areas are emerging, but key gaps must be addressed to ensure success.


31–40 (Strong Readiness): Well-developed foundations, ready to implement with ongoing support.

41–50 (High Readiness): The organisation is strongly positioned to embed and sustain a restorative culture.

9: FURTHER RESOURCES

 [Doolin, K, 'Restorative youth detention: The way forward?' \(2022\) 22\(3\) Criminology & Criminal Justice 367-382](#)

 [RJC Restorative justice in custodial settings: Information pack](#)

 [RJC State of the Sector report](#)

 [RJC Restorative practice guidance \(July 2025\)](#)

 [RJC Resolution Podcast, Season Two](#)

About us

Serving as the national, independent membership body for the restorative sector, our mission is to promote and advance the use of restorative practice, in all its forms, for the betterment of the public. We believe that restorative practice has the power to enable communities to cultivate a culture that prioritises reconciliation and empowers individuals to build strong, effective and resilient relationships. By embracing a restorative and relational mindset in every aspect of society and our own lives, we create safe environments where those in conflict can engage in meaningful dialogue and begin the journey of repairing the harm caused. It is our goal to see restorative principles deeply integrated in all aspects of our society.

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