

Interview with Caragh Arthur

Update "Nothing about me without me", 5th April 2024

Caragh Arthur (C.A.) lives in London and works for His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, HMPPS. Now a qualified social worker and anthropologist, Caragh has a difficult journey behind her. She faced problems with addiction, domestic violence and mental illness from adolescence and as a result ended up in prison numerous times as a young woman. For her great professional commitment, Caragh was honoured with the [Butler Trust Award](#) in 2023 for outstanding achievements in the prison system.

In April 2024 **Laura von Mandach** (L.V.M.), Sociologist and Head of the Analysis and Practice Development Department at the Swiss Centre of Expertise in Prison and Probation, SCEPP, interviewed Caragh Arthur at the University of Cambridge, where both are part of the Master of Studies (MSt) programme in Applied Criminology, Penology and of the Institute of Criminology. Following is a transcript of the interview in condensed form.

Laura von Mandach Dear Caragh, thank you for offering me some time for this interview. We know each other, but I would still like to ask you to introduce yourself. Who is Caragh?

Caragh Arthur I am Caragh Arthur. I am a mum, I am a wife, I am a sister. I live in London, and I work for HMPPS, which is His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. I work for headquarters. I am a Senior Policy Manager, and my work focuses on prison education and future models of the prison system. I also run my own HR company and work with a lot of organisations that have people with different issues: mostly peer-led organisations, sometimes churches and other groups from charitable organisations.

L.V.M. You are a person with lived experience. What does that mean?

C.A. Yes, lived experience, specifically of the criminal justice system. I came out of prison in 2002. I have a background of trauma and difficulties, which we will talk about later. But I first went to prison when I was quite young. I think I might have been about sixteen. I lied to the police and told them I was older than I was, and at the time, they didn't have very good fingerprint checking systems, so they couldn't tell I was lying. And off I went to prison. I've been to prison on 16 separate occasions and have 63 prior criminal convictions. Most of my initial interactions with criminal justice were small, petty things. I was just seeking attention and trying to get by. I lived on the streets at the age of thirteen. Stealing and drinking and taking drugs was all part of that kind of lifestyle. So I would say I've got lived experience of prison, but I've also got lived experience of homelessness. I've got lived experience of addiction. I've got lived experience of domestic violence. I've got lived experience of sexual violence.

L.V.M. As a person with lived experience, you're committed to improving the British prison system. Tell us more about it. What projects have you been involved in?

C.A. I have been very lucky. Since I left prison in 2002, I have worked. I started off working in the charity sector. For the past three years, I have worked for the government. They had the idea that it was important to

get people with lived experience of the system to help find solutions to problems in the system. Because it's very difficult to just have people who don't understand why people behave in certain ways, or why people are not complying with the policy in a particular way. It's hard if lived experiences are not included in the discussion. Our government in the UK wanted to be able to hire people who had lived experience of the system. That was useful because we were able to offer input into particular policy. We were able to help colleagues. So for example, I might have colleagues who do not understand what it's like to be in a prison, and yet they want to implement a policy to help people to find work on release, or to stop their offending behaviour, or to reduce substance abuse. But they don't really know how to word those policies; they don't know how to approach those people. So quite often, I would work on programmes and initiatives that would help my colleagues to understand the mindset of the people in prison. Or I might go into a prison with colleagues and break down the barriers with the prisoners in the room first so that my colleagues can then interact and engage with them. That is very, very helpful.

Sometimes, for example, when we would be working on employment-related outcomes, and we'd come up with big ideas, I'd tell them that the general plan was not necessarily going to work. For example, with women, we apply a concept that we think fits guys. But when you actually look at women's issues, women have often had a lot more trauma than men. They're emotional. They're caregivers. They might have family, or children who are more important than getting a job. Some of these stereotypes play out where we see the man as the breadwinner, the one who should provide, and the woman as the caretaker, the one who should look after the children, despite the fact that this is not necessarily true anymore. Boundaries blur and everybody says a bit of everything. But there is still an element of 'mum is mum'. So if I'm in prison and about to be released, my priority is not to get a job. My priority is going to be to have my child's back. Helping my colleagues to understand that really helps them to focus their policies on women in a way that is actually going to meet their needs.

L.V.M. You bring a broad range of skills and recommendations to the table. What is your current role as a person with lived experience?

C.A. Many different things. Some things are not in the public domain at the moment, so I won't say what they are. But, for example, I have worked on a communications project which has been bringing the voices of others with lived experience into the prison environment so the officers can hear about how their work has produced positive results. On doing some research, we found that officers didn't believe people could be rehabilitated. But the reason for this is that they had never seen any success stories. They just saw the same people coming in all the time, so we wanted to present them with people who had achieved success to show them that their engagement, their interactions with prisoners can be really meaningful, and that they do make a difference.

A prison officer's job is a really hard one. They are dealing with people when they are the worst versions of themselves, at the worst time in their lives, when they're not grateful or thankful for the support because they haven't specifically asked for it. They've been put into this environment. It's a very difficult place. But we do other projects as well: we've got some projects coming up aimed at creating more job opportunities, at looking at how to make the best use of our prison spaces, and at providing better educational opportunities for people in prison so that they are more likely to meet the criteria of employers in the community.

If we don't do that sort of work, then we can't reduce reoffending. So fundamentally, my role and the role of my colleagues is about reducing reoffending. Because we know when somebody has a job in the community, or they are allowed to re-enter the community with some level of acceptance and engagement, they're no longer seen as 'that prisoner' or 'that person'. There might still be some stigma, but they're given a chance to build trust and to reintegrate back into the community. I recently won an award called the Butler Trust Award, which was given to me by Princess Anne. And that was for my role in utilizing my lived experiences to help people find work, and also to ensure that the lived experience voice is threaded through our organisation and through our policies.

But I don't just have lived experience. I also am very educated now. I left school at the age of thirteen. I didn't have any GCSEs. I didn't have any A levels. But I went on when I came into recovery from addiction, and I

started to address my behaviours that were leading me to offending and my underlying traumas and my mental health and all those things. I started to go back to education; I did an access course on social work. I then went on to do a degree in anthropology and sociology, followed by a master's in HR management, and then a Level 7 diploma with the CIPD, which is the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. I'm now participating in this course with you, doing a master's at Cambridge University. So even though I have lived experience – and lived experience is great – on its own, it's not enough. We need to be educated. And we need to transition into environments where we can learn to achieve the right behaviour through prosocial modelling.

L.V.M. This is excellent, Caragh. What drives your motivation?

C.A. My motivation is that there were so many times in my life where I wanted to die. There were so many times in my life where I was the worst member of society, the most damaged person, or the person who would be singled out to be abused and traumatised by very wicked people. And for me, when I go into prison, I do not see evil. I know, there is a small percentage of really crazy people in prison that are really evil. But I would say 99% of the people that I see in prison are not evil people. They are misguided youth. They are people who have made a mistake. They are people who were victims of something. Particularly in the women's estate, a lot of women were victims of lots of different circumstances and domestic violence and sexual violence and traumas as children. So for me, it's about giving back; to be able to do a job, where you don't just go to work to earn money, you know you're saving someone's life. What kind of life is it to stick a needle in your arm, being beaten up or sleeping in the park, or being sexually assaulted? And you know, that's worse than death. You are better off dead. So if I can rescue somebody, if my interactions and interventions that are part of my job mean getting somebody out of prison and giving them the hope and the future that I have, that's amazing.

And it's not just the people in prison whom we help. We also help their family members. We give sons back to their parents and to their wives and to their brothers and sisters. We give mums back to their children. And the difference that we can make is just brilliant. We help communities to feel safer. We help to reduce victims, because people have stopped offending, and we make sure that the next generation of children do not come from families of addiction or mental health or criminal behaviour.

L.V.M. Your engagement is awe-inspiring. What can you bring to the table that a person without lived experience like me cannot?

C.A. I think there are two different types of prisoners. There's the prisoner who's always in and out of prison, who leads a criminal life, for whatever reason. Then there's the person who accidentally hit somebody, or accidentally ran over somebody, or who committed fraud once because they were gambling. They end up in prison but normally live a normal, law-abiding life. I was in the group of people with constant criminal behaviour because I had addictions. And when you live that life – I was stabbed, I was held at gunpoint, I was kidnapped, I saw somebody get murdered, I had to give evidence to the police, I then had somebody threaten to kill me, because I was giving evidence – it was very difficult and very dangerous. I learned something from that life, but also in prison: I'm very, very good at anticipating risk. I can see risk very far down the road before it happens. It's almost like there's an energy inside me that tells me something's going to go bad, something's going to happen. I see it before anyone else does.

Non-verbal communication is also a big topic. It makes up for 70% of the communication that we have with people, but a lot of people cannot read body language. So I can be in a room and I can see... For example, we're trying to make a point about something, but when these things occur – leaders are shifting in their seat, or their eyes are not focused, or they're not happy – I know how to intervene. My relationship-building skills are very, very good, because I know people quite well. But I know them from the level of being really dangerous.

I think there's also something else where procedural justice feels really important. It's a good thing and a bad thing. A lot of my civil servant colleagues are much more polite. They will have a really clever, diplomatic way to say 'no', whereas I'll just say 'no'. And then some people think: 'Oh, God, that's a bit much', but at least they know where they stand. I'm very direct and clear with my communication. I'm not going to pretend to be something that I'm not. And I don't want the room to pretend. It can be a help, but it can be a hindrance as well. Sometimes in the environment that we're in, that is the way they operate. So when somebody like me comes

along and says: 'No, just give me the correct answer, stop hiding behind all of this smoke and mirrors', they can find that level of honesty quite hard.

I think people with lived experience, we find it hard to communicate without swearing. It takes us a long time to learn how to speak normally. So when we are in an environment and we've gotten to that place where we just know how to communicate without swearing or without grabbing somebody or throwing something at something, we think we've hit perfection. But actually, emotionally, we still wear our heart on our sleeves. And that is really good. But sometimes it's also a bit difficult because we're brought into this, this isn't just a job for us. We want to make a difference for a real important reason. We know what it's like to be in a prison cell.

L.V.M. Interesting, the cultural dimension, how people interact. You don't have any time to lose, you just give the direct answer.

C.A. Yes, and sometimes people in the room like it. Because they do these meetings, which are a bit boring. And when they come to our space, they will say: 'She said what I wanted to say, but I can't say it.'

L.V.M. And are there tangible outcomes? Where do you see the added value of your engagement?

C.A. There's been so many examples of positive outcomes. I think we have gotten people into jobs who normally wouldn't have gotten into jobs. We've gotten people to go into education programmes that normally would not have gone into those education programmes. We've gotten policy staff to rewrite documents and follow a path that, without that support, they just wouldn't have done those things. And we've inspired hope, as well. When I was talking earlier about the officers, it's a really hard job. And in England, it's a really hard job for officers, because we've got less staff than we would like, staff working long hours, in difficult circumstances. And, you know, to have people go back and say 'No, you do make a difference' means that those officers feel valued in an environment where they don't always get the value and the recognition they deserve.

L.V.M. I see what you mean: Someone leaves prison, and there is no way to follow up afterwards, no possibility of communication.

C.A. Yes, because they've built that relationship. You are an officer, you've worked with somebody for five to ten years, and then you know nothing about where they go next.

L.V.M. Let's say I'm going to launch a project or initiative that involves someone with lived experience. What should I take into consideration?

C.A. I started something called the Internal Expert Voice Panel in my organisation. It had never been done before. There are a few things that I think need to be considered. First of all, people with lived experience are a bit rough around the edges. So they definitely need somebody who has time and patience to manage them. I think that's really important. I think they need a level of introduction and training that is slower and more systematic than perhaps the average individual. This does not apply in every circumstance, but we're talking about people who possibly don't have long work histories, or who left school early and are quite entrenched in criminal behaviour or addictions, or who have been excluded from society for quite a long time. We tend to come in with behavioural issues, so initially we're not as emotionally intelligent as we can be. I think learning how to moderate our feelings can be hard. We also often have low confidence. Sometimes we may feel as if you don't like us, or that you've given us a funny look. And then we pick an argument, or we just leave. We don't check things out because our head tells us we're no good. We tend to think that that's what you think about us anyway. Being able to get positive regard from people, being able to have check-ins, is important. One of the things that was really important for me – because I had such a high-trauma background and had been so abused from the age of five right through to my late 20s – is that people didn't tell me what to do. So whenever I was managed by somebody, if they tried to tell me what to do, or if they were overly controlling, I would leave the job. I just wouldn't stay. What I needed was a manager who was very sensitive to me and was able to collaborate with me, to look at the skills that I have and pull them out. I needed someone to work on a strength-based approach with me.

But I would also say that if there was the equivalent type of programme in your country, you would also need to really support the managers who are working with those types of people. I've had a lot of managers coming to me, obviously. I've been at it for a very long time, and I've done a lot of education and work on myself. But we have other people who came out of prison a year ago, and they haven't got all of that. And managers have come to me going: 'I don't know how to manage this person, they won't shut up in meetings, they are being inappropriate, they're not coming dressed appropriately, they're slouching in their chair.' And you know, 'They're swearing in meetings' and stuff like that. So it's trying to help support the managers, since just because you've got lived experiences shouldn't mean that behaviour is okay. Also, a lot of people with lived experience tend to have a range of neuro-diversities. I've seen people come into our organisation who possibly need to be screened and haven't been screened for a disability, because we can see it as a behavioural issue, when in fact, it's actually a disabling issue; it's a disability. Or it's something for which we just need to provide them with the right support.

I think people with lived experience tend not to always be very skilled at IT, they tend not to be always very skilled at writing, so strengthening what they're weak at, but also really focusing in on what they are good at, is important. They tend to be very good at building relationships and very good at engaging people. So I think a kind of mix between those things is very, very helpful. And I would suggest, lastly, to get advice from other lived experience practitioners. Whether that's in your own country or in another country. Come together as a forum for initial brainstorming to develop an idea of how you're going to utilise lived experience in your criminal justice system.

L.V.M. Your higher education trajectory is amazing. You're a social anthropologist with knowledge of psychology, social work, all combined – as you've said – with this alertness you have. Another question: There could be risks bringing people with lived experience into organisations, and the person with lived experience could also encounter risks on their end. What kind of risks are there?

C.A. If people are not educated and trained and in the right place and space, going back into prison can be risky. You might have somebody who brings drugs to their friend, or somebody who knows somebody who is in prison who had done something to them in a different life, and this is the reason they want to go in and do it. For me I think it's a good idea to say: 'When you have somebody and you want them to work in a prison, they need to have been out of prison for maybe two years and to have had particular training'. You need to make sure you interview them first; you must understand their thinking and do risk assessment: 'Do you know anybody in the prison?' That kind of stuff, I think, is really important. I also remember last year, while working in a particular prison, I saw a group of women we had been talking to in a female prison. I went to the car park and cried afterwards, because I was heartbroken for these women who had had their children taken away. I had my child taken away, so I relate to that. They cannot get to see the dentist because the dentist comes in once a month, and it's hard. And you feel this level of empathy, because if I'm not valuable enough to just see a dentist for my tooth that's killing me, what then? So it's like, there are different risks on both sides that I do think need to be considered.

L.V.M. So if I understand correctly, you need to be aware of whether a person with lived experience has undergone a behavioural change before bringing them back into a prison.

C.A. Or even get them to do community work first, so they can go to probation services, or they can go to other services and see how they operate in the community. This way you are building trust with them, they're building trust with you, and then you are supporting them to later do interventions in prison.

L.V.M. How do you assess the development of this approach of including lived experience in corrections in prison or probation in England and Wales?

C.A. It's quite a new approach. There are also a lot of third-sector organisations that are doing really good work. I think relying on those third sectors and drawing them in, and also relying on the prisons is key – because the prisons here make some really good local connections with organisations that are peer-led. They might invite people in and make recommendations for them, too. The landscape is changing here, and we're probably more advanced than your country at the moment in that regard. There's still some security resistance, and

there were still others who think: 'Oh no, it's not the best idea in the world.' There are some really good positive outcomes. I do not think we've tracked and measured those outcomes enough yet, but I think we're in the very early stages of starting to track and measure what those outcomes do and how they are impacting or supporting or encouraging the success of projects that we are doing.

L.V.M. I'm going back to Switzerland, so let's say I'm going to start an initiative, involving persons with lived experience. What would your advice be?

C.A. I think the first thing to do is to get a group of people with lived experience who are in some sort of professional environment. I would get two groups. I would get service user groups and maybe speak to service user groups in prison about what that would feel like for them so you can understand their perspective. I definitely think you should speak to staff as well to know what the barriers are. If you speak to staff, they'll go: 'No, we don't want them in here, they're crazy'. Or: 'That's a good thing, it's a good idea'. You will get an idea of what prison staff think or criminal justice staff think. And then you need experienced people with lived experience who have been out of prison for some time – people who have accepted, who have built their confidence in one thing or another – to come in as your steering group to help you to implement something. Then you need to think about what your aims and objectives are. Why do you want to implement this? Is it because you want to show prison staff that success is possible? Or is it because you want to give hope to prisoners that they can change? Or is it because you want to find more people to recruit individuals who have this experience? Figure out what your aims and objectives are first, and then get those steering groups. Do some scoping with all the people that you know, and then start to build something. And when you come back in July, tell me how far you have got, and we can take more steps. I think it'd be a great idea. And if you want to invite me over, I'd love to come. I'd come and talk or do any speaking or anything if you wanted me to.