

## Written evidence submitted by Dr Julie Parsons School of Society & Culture, University of Plymouth

### Introduction

My research focus is the lived experience of people affected by the criminal justice system through a well-established research partnership with LandWorks (LW), a resettlement charity that provides a supported route back into the community and employment for people in prison, recently released from prison or at risk of going to prison (see <https://www.landworks.org.uk/>). Recidivism rates remain high in England and Wales, whereas LW maintains impressively low reoffending rates: consistently below 6% compared to national rates of around 50% (Gray et al 2022 - [https://www.landworks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/DPC22605\\_LandWorks-Brochure-2022\\_web.pdf](https://www.landworks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/DPC22605_LandWorks-Brochure-2022_web.pdf)). LW delivers approx., 40 placements per annum, providing vocational skills training and practical living support, using a holistic person-centred approach; 94% of LW trainees continue into long-term employment against a national figure of 28% (Gray et al 2022).

Since the charity started in 2013, LW have completed over 200 placements and I have been involved in measuring its impact in three ways: (1) through a formal evaluation process (see Gray et al 2022); (2) the development of the Photographic-electronic Narrative (PeN) project (<https://penprojectlandworks.org/>), which I started in 2016; and (3) the Finishing Time (FT) project, which I started in 2018 ([https:// finishingtime-online.lawcrimelibrary.org/](https://finishingtime-online.lawcrimelibrary.org/)). These projects document first-hand the lived experience of some of the (over 200) people who have been on placement or who have graduated from LW, providing a rare and valuable insight into resettlement ([https://issuu.com/fotonowpublishing/docs/pen\\_project\\_issue](https://issuu.com/fotonowpublishing/docs/pen_project_issue)).

The PeN and FT research projects are ongoing, as they feed into the evaluation and are sources of useful data covering a range of themes, not least 'what works' for people struggling to resettle into the community following punishment. To date I have over 120 transcripts from 72 people. These average 8,000 words each, transcribed from in-depth interviews lasting from 40-160 minutes. For the interviews I utilise a narrative inquiry approach, focusing on life histories that prioritise the participant's voice in a dialogical co-creation. The resulting transcripts form the basis for on-going analysis of the role of LW in aiding resettlement, and for academic publications. Both the PeN and FT research projects feature in a documentary film made in 2021 called *Finishing Time & Moving On: Life after punishment*. The film highlights the experiences of three men (John, Jarvis and Quentin) who had a LandWorks placement when released on temporary licence from the local prison, engaged in the PeN and FT projects and then volunteered to share their experiences of resettlement for the film – see here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALEj2qYaxo>.

One of the key messages from the film comes from Quentin, who says unequivocally that:

*“prison was actually the better part, coming home was a harder part because there’s more to deal with, in prison you got nothing to deal with just keep your head down and that’s it, but coming home man, that was tough.”*

This begs the question how or why is leaving prison harder than enduring prison life?

**Context – Prison Life – “being on autopilot and guarded”.**

The answer to this question lies in the context of what surviving in prison entails. Indeed, some of the key issues for prison leavers, aside of possible practical problems, such as money, work, accommodation, family, and medical support, relate to becoming socialised and/ or institutionalised into prison life. Hence, the extent to which prison culture is normalised is problematic when readjusting to civilian life. Notably, it has been well documented how ‘guarded’ people are in prison. Often, this is the first thing people are looking forward to on release, as Frankie’ on a ROTL placement at LW in an interview for the PeN project says:

*“I’m fortunate my time in prison, it’s coming to an end. It’s getting close to the end. A few more bullets to dodge yet... What I’m looking forward to most is to be able to drop my guard and relax. You’re so guarded all the time. To actually be able to relax, even when you go out on ROTL (release on temporary licence), you’re very aware you’re going back, and you need to keep that sort of hyper-vigilance about you. Coming out here is a lot different to being on the main prison and working inside the prison. You never relax. You never drop your guard. That is prison, hyper-vigilant all the time. You’ve got to be aware of what’s going on around you so you don’t get drawn into anything that you can’t handle.”*

Similarly, Quentin on a ROTL placement, comments in a PeN Project interview,

*“I’m just relieved it’s at an end. I couldn’t do another year, put it that way. Not a chance. It’s tougher than I thought. I honestly thought it would be along the same lines as the army. I thought it can’t be that much different. In certain ways the army was harder, certainly from a more physical point of view. Prison is a constant threat of danger, even when you don’t see it, it’s always there. You know that, and you can never drop your guard. So, you’re always on alert, not high alert, but alert, and that’s exhausting. To be able to go home and drop that, it’ll be great. It’s going to be palpable. To sleep in my own bed, heavenly, although I couldn’t get to sleep when I was home (on a ROTL home leave in preparation for release). The bed was too comfortable. I just want to go home and be normal, be myself...”*

In another interview Quentin also mentions some of his survival tactics in prison, he says:

*“Anyone who is in prison is broken, you just don’t know it. So, if you’ve come from a normalish background and you’ve dealt with people at a certain level on the outside and then all of a sudden, you’re thrust into this environment, within a prison where it’s dog eat dog, and it’s so far removed from what you know, you end up a bit ... so you are broken. You can’t have what you want. You can’t get stuff when you want it.*

*You've got to ask. You've got to queue up. You've got to fill an application in. The people with the least amount and who give the least shit about anything, seem to rise to the top in prison because they've got nothing to lose. So, if you've got nothing to lose, it makes you very dangerous. For those of us in prison who just want a peaceful life, and want to go home and back on with their lives, it does break you because you become ... you go onto autopilot, I guess. A lot of the time you're operating and you're doing what you need to do, but you're not fully engaged. That's the way I would describe it..."*

To survive in a prison environment Quentin works on a kind of autopilot and stops himself from becoming fully engaged in prison life. The emotional toll of surviving in these environments is perhaps not fully realised until people try to adjust and adapt to life once released from prison.

### **A LandWorks Placement – Normality, Trust, Confidence, Self-Worth**

The opportunities afforded by being on placement at LandWorks are vital for people preparing for 'normal' life outside, even for those recently released the significance of being able to go somewhere to spend some time readjusting to a more normal environment is important. For example, Tarquin interviewed on placement for the PeN Project says:

*"I've been coming out to LandWorks for a couple of months. I've now been released from prison on a Home Detention Curfew (HDC/Tag)... I've found it really useful to re-humanise myself and gain some skills that I can use when I get out. It's a nice environment to meet people and it's just nice to be here. It's helping in the transition, actually, it's helped quite a lot because it's a bit of a shock when you get out. Just little things, like, you can have a bath, it's just silly little things, using a metal knife and fork and stuff like that. I nearly got run over three times because you forget there's cars on the road... It definitely helps because it can be pretty scary getting out and then just 'bang' into normality. That, I suppose, is the time when people are most likely to re-offend, in those first few weeks because straight back on the piss or something, or straight back into old friends who might be doing drugs, or whatever and straight back out on the rob and then straight back inside. That's basically the cycle, isn't it?"*

Frankie too comments on the contrast between his ROTL placement at LW and prison life, in an interview for the PeN Project he says:

*"Coming out to LandWorks has been a breath of fresh air... I think the first couple of days I came to LandWorks, it was the enthusiasm that hit me. When you're in prison there is no enthusiasm. There's nothing people get enthusiastic about. Why would they? The intention is to make every day the same as the one before, so enthusiasm and almost joy, disappear out through the window. Coming out here and noting the enthusiasm... I think one thing that when you go to prison you have to learn very, very quickly, is how to become streetwise or prison-wise, whatever you want to call it. When you're in prison you have to learn very quickly that somebody, no, everybody has an angle. The contrast of prison where everybody has an angle and you come out to LandWorks where nobody has an angle, and what it actually does is it heightens your awareness as to quite how dire the prison system is..."*

In the *Finishing Time* film, Quentin comments on a LW placement, he says:

*“At least someone out there is trying to do something... I had a lot of anger to deal with... but I worked through it and through coming to LandWorks and just talking to everybody and talking to the other guys that were here, I just learned a bit about myself really and it gave me what I needed... it’s important to have these places because it’s that support, it’s that chance that people are given, it’s that being made to feel worthy, it’s being made to feel wanted”*

This sense of self-worth is significant for those whose sense of self has been decimated, especially if people are to feel able or welcome to re/integrate into the community following punishment. For Jarvis, a reformed career criminal, who is also featured in the film, LandWorks gave him the opportunity to mix with people outside of the criminal justice system and as he comments people “with his background”. Through LandWorks and his engagement with the PeN project he was able to express another side of himself that he had not been able to before. The role of LandWorks is to give people on placement time and space to grow, as Jarvis notes:

*“over a long period of time LandWorks help you to grow and find confidence in lots of different areas... for years because it takes years to change, I don’t care what anybody says... you know I’ve got a lot of self-worth now, I feel quite proud of myself, I’ve never really been proud before”.*

This is a remarkable turnaround for someone who had been a ‘career criminal’. In John’s case in the film, he notes how important it was to be trusted, he says:

*“people trusting me with tools again, in prison you’re not trusted with anything, everything’s checked in on shadow boards and that, and it’s all very degrading to be honest, so when I came out here to be trusted with tools in my hand again and left to my own devices to get on with something , it was a real form of normality again, it was nice, like the fact that LandWorks didn’t judge me for what I’d done and they were trying to help me back into society to lead my life again... I think it made me a better version of myself... I think my 12 months at LandWorks before I left prison, it was good for my self-worth, my inner being, it made me realise I wasn’t this bad person that I guess prison made me feel that I was... by talking to the people that worked at LandWorks as well, just getting it off my chest, talking to people that I felt I could trust, it made me realise that I wasn’t this worthless person, I didn’t need to second guess myself, I’d made a huge mistake in my life, but life still goes on... at some point you need to put that to bed and move on and I’ve got that from LandWorks...”*

Again, John is highlighting the significance of being and doing normal things, including being trusted to work and do things for others. Finally, in one last quote from someone on placement at LW following his release from prison, Max says in an interview for the PeN Project:

*“LandWorks helps in a big way, God, in many ways. It shows people they’ve actually got it in them to work. You can lose your confidence in prison. You don’t think you could work again. It gets into your head that bad and then you come out and it’s like a job. It shows people they can work again. Also, you’ve got people there as back-up,*

*a bit of help. You're not on your own. Even a big strong male like me, I wouldn't normally be accepted on anything like this. It's done in a way where you feel like you're earning it, which is important. It's hard to take help, especially as a male [...] People like to value themselves, don't they? Also, it's good to add value to yourself, whichever way you want it. It gives you a bit of value and self-worth. You come out of prison, and you've got none. You think you're unemployable. You're spoken to like shit in prison. You're given a number. You have your name taken off you. That's not good for the psyche, is it? When you're here it's ... sanctuary is one word I suppose because you're just out the way of all the crap. It's what it is really. It gives you a chance to breathe..."*

The LW stats in terms of employment and reoffending rates as noted earlier are impressive. A placement for prison leavers builds confidence and self-worth, in Max's case he highlights the extent to which even a relatively short prison sentence (which his was), can knock your confidence. He underlines the need for practical opportunities to practice working and doing 'good' in the community or just being amongst 'normal', ordinary people to practice being yourself again.

### **The role of Generative Justice in successful resettlement**

A LandWorks placement draws attention to the significance of social and community relations for people leaving prison, where 'normal' social relations are curtailed. There has been a recent growth of interest in alternatives to traditional approaches to criminal justice practices that emphasise neo-liberal discourses of responsible individualism. Alternatives, such as the one under discussion by the Generative Justice (GJ) Network, a group of national and international colleagues, scholars, practitioners, and people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. Initially developed by Fergus McNeill, Mary Corcoran and Beth Weaver, a GJ perspective provides an alternative to 'criminal justice' with its problematic binary logic (e.g. criminal/victim), by reconceptualising crime as a relational problem. Generative Justice refers to social processes and community practices involving justice-affected people – such as exchanges and shared goals that allow value to be coproduced and circulated – that are generative of positive relationships and mutual support for the common good (McNeill 2022). Ongoing network discussions suggest that a GJ approach may align closely with the LW ethos and its focus on developing trusting generative relationships to sustain identity change and social reintegration. Moreover, both GJ and LW promote the value of and seek methods to enhance mutual recognition and communication of worth, material exchange, social connection, reciprocal concern, collective effort and change beyond the individual. Resettlement into the community following punishment is not just an individual but a social process.

### **References:**

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**May 2023**