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# Reducing deaths in prisons:

LEARNING FROM  
PRISONER LIVED  
EXPERIENCE?

## WEBINAR WRITEUP: 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020

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Economic  
and Social  
Research Council

## SAFESOC

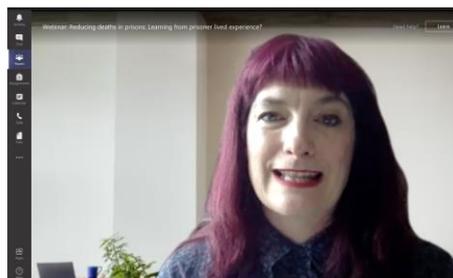
The £1.1m UKRI funded [SAFESOC](#) research project aims to reconceptualise prison regulation for safer societies. This difficult multidisciplinary challenge demands academic innovation. Implementation requires sustained collaboration with local and (trans)national practitioners from different sectors (e.g. public, voluntary), regulators, policymakers, and prisoners. Based at the [University of Nottingham](#), SAFESOC is funded through Dr Philippa Tomczak's prestigious UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship, and sits within the '[Prisons, Health and Societies](#)' Research Group. This study runs from 2020-2027.

## WEBINAR LAUNCH

[SAFESOC](#) launched on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020 through an innovative, cross-sectoral webinar [Reducing Deaths in Prison: learning from lived experience?](#) The webinar was jointly hosted by the University of Nottingham, Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO), Prison Reform Trust and Revolving Doors Agency.

The webinar presented the first set of findings from an impact project led by the University of Nottingham (Dr Philippa Tomczak and Sara Hyde) and the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (Sue McAllister). This partnership seeks to reduce deaths and improve prison safety by linking Ombudsman fatal incident investigations to practice in prisons and healthcare. Philippa and Sue met in January 2019 at a Prison Reform Trust Prisoner Policy Network event. Research has been undertaken with (former) prisoners, Ombudsman staff, prison governors, Safer Custody Group Leads, Coroners and bereaved families. This partnership work was initially funded by a Nottingham Impact Accelerator Knowledge Exchange Prize (£25,000) and University of Nottingham Economic and Social Research Council Impact Accelerator Award (£10,000). Through Philippa's UKRI fellowship, it will be developed into a blueprint to guide prison regulation around the world.

Just shy of 200 attendees represented a variety of backgrounds including: academics, practitioners, civil servants, the voluntary sector and those with lived experience of imprisonment. Sara Hyde chaired.



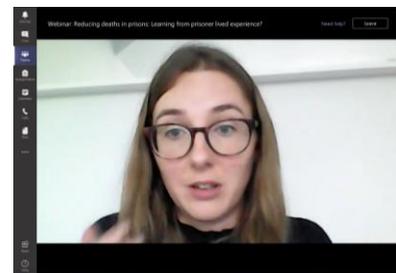
The event began with presentations from Philippa, who contextualised and outlined the project and the Ombudsman Sue McAllister, who outlined the PPO's desire for their work to have greater impact on treatment and conditions in prison.



The majority of the event then focused on two reports which foregrounded lived experiences of distress in prisons. Firstly, the Prison Reform Trust presented: *Who cares? Exploring distress in prison from the perspective of people in prison*, which can be read in full [here](#). Paula Harriott skilfully summarised their findings under eight themes: the physical environment; emptiness; hypervigilance; mental ill health; substance misuse; how prison normalises distress; disrupted sense of self; and means of mitigating distress. She concluded: "*prison creates harm. Prison is a risk factor in itself and should be recognised as such.*"



Revolving Doors Agency then presented: *Suicide in prison review: Former prisoner perspectives*, which can be read in full [here](#).



Alyce Ellen Barber and Lauren Bennett health support was viewed as inadequate; multiple factors had a negative impact on wellbeing; a pre-sentence focus on mental health is required; and that family contact mattered. Their recommendation included the importance of early intervention and *diversion from custody when mental ill health is*

*involved*; further training for prison staff regarding mental health; and recognition of the important roles that people with lived experience could play in supporting those in prison.

Webinar attendees were then invited to discuss and problem solve about what should be done with these important findings. Dr Lucy Wainwright, who authored the Prison Reform Trust report also joined the speakers. There was a lively, wide-ranging 30 minute Q&A with attendees. Discussion themes included: how the findings could be applied beyond prison, to other forms of state detention; the importance of recognising trauma; empathy and compassion informed practice; and how links between stakeholders (e.g. prisoners, prisons, health settings, voluntary sector agencies) could be strengthened. As a result of one of the questions, the PPO



are now piloting a trial where Prisoners' Advice Service and the Prison Reform Trust will be approached during fatal incident investigations to see whether concerns had been raised about the person whose death is being investigated.

In concluding the event, Dr Tomczak highlighted the next steps for the project – working with the PPO to pilot changes to their Fatal Incident Investigation reports, with the aim of safer prisons and fewer preventable deaths.

To find out more or to be kept informed about the progress of this work, please email

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