RECEDE

REgulating Criminal justicE DEtention: glocal prospects for improving health and safety in detention and society

Reflections on Penal Voluntary Sector Support for People Held in Criminal Justice Detention

Webinar Report

18 March 2026, 11:00–12:30 (UK time)

Introduction

The webinar 'Reflections on Penal Voluntary Sector Support for People Held in Criminal Justice Detention' was hosted on 18 March 2026, bringing together practitioners, academics, and voluntary sector representatives to discuss a recently circulated practitioner brief on voluntary sector engagement in criminal justice detention settings.

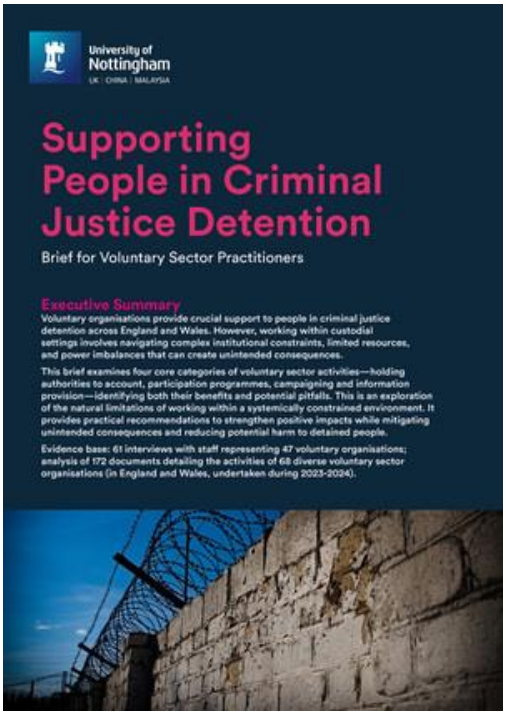
Chaired by Dr Tom Kemp (University of Nottingham), the session aimed to reflect on the purpose, challenges, and evolving landscape of voluntary sector work in prisons, particularly in balancing access, accountability, and transformative goals. Attendees engaged with the briefing, heard from expert discussants, and participated in a reflective Q&A session to consider implications for practice.

Summary of Content

Dr Matty Hall introduced the brief, which categorises voluntary sector activity in detention into four areas: holding authorities to account, peer support and participation, campaigning and policy engagement, and information provision. The brief emphasises the dual potential of voluntary interventions delivering benefits while also risking harmful participation in institutional processes. Khatuna Tsintsadze (Zahid Mubarek Trust) reflected on the challenges of maintaining independence and integrity while operating within the prison system and the importance of collective approaches with other organisations. Soruche Saajedi (formerly Prison Reform Trust) highlighted tensions between empowering individuals and potentially smoothing institutional processes, noting that access and credibility can vary between organisations. Dr Tom Guiney (University of Nottingham) explored questions of legitimacy, the importance of clearly defined mission and ethos, and the constraints of an increasingly efficiency-driven penal system.

Discussion Themes

Key lines of discussion centred on the purpose and leverage of the voluntary sector, strategies to maintain integrity while retaining access, and the value of collective action across organisations. Participants reflected on the sector's unsettled and rapidly changing environment, including the pressures of resource constraints, managerialism, and technological developments, and considered how the principles outlined in the policy brief could guide practice in this context. Attendees also debated the capacity for voluntary organisations to exercise power creatively, including collective withdrawal or principled negotiation, and the importance of clearly defining organisational ethos as a means of sustaining independence and influence.



Next Steps and Conclusion

The webinar concluded with agreement on the importance of disseminating the policy brief widely to stimulate ongoing reflection and debate within the sector. Attendees highlighted the value of the discussions in shaping future practice, enhancing collaboration, and supporting voluntary organisations to navigate the complex penal environment with integrity and purpose. The session provided a timely opportunity to reflect on how voluntary sector work can balance pragmatic access with transformative objectives, offering guidance for practitioners and researchers alike.

This project has received funding from the European Union's, Horizon 2020 research and innovation framework programme under grant agreement No. 949289