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Setting out a methodological framework for undertaking effective reviews of national prison library services: Design of an inclusive methodology for the Irish Prison Library Review

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ABSTRACT

Prison library services in Ireland are inconsistent nationally and provision varies across sites, with a limited number of professional library staff working in the prison sector located primarily within only one geographic area. The Local Government Management Agency (LGMA, Ireland) commissioned a review of prison library services in Ireland to examine how library services should operate. A challenge within prison librarianship involves closing the gap between international standards and policies, and the state of provision on the ground. By providing a detailed description of the review methodology, other researchers, policy makers, and practitioners can learn from the experiences and approach taken by this research team. This process of knowledge exchange is intended to assist anyone undertaking a review of library services and will also be of interest to those working in the field of prison librarianship. The review methodology sits within a broader context of change management and critical librarianship.

1. Introduction

All departments within a prison, including the library, have a responsibility to work together to create an environment which helps people to cope with their sentence and prepares them for a return to society. Access to the space, resources, and activities offered by the library can support the educational, informational, cultural, and recreational needs of people in custody (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). Not only do prison libraries support people in custody, but they also help maintain positive family connections through provision of family reading programs and collaboration with local community library programs (Finlay et al., 2024; Garner & Krolak, 2023). The potential of an effective prison library system can be seen across a range of areas of impact: wellbeing and mental health; identify transformation and personal development; social capital and social bonds; hope and motivation; and knowledge, skills and understanding (Finlay & Bates, 2018).

2. Problem statement

A challenge within prison librarianship involves closing the gap between international standards and policies, and the state of provision on the ground. A lack of professional library staff and underdeveloped relationships between prison and public libraries are typical of the current state of prison libraries internationally (Hussain et al., 2022). Yet strong collaboration between prison and public libraries is widely regarded as a best practice model. This approach raises professional standards of prison library provision and provides a more unified, consistent provision across prison sites nationally (Costanzo & Montecchi, 2011; Finlay et al., 2024; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020).

Given these challenges, and the prison library landscape in Ireland, the call for a national review of prison library services was a critical juncture. The Irish public library strategy in place at the time of the Review (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2018) emphasized inclusion and equality as key library values and aimed to “secure equitable access for all by removing barriers, streamlining the process for joining and improving access to services for all communities” (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2018, p.17).¹

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¹ While this strategy does not specifically reference prisons and people in custody, equitable access should also include those in custody and their families.

IFLA's recently revised international *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners* states: "An incarcerated person has the right to learn and to access information, and the prison library should offer materials and services comparable to public and community libraries to support this right" (Garner & Krolak, 2023, p. 6). A reinvigorated, enhanced, and equitable prison library service in Ireland would therefore help to meet the strategic aims of the Irish Prison Service (IPS) (Irish Prison Service, 2019) and fulfill the duties of the wider public library service, while ultimately supporting the needs of some of the most marginalized members of society.

A Prison Library Review for Ireland was commissioned by the Local Government Management Agency² (LGMA) and undertaken in 2021. The LGMA sought to appoint an external Service Provider to undertake a review of existing prison library services in Ireland and provide recommendations for service development.

Specifically, the aim of the Review was to "undertake a review of existing prison library services to assess current service provision and make recommendations for a potential new model" (Finlay et al., 2022, p.8).

The objectives were to:

- Identify the library services currently being provided;
- Determine whether current library provision and access meets the needs of people in custody;
- Determine circumstances of best practice with regard to provision of prison library services and involvement of people in custody;
- Identify the characteristics of a model prison library service with consideration of variations to meet different prison needs; and
- Provide recommended next steps to develop the quality of library services in prisons.

Throughout this study, those incarcerated within the prison system were referred to using person-centered language such as persons in custody, rather than as prisoners, aligning with what Cox (2020) calls "a shifting global language of imprisonment" (p. 4). The term "person in custody" also aligns with language used within the IPS (for example, Irish Prison Service, 2023).

3. Literature review

3.1. Theoretical framing

The Review sits within a broader context of change management. Fullan's (2021) advocacy of the need for a "whole systems" approach in relation to enabling an effective change process is evident throughout the Review. The four drivers of change Fullan (2021) identified in his extensive work relating to change management in educational settings (wellbeing and learning, social intelligence, equality investments, and systemness) have underpinned the Review methodology and resulting outcomes.

The Review was strongly influenced by the critical librarianship turn within library and information science (Drabinski, 2019; Samek, 2007). However, the interface between the change process and critical librarianship is not without its challenges. Considerable care needs to be taken to ensure an inclusive design that gives a voice to both the change leaders and those that are most impacted by the service provision. This tension between change management and critical librarianship has been recognized by Leebaw (2020) and is resolved, in so far as possible, through the application of "critical management studies" and "critical performativity": "Critical performativity ...proposes that critically-minded scholars and practitioners surface alternatives to mainstream

management that can serve as models of progressive approaches" (p. 12) and "Critical librarian-scholars can influence mainstream management practices by focusing on urgent issues of public importance" (p. 16).

3.2. Positionality and critical librarianship

It seems appropriate to make clear the positionality of the research team and how disciplinary backgrounds and research expertise informed the approach taken to this Review. All three members of the Review team work within the field of library and information science and their work is underpinned by both library and information science and educational theories within the social sciences. Bates has additional expertise of engaging with stakeholders at all levels to enable change (for example: Bates & O'Connor-Bones, 2021; O'Connor Bones et al., 2020). Finlay has carried out extensive research in the field of prison librarianship (for example: Finlay, 2020; Finlay, 2022; Finlay & Bates, 2018; Finlay & Bates, 2021), and Hanlon has extensive previous professional experience of teaching in prison settings. The shared world-view of library provision held by this team is shaped by critical librarianship, a movement which seeks to bring social justice principles into library practice and where "considerations for the human condition and for human rights takes precedence over other professional concerns" (Samek, 2007, p. xxiii). This view becomes particularly complex in a prison environment, where professional concerns of security and control often take precedence over a person's right to access the information and the educational services that a library provides. Critical librarianship challenges the library worker to recognize existing structures of power in their workplace or surrounding community, to question who is being excluded or silenced, and to consider ways in which they might act to redress structural inequalities (Barr-Walker & Sharifi, 2019; Drabinski, 2019).

3.3. The purpose of the prison library

One of the main goals of the IPS is to provide those in custody "with opportunities to engage in a meaningful way to reduce the likelihood of re-offending and assist their reintegration into law-abiding society" (Irish Prison Service, 2024). Writing about the role of education in prison, Behan (2014) warns against aligning the goals of education with those of the prison, stating that "prison education must define its own objectives based on educational principles" (p. 28). In the same way, prison libraries should build their objectives based on principles and ethics within the library profession. It is widely accepted within prison library literature that library services should be based on a public library model (Garner & Krolak, 2023; Vogel, 2009). The mission of libraries in the community includes providing access to information, literacy, education, inclusivity, civic participation, and culture (IFLA & UNESCO, 2022). The goal of the library in the prison should therefore be to provide continued access to these human rights, rather than having the ultimate goal of rehabilitation and reducing reoffending (De Agostini, 2022). In addition, Finlay and Bates (2018) have also noted that the potential outcomes of engaging with prison library services (such as supporting wellbeing, providing opportunities for hope and motivation, and the development of knowledge and skills) may contribute to the likelihood of an individual's desistance from crime.

3.4. Prison libraries and public libraries in Ireland

There are twelve prisons in Ireland (see Table 1), which fall within seven local authorities (five are within Dublin City Council, and the remaining seven are in the following six counties: Cavan, Cork, Laois (two prisons), Limerick, Roscommon, and Wicklow). The prisons in Ireland comprise one high-security prison, nine medium-security prisons (seven of these house men only, one houses women only, and one houses predominantly men with a small number of women in a separate part of the prison), and two low-security prisons for men. Official capacity

² The LGMA is a state agency of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, primarily funded by local authorities in Ireland (<https://www.lgma.ie/en/about-us/>).

Table 1

Prisons in Ireland (with information^a from <https://www.irishprisons.ie/prisons/>).

Prison	Description	Capacity	Local authority
Arbour Hill	Closed, medium security prison for adult men	137	Dublin City Council
Castlerea Prison	Closed, medium security prison for adult men	340	Roscommon County Council
Cork Prison	Closed, medium security prison for adult men	296	Cork City Council
Limerick Prison	Closed, medium security prison for adult men and women	210 men 28 women	Limerick City and County Council
Loughan House	Open, low security prison for adult men	140	Cavan County Council
Mountjoy Prison	Closed, medium security prison for adult men	755	Dublin City Council
Dóchas Centre (Mountjoy Female Prison)	Closed, medium security prison for adult women	146	Dublin City Council
Portlaoise Prison	Closed, high security prison for adult men	291	Laois County Council
Midlands Prison	Closed, medium security prison for adult men	875	Laois County Council
Shelton Abbey	Open, low security prison for men	115	Wicklow County Council
Cloverhill Prison	Closed, medium security prison for adult men	431	Dublin City Council
Wheatfield Prison	Closed, medium security prison for adult men	610	Dublin City Council

^a Last checked 22 April 2024.

across the twelve sites varies from 115 to 875. Each prison is managed by a Prison Governor, and the prisons are part of the IPS, which operates as an Office of the Irish Department of Justice.

The legislative basis for libraries and education in prisons is Statutory Instrument Number 252 of the *Prison Rules 2007* (Irish Government Publications, 2007), which states that a library must be provided within each prison. While each prison has a library on site, the standard of services and level of access varies considerably. In recent years, there has been some shift towards prison libraries being staffed by library staff from the local public library system, however, at the time of the Review, there were only three professional library staff whose core responsibility was providing prison library services, and they were all based within Dublin. These individuals were not positioned full-time within the prison library setting but rather visited the prison library sites for the delivery of library services. Provision of prison library services was also heavily impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in restricted access to the prison library space and prevented access by professional library staff (within the prison sites in Dublin city).

The budget for prison library services is managed within the IPS Care and Rehabilitation Directorate, who oversee the provision of arts, education, and library services across the prison estate. This Directorate funds the salaries of professional library staff (where these are in place), and pays for prison library resources, materials and any subscription costs.

The network of public libraries in Ireland are managed by local authorities, with 330 library branches across 30 local authorities.

4. Methodology

4.1. Overview

The comprehensive and inclusive methodology began with a review of international research and guidelines for prison library provision. Following this, data collection involved interviews with global experts on prison library provision; interviews with members of the Review Steering Group; focus groups and interviews with public library leaders and prison librarians, prison staff (including teachers and prison

governors), and members of the prison community. An audit of the library provision in all prison sites in Ireland was also undertaken. As the findings emerged from the data analysis, two workshops were held with key stakeholders to ensure there was an understanding of the evidence base which would underpin the Principles and Recommendations from the Review, and to build in an element of co-design in establishing the key priorities.

The Review was underpinned by principles of academic rigour, ethics, openness, transparency, inclusion, social justice, and independence of the Review team to ensure robust evidence-based recommendations. Issues of inclusion, partnership, challenges, opportunities, and the potential for prison libraries to make a difference in the lives of the prison population were at the fore throughout the Review and examples of global good practice were identified and shared to build confidence and trust in the Review outcomes.

During the Review process, there was ongoing communication with Steering Group members and other relevant stakeholders to ensure buy-in across stakeholder groups, and the development of realistic and achievable recommendations. The Steering Group was established by the commissioning body, the LGMA, prior to the commencement of the Review and comprised one LGMA representative, two IPS staff, and two County Librarians. On reflection, the researchers should have requested this Steering Group be expanded to include representation from those with lived experience of being in custody to help shape the Review from the outset.

The Review team met with the Steering Group at intervals during the Review to enable information gathering and to discuss potential access to prison sites, staff, and members of the prison population. The methodology of the Review was shared with the Steering Group, but the Review team had independence to select and apply the methodology they deemed to be appropriate to the Review.

A diagram showing the linear trajectory of the stages of the Review is presented in Fig. 1 below.

4.2. Learning from global best practice

It was important to commence the Review by examining policy, good practice, and challenges faced in the provision of prison libraries internationally. This was achieved through a review of relevant literature and policy and through interviews with individuals who play a significant role in the provision of prison library services outside of Ireland. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with six global experts working in the field of prison librarianship. These participants had a mix of experiences, including prison library management, development of international prison library guidelines, and the review and implementation of national prison library provision. Interviews explored their role in prison library provision and management, their perceived role of prison libraries, best practice, collaboration (both within the prison and outside the prison), lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, evaluation of services and challenges, and hopes for future prison library policy and practice. This initial phase established an international baseline of good practice. Findings were key in showcasing examples of best practice to key decision-makers in the Irish prison context and demonstrating the potential outcomes of engagement with prison library services. Findings from this first phase of the research study have been published in Finlay et al. (2024).

4.3. Establishing the local context

4.3.1. Interviews with steering group members and prison library staff

Following an examination of the global context, semi-structured interviews were then undertaken with each member of the Review Steering Group. This provided the Review team with a deeper understanding of the context which had led to commissioning the Review and what the different stakeholders on the Steering Group, and the organizations they represented, hoped it would achieve. Individual interviews

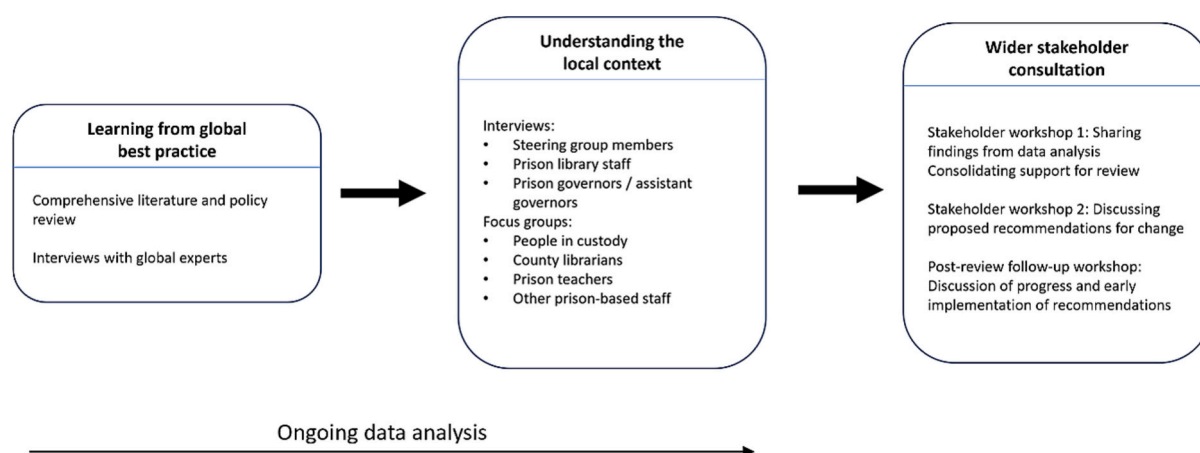


Fig. 1. Stages of data collection.

were also held with two library staff members working in the Dublin prison library service to get an understanding of how library services were currently provided in the prison sites across Dublin County Council.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions and geographic constraints, these initial interviews were all conducted online using the preferred platform of each interviewee. With the consent of interviewees, the interviews were recorded to facilitate data transcription and analysis.

4.3.2. Mini-focus groups with staff members

To learn more about current prison library provision in Ireland, the perceived needs of people in prison, and ideas for future service development, mini-focus groups with key staff members were undertaken. In Ireland, the system of public library provision is organized and managed on a county basis at local authority level with each local authority having a county librarian responsible for the provision, delivery, and development of public library services in that county.³ It was considered important to therefore include all those county librarians in counties that had at least one prison located within the county, given that the Review was considering the potential role of the public library system in the provision of prison library services. In addition to involving county librarians, the Review team also recognized the value of involving those engaged in educational roles within prisons, as the prison library can support both formal and informal learning. IPS staff on the Steering Group helped to disseminate information about project participation to Head Teachers across all prison sites in Ireland.

In total, this phase involved two mini-focus groups with the seven county librarians working in counties that have at least one prison site; two mini-focus groups with seven head teachers across prison sites; and one mixed mini-focus group with other relevant stakeholders: a prison chaplain (this was regarded as useful as it had become apparent through conversations with members of the Steering Group that in at least one prison site the chaplain had played a key role in ensuring book stock reached those in prison during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic), an Open University⁴ staff member whose professional role included widening access to Open University courses and programs (given that people in custody who study at a foundation level, degree level, or higher within prisons in Ireland often do so through the Open University as this enables distance learning), and an Irish Prison Reform Trust⁵ staff member (which is a nongovernmental organization campaigning for rights in the Irish penal system and reform of penal policy).

All potential participants were contacted by a member of the Review

team and provided with an Information Letter so they had knowledge of the Review, what their participation would involve, and any ethical considerations, thus enabling them to make an informed decision as to whether they wished to participate. All participation was on a voluntary basis, and there was no remuneration or similar for participation as engagement with the Review was regarded as professionally relevant to their work roles. The mini-focus group methodology is a qualitative method of data collection which brings together a smaller group of individuals (typically 3–5) in contrast to traditional focus groups which normally comprise of 6–10 individuals (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The mini-focus group approach allows for greater elaboration and discussion than might be afforded in a larger group and is particularly suited to conversations with professionals where there is research value in providing an opportunity for them to share their experiences and interact with each other to stimulate deeper conversation (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998).

4.3.3. Focus groups with persons in custody

Any changes in policy or practice should be informed by those directly impacted by these changes. It was therefore a priority for the Review team to hear directly from people in custody about their experiences of engaging with library services and improvements they would like to see for service delivery. Inclusion of these voices offer decision-makers an “expanded set of perspectives for generating newer practice-based knowledge that is more closely aligned with user experiences” (Doyle et al., 2021, p. 84). This is particularly important for marginalized populations (Arnstein, 1969; De’Ath et al., 2018). Inclusion of lived experience in the policy process also helps to combine local knowledge with that of professional experts (Blomkamp, 2018). In this Review, it was important to consider the lived experience of prison library users, and potential users, alongside the professional experience of librarians, teachers, and other prison-based staff to identify challenges and realistic solutions for improved future delivery of library services.

As much of the Review was undertaken during a period where access to prison sites was limited due to Covid-19 restrictions, the feasibility of online engagement with persons in custody was discussed with key staff in the IPS. This led to online focus groups with individuals at two prison sites, and towards the end of the Review process as Covid-19 restrictions were lifting, it was possible to undertake a physical site visit and complete an in-person focus group. Therefore, a total of three focus groups were carried out with people in custody (a medium security prison for adult males, an open prison for adult males, and a women’s prison). Given that persons in custody are regarded a hard-to-reach group in terms of research, the Review team liaised with the IPS, and it was the IPS who identified potential individuals to participate in the Review in each of the three prison sites. Despite being recruited by the IPS, it was made clear to participants that participation was completely voluntary

³ <https://www.localgov.ie/services/libraries>

⁴ <https://university.open.ac.uk/ireland/>

⁵ <https://www.iprt.ie/>

and that there would be no consequence of nonparticipation or attendance at the focus group. There was a small token gift of an art pack for those persons in custody that gave their time to participate in a focus group. Mambro et al. (2024) stress that incarcerated individuals who participate in research should be reimbursed for this (to whatever extent is permissible within the prison system in which they are located).

Had there been the opportunity for more on-site visits, it would have been beneficial to spend time in the library space to observe service delivery and user engagement and to build trust with library users prior to focus groups. During the one on-site visit, the researchers were able to visit the library space, and a library assistant (person in custody) offered a tour of the library. To build trust with focus group participants (both in-person and online), the researchers spent time at the beginning of each focus group discussing the research, allowing time for questions and ensuring participants were fully informed about its purpose and their role within it. Lafferty (2022) reflects on the experience of “on-the-spot rapport building” (p. 1222) with people in prison. In line with their suggestions, the researchers introduced themselves by their first names and asked the names of participants before starting the focus group and ultimately, we treated everyone “as human beings worthy of respect and dignity” (Lafferty, 2022, p. 1228). In explaining our role, and our own professional experience of library practice and research, participants understood that the researchers were not employed by the IPS or the wider criminal justice system. This helped to counter suspicions about the project, and why the researchers wanted to hear about their experiences and ideas for improvement of library services.

4.3.4. Audit of library provision in Irish prisons

It was important to establish the extent of library provision across the prison network in Ireland. This was achieved through an online questionnaire (using the Jisc survey platform) completed by an individual responsible for library provision at each prison site. The quality of data obtained varied across sites, which was due to impacts on and disruption of library provision resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and also depending on whether the survey was completed by a professional librarian or prison officer. Nonetheless, this provided the Review team with a useful indication of the level of current provision nationally and the variance in provision and approaches to provision across sites.

4.3.5. Interviews with prison governors

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with Prison Governors for three prison sites to obtain their perspective on priorities for prison library provision and how the prison library aligns strategically within the prison structure. Prison library research has shown the significance of having buy-in from senior prison staff members, including prison governors, if the library is to be well-supported and prioritized within the prison regime (Finlay, 2022). These senior staff members were included in the Review to hear their perspectives of library delivery and to gain feedback for the findings as a way of showcasing the benefits of investing in prison library services.

4.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using a template analysis approach (King & Horrocks, 2010). Template analysis is a technique for thematic analysis that has been developed by King and others for use primarily in the analysis of qualitative interviews and focus groups. The interviews and focus groups in this study were transcribed and analysed into three documents, one for each of the following groups: global experts, steering group members, and stakeholders (including persons in custody, library staff, and prison staff). With template analysis, tentative a priori themes are identified at the outset based on knowledge of the subject area, and the initial template was developed on the basis of these a priori themes and through analysis of a sub-set of the data. Using this technique, analysis progresses “through an iterative process of applying, modifying and re-applying the initial template” (King, 2012, p. 430). Following

this, the findings were collated and synthesized across the three data sets. The themes which emerged were discussed in the final report (Finlay et al., 2022) and heavily shaped both the Principles and Recommendations of the Review, aligning closely with the headings outlined in the ten Principles in Fig. 2.

4.5. Stakeholder workshops and individual meetings

Towards the end of the data collection period, two workshops were conducted with key stakeholders, many of whom had already participated in the Review, to obtain feedback on the Principles and Recommendations that were emerging from the Review. Stakeholders included members of the Steering Group, county librarians, prison educators, senior prison staff, and others. The first workshop enabled agreement on the overarching Principles, which were intended to frame the provision of prison library services in Ireland going forward, and the second enabled discussion of the more specific Recommendations that were emerging from the Review. These two workshops were critical in consolidating support for the Review and its outcomes from stakeholders. They also offered a critical opportunity to showcase best practice in prison library provision, and the potential outcomes of engaging persons in custody with wider library services, helping to “alter perceptions of those who viewed the prison library as no more than a book-lending service” (Finlay et al., 2024, p.2). It was important that there was consensus around the overarching Principles as it was intended that these would then shape the Recommendations that followed.

The workshops were succeeded by a series of smaller, focused meetings that enabled discussion of how recommendations might be implemented following the Review. Meetings were undertaken with key representatives from the LGMA, IPS, Department of Rural and Community Development, and Directors of Services from selected County Councils.

One outworking of these meetings was the development of an interim set of steps that could help to improve library access for people in custody in the short-term while waiting for the securement of additional professional library staff. These steps included supervised visits to the library space by prison officers, and the collection of feedback from users in each library to build a more user-centered collection of resources.

5. Discussion

5.1. Undertaking an effective review

For a Review to be effective, both in terms of capturing the perspectives of the fullest range of stakeholders, and for any recommendations to be accepted, supported, and implemented, it needs to be participatory (see Macaulay, 2017) and engage with those most directly impacted from the outset.

The balance between independence as a Review team, which is important for the rigour and robustness of the process and outcomes, and co-design and participatory engagement which is necessary to ensure there is buy-in and support for both the process and the outcomes, can be difficult to achieve and it is important to have an awareness and understanding of this potential challenge from the start of the process so that it can be successfully navigated.

Research rigour is strengthened when there is data triangulation which enables the convergence of research evidence obtained through multiple data sources and methods and collaborative consultation which is an iterative and interactive process enabling relevant stakeholders to engage in key stages of the research process and contribute to the resulting solutions.

It is also necessary to ensure that research ethics standards and requirements are upheld, and that this may require approval from not just the researchers’ institution, but also the institution which is the focus of

a review. These will include the principle of informed voluntary consent and anonymity for participants and data protection, storage and retention policies. In the Review being discussed and reported here, institutional approval was granted by both Ulster University and the IPS, and in addition to this, the research team members underwent individual vetting and clearance by the IPS.

The researchers agree with De Agostini's (2022) assertion that "the purpose of the prison library is to ensure that the basic minimum human rights of incarcerated individuals are met" (p. 21). Maintaining this position while aiming to persuade those in decision-making positions within the prison service to implement recommendations for change was a challenge anticipated by the reviewers. Much has been written about the complexities of conducting research in prisons, including the importance of building trust with those in positions of administration and leadership. Wurcel et al. (2022) point out that prisons are "complex systems of relationships and hierarchy" (p. 6), and it is unlikely that prison staff will have the same priorities as researchers. The Review team was cognizant of tensions that can arise when working with stakeholders with differing priorities, and the importance of building trust and rapport with prison-based staff. It was important to also be realistic about expectations of change and to ensure a good understanding of the challenges faced by prison staff working in a difficult environment. Including representative stakeholders at each stage of the Review helped mitigate a potential lack of 'buy-in'. Potential tensions were also lessened by conducting a review within a prison service that seeks to be progressive. The IPS Strategic Plan in place at the time of the Review notes the aim of ensuring a prison estate that "upholds the dignity of all users and that reflects and supports a modern and progressive penal policy" (Irish Prison Service, 2019, p. 2), and the fact that this Review had been commissioned showed a desire to improve access to library services across the prison system. The Recommendations which emerged from the Review, and the Principles of Library Provision outlined below (Fig. 2), take into account the many challenges of providing library services in a restrictive environment while also prioritising the right of individuals to access an efficient library service.

5.2. Principles for prison library provision in Ireland and Review recommendations

A set of overarching Principles was developed towards the end of the Review process following the rigorous analysis of data and through the workshop process outlined above. It is intended by the Review team that these should be used to guide, inform, and frame provision going forward. There are ten Principles which are set out in Fig. 2 below. The draft version of these Principles that emerged from the Review research process were considered and co-developed by those who attended the first stakeholder workshop, including Steering Group members, research participants, and those in areas of leadership both within the public library service and the prison service. It was important that an agreed vision on the future of prison library services in Ireland between those responsible for funding, planning, and delivering these services was reached. The Principles were then revised and reworded following in-depth discussions and feedback at this stakeholder workshop. The final set of Principles also helped to inform the more specific Recommendations proposed by the Review team. A fuller exploration of these Principles has been published in Finlay et al., 2024. While primarily intended for stakeholders in the Irish context, these Principles are relevant to those working in other global contexts who are responsible for making decisions and drafting prison policy and strategies.

In addition to these Principles, the Review final report (Finlay et al., 2022) also sets out a series of Recommendations. These are organized within eight areas: Policies; Universal access; Partnership and collaboration; Staff, Training and networking; Range and scope of provision; the Library as a support while in prison; the Library as a stepping-stone to re-entering society; and Review, evaluation and user feedback.

PRINCIPLES FOR PRISON LIBRARY PROVISION IN IRELAND

- 1. Policy-driven:** Prison library services are underpinned and guided by a national policy of prison library provision.
- 2. Universal access:** All persons in custody have the right to access library services and, where possible, the library space while in prison.
- 3. User-centred:** Library services are user-centred, designed around the needs of specific populations at individual prison sites.
- 4. Professionalism:** Prison libraries are managed by professional library staff, supported by prison staff and volunteers from within the prison population.
- 5. Partnership:** Prison library services are provided in partnership with public libraries, and work with other prison departments and external organisations.
- 6. Range and scope of provision:** In addition to borrowing services, a broad range and format of stock, programmes and activities are available.
- 7. Community:** Prison library provision reflects, as much as possible, what is offered to communities by local public libraries, including access to digital resources.
- 8. The Library as support while in prison:** Libraries support health and wellbeing, information access, reading, self-development, learning, and social engagement in library programmes and activities.
- 9. The Library as a stepping-stone to re-entering society:** Libraries provide support in preparing people in custody for release and life in the community.
- 10. Review and evaluation:** Prison library services are reviewed on a regular basis to monitor and evaluate the implementation of strategic priorities, the provision of library services and how they support user needs, to ensure effective delivery both locally and nationally.

Fig. 2. Principles for prison library provision in Ireland.

5.3. Developments and impact of the Review to date

Following the Review, additional funding was secured by the Review team from Ulster University for three additional activities to strengthen the impact of this work.⁶ The first was an online symposium open to anyone working in or with an interest in correctional library services and was attended by global participants. This was an opportunity to share some of the learnings from the Review and to bring together speakers and attendees with wide-ranging experiences of prison library provision and research. In the second strand of activity, the Review team led a workshop for prison library staff in Ireland and the UK. The need for this workshop was informed both by the Review and by Finlay's (2020) earlier research showing the professional isolation and professional development needs of prison library staff. Finally, a follow-up workshop was held with Review stakeholders to help facilitate timely implementation of Recommendations from the Review. The focus of the workshop was specifically on exploring the development of Service Level Agreements between prison sites and local public libraries authorities to define the goals of the partnership, the responsibilities of each party, and how the partnership should be monitored and evaluated. These events have helped to build and maintain momentum around the development of prison library services in Ireland and to show the ongoing commitment of the Review team to support the change process. Subsequent correspondence with the LGMA has indicated that a number of Service Level Agreements are either in place, or in development nationally, as the prison service moves to a new model of provision of library services based on collaboration with public libraries.

Another positive outcome of this Review has been the explicit reference to library services for people in custody in the new Irish Public Library strategy (Government of Ireland, 2023). This strategy includes a commitment to working "with the Department of Justice, the IPS and prison governors to ensure that every relevant local authority will have a

⁶ <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/education/our-research/current-research-projects/review-of-prison-libraries-in-ireland>

working Service Level Agreement with their local prisons and have commenced delivery of agreed services during 2023” (Government of Ireland, 2023, p. 27). This follows Recommendation 1.8 from the Review: “Support for prison libraries should be considered for inclusion in the next national public library strategy for Ireland to ensure written commitment of public library support to people in custody” (Finlay et al., 2022, p.17).

5.4. Limitations

It was a challenge undertaking a fundamental national review of prison library provision during a global pandemic, and this restricted the level of face-to-face engagement and physical site visits that were possible. Nevertheless, extensive online interaction and engagement enabled the research team to carry out the Review effectively in the circumstances.

While the Review process engaged a wide range of key stakeholders in the context of the provision of prison library services, time did not allow for direct engagement with prison officers, who are often the ones with responsibility on the ground for providing access to a prison library. Future research should address this as their understanding of the prison library can have a direct bearing on the perceived value of the prison library and the extent to which it is accessed and used. The involvement of prison governors was invaluable in providing an understanding of how the prison library was viewed within the prison.

A final limitation relates to the fact that this was a commissioned Review and therefore the nature of this work means that once the final report is provided to the commissioning body, it is not the responsibility of the Review team to directly engage any further with the participants. It can be difficult to stand back at this point having invested heavily in the review work and to let those who do have the responsibility for providing prison libraries take forward the recommendations as they wish. This also meant there was not the opportunity for providing feedback to members of the prison community who had participated, beyond the focus groups and meetings that were part of the Review. However, ongoing opportunities to disseminate the learning from the Review do present themselves, and it is important that these are taken. The researchers would encourage any organization seeking to commission a similar review in the future to formally include a follow up to revisit the implementation of the resulting recommendations for the Steering Group and Review team.

6. Conclusion

This Review has established a roadmap for a process of change management that is intended to provide a progressive, inclusive library service within the prison system in Ireland that reflects and is supported by the model of public library provision in the country. It is intended that by detailing the Review process others can learn from the collaborative approach taken to reviewing library services and making recommendations for change. The main points which have been crucial in this fundamental review concern:

- Involving stakeholders at all levels from the outset of the review and throughout the process to consolidate support for both the research approach and the final recommendations for change. It is important to consider creative ways to bring together individuals and organizations who do not often engage with each other as these dialogues can open up pathways for future discussions and understanding of each other’s roles and work environments, which will help with the implementation of review recommendations and next steps.
- Collecting data on global best practice both to inform recommendations and also to have findings that showcase to those in decision-making positions what a good library service looks like and how it can impact the lives of those in prison.

- Prioritising experiences of those who will be most affected by the changes made – in this case, current and potential prison library users, and not being afraid to be bold in taking a critical librarianship stance.
- Balancing independence as a review team and the co-design element.
- Being realistic about the speed at which change can happen and having tiered recommendations or interim steps to ensure there is sufficient support and visual implementation of change, recognising that is likely to be incremental.

The impact of engaging with prison library services is not often discussed in wider prison discourse, and the prison library is rarely a priority service within the wider prison regime (De Agostini, 2022; Finlay, 2022). Evidence exists, however, that a well-run library service can impact the wider culture of the prison and have a positive impact on both persons in custody and their family.

By setting out the methodology developed and applied in this Review, the hope is that it will prompt those in decision-making positions to embark on their own review of prison library services with the goal of enhancing library provision in their own country or local context.

A review of prison library services should be an opportunity to bring together stakeholders with differing priorities, to showcase the powerful impact that libraries can have, and to persuade those responsible for libraries within the prison system to give higher priority to library services, and to take seriously the need for consistent provision across prison sites and sufficient access for persons in custody. Taken together, the Principles and methodology for this review could act as a starting point for discussions in other contexts, used as a way of articulating the importance of prison libraries and what it takes to make a prison library run well.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jessica Bates: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jayne Finlay:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Susannah Hanlon:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis.

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None.

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