

**RESEARCH PAPER**

# **An Evidence-Based Approach to Prison Library Provision: Aligning Policy and Practice**

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to enable a better understanding of the possibilities of prison library services and offer evidence that can help to support efforts to align policy and practice in prison library provision. Alongside an examination of existing policies, guidelines and literature, the paper presents findings that emerged from interviews with six prison library experts, undertaken as part of a recent national review of prison library services in Ireland. Following a discussion of these findings, a set of ten principles for prison library provision in Ireland is presented which holds relevance for global prison library policy and practice. As well as providing research-informed evidence for those in policymaking roles, the findings will be of interest to practitioners and researchers advocating for improved access to prison library services.*

**Keywords:** *prison libraries, prison policy, best practice, evidence-based practice*

## **Introduction**

Within prison library literature, the prison library is widely regarded as an important space that helps to meet the educational, informational, legal, recreational and cultural needs and interests of incarcerated individuals (Krolak, 2019). Less attention has been paid to the role and value of the prison library in wider prison research and policy development. This paper seeks to elucidate the benefits of having a well-run library within a prison and to discuss current issues in prison library provision that should be prioritised by prison administrators and policymakers. It explores perspectives on prison library services and considers good practice through an examination of international and national policies and guidelines, relevant literature, and the views and experiences of individuals with expertise in the area. The latter was gained through a series of qualitative interviews with prison library experts undertaken by the authors as part of their Review of Prison Libraries in Ireland (commissioned by the Local Government Management Agency Ireland) in 2021. In addition to reporting on the findings with global experts, this paper is in part a response to the need for research evidence to underpin decision-making and strategic development within



prisons to ensure they are meeting the basic human rights of prisoners through providing access to the information and education that a library is uniquely placed to provide. Global research in this field laments both the disconnect between prison library policies and practice (Conrad, 2017) and the absence of explicit mention of prison library activities in official prison reports or strategy documents (Tanacković et al., 2022). The role that libraries play in the lives of those affected by incarceration is beginning to gain momentum in the research literature and recent doctoral studies by both Garner (2017) and Finlay (2020) offer empirical evidence of how prisoners engage with library services during incarceration. It is imperative however that this research reaches those outside of the library and information research community to raise the visibility of library services to those in decision-making positions (Tanacković et al., 2022).

Beyond the provision of reading material, prison libraries offer a range of literacy and reader development programmes, cultural activities and family literacy initiatives which aim to mirror library services in the community. The space of the prison library has been described as an “oasis of equality and respect” (Vogel, 2009), a “refuge” (Finlay, 2020) and a “normal” zone within the prison (Vogel, 2009; Lehmann, 2011). It is a space which offers freedom of choice in an environment which otherwise limits autonomy, where individuals can choose how to spend their time, or what educational or recreational interests to pursue (Garner, 2019; Finlay & Bates, 2021). In alignment with Little and Warr’s (2022) position that discussions of education in prison should distance themselves from a ‘use value’ model of education, so too discussions of prison libraries should not be tied up with any potential ‘rehabilitative’ function. Engagement with library services can make the experience of incarceration more bearable, alleviating the everyday boredom of prison life (Garner, 2019) and supporting the wellbeing of prisoners (Finlay & Bates, 2018; Garner, 2019). Ultimately, a well-run library helps to meet the basic human rights of prisoners including the right of access to information and the right to read (De Agostini, 2022).

The authors of this paper recently undertook a national Review of Prison Library Provision in Ireland (Finlay et al., 2022; Ulster University, 2023) which sought to understand current practice and develop recommendations for change in future practice and policy. It was deemed important at the outset of the review to have a thorough understanding of global best practice in prison library provision. This was sought through a comprehensive review of existing policy and literature and through six in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals with expertise in this area. Findings from this initial stage of the review were key in demonstrating to stakeholders in Ireland what a well-planned prison library service can offer to people in prison and helped to alter perceptions of those who viewed the prison library as no more than a book-lending service. These findings also informed the subsequent data collection undertaken in Ireland as part of the Review and placed the Irish findings and recommendations in an international context, demonstrating their alignment with global best practice. This paper details findings from these initial interviews, providing insight into global best practice as well as common challenges in prison library provision and suggestions for future development in practice and policy. Findings highlight strategic priority areas for prison library policy development and should help decision-makers to determine how best to deploy the often-limited resources available to them to increase prisoners’ access to library services.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Global prison library policy and guidelines***

Access to library services is a basic human right for all prisoners, as made clear in Rule 64 of the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, The Nelson Mandela Rules:

*Every prison shall have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners shall be encouraged to make full use of it* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015).

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) have produced a set of international Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners, with the most recent edition published in 2023 (Garner & Krolak, 2023). Previous editions have served as a template for the development of national guidelines<sup>1</sup>. While these guidelines are important for prison library staff and policymakers, they do not negate the need for official policies on prison library provision. In a recent paper discussing prison library policy and practice in Canada, De Agostini (2022, p.10) describes their National Guide for Institutional Libraries as merely “the skeleton from which an international prison library policy might emerge.”

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has also been key in advocating for prisoners’ rights to access library services. A policy brief published by UNESCO’s Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) outlines the ways in which prison libraries can support rehabilitation efforts and proposes recommendations for the successful provision of prison libraries, including professional staffing and mirroring prison library services (UIL, 2020). Recommendations for prison library provision are also laid out in the Council of Europe’s Recommendations on Prison Education (1990), which affirm that prison libraries should mirror public libraries “and the same professional standards should apply” (p.34). A recent revision of Europe’s 2006 Prison Rules (2020) recommends that, where possible, prison libraries “should be organised in co-operation with community library services” (Recommendation 28.6).

The quality and extent of library provision is also dependent on prison policy or rules in particular contexts. For example, existing Prison Rules in each jurisdiction in the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland decree that all prisoners have a legal right to access a library and its resources during their sentence, although offer limited details about the extent of this access (see The Prison Rules 1999; The Prison and Young Offenders [Scotland] Rules 2011; The Prison and Young Offenders Centre Rules Northern Ireland 1995; Prison Rules 2007). A framework on education and library services published by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) recognises that prison libraries in England and Wales should have a “focus on supporting learning, improving literacy and other barriers to resettlement” as well as providing prisoners with “opportunities for wider cultural engagement” (MoJ, 2019, p.4). Further details of library access and services offered by the prison libraries in the UK are usually outlined in Service Level Agreements drawn up between the individual prison and local public authority (e.g. County Council or Public Library Authority) where there is a formal partnership between a public library authority and a prison library for the provision of prison library services.

Despite the mandate for universal access to prison library services and the existence of international and, in some cases, national prison library guidelines, literature in this area reveals inconsistent levels of service provision across countries, states and individual institutions. This paper draws attention to some of the common global challenges which hinder policy recommendations being met and often lead to the prison library being undervalued and overlooked within the wider prison regime (De Agostini, 2022; Finlay, 2022), and highlights priority areas that should be addressed in order to strengthen future library provision.

### ***Global prison library policy and guidelines***

Historically, the majority of prison library research has stemmed from the United States (US). A recent scholarly analysis of prison library literature found that almost half of all journal articles published in this area (42.25%) were written by authors resident in the US, followed by Nigeria (7.75%), the UK (5.63%) and France (5.63%) (Garner, 2022). There is evidence however of a growing international focus on prison library research. With just over half of the contributors from outside the US, a recent book edited by Garner (2021) includes contributions from international researchers, librarians and prisoners and offers a contemporary insight into global policy and practice. It is the first collation of international practice since a 2011 issue of *Library Trends* journal (Volume 59, Number 3) which published articles

<sup>1</sup> See: The Prison Rules 1999; The Prison and Young Offenders (Scotland) Rules 2011; The Prison and Young Offenders Centre Rules Northern Ireland 1995; Prison Rules 2007.

describing aspects of library provision in countries across Europe as well as Canada and Japan. These publications have been helpful in highlighting differences in global provision and the common challenges faced globally by librarians who are tasked with providing library services in a closed environment. Understanding of global provision is also strengthened by a recent literature review undertaken by Hussain et al. (2022) which found that stronger provision was offered in some states of the USA, the UK and some European countries than in other parts of the world, due to notable differences in budgets, resources, access to technology and the internet and levels of co-operation between public and prison libraries.

Garner's analysis also found that 74% of the 57 journals that published papers related to prison libraries were library studies journals, while only 6 were criminology journals (Garner, 2022). This statistic reflects a criticism that has been levelled by both Stearns (2004) and Finlay and Bates (2018). Stearns criticised existing library research for lacking any philosophical or criminological foundation. Finlay and Bates (2018) further note that existing empirical research of prison library engagement remains "within the niche field of prison librarianship" (p.120) and sought to draw their work into wider discourse of prison education and desistance research. Finlay's doctoral study aimed to address these criticisms and applied criminological concepts to a study of prison library engagement to better understand the value of engaging with library services both during incarceration and in preparation to return to communities (Finlay, 2020). This current paper also aims to raise awareness of the importance of prison library services in the lives of those who use them. It calls for stronger prison library policies which will both help to ensure consistent levels of library access and provision and to raise the profile of the library among prison administration and policymakers.

### ***Common global issues***

While the standard of prison library provision differs widely across countries and cultures, prison library literature reveals common challenges that arise when providing library services in a prison environment. A literature review conducted by Hussain et al. (2022) concludes that the major causes of frustration in prison libraries are a "lack of professional staff, the unavailability of library space, limited collections, censorship issues, a poor budgetary situation, the absence of library associations in developing countries, and a lack of cooperation among prison libraries and public libraries" (p.9). The following paragraphs identify priority areas which, if addressed, form part of the solution for bridging policy and practice.

### ***Universal access and user-centred provision***

Universal access in a library context means equity of access to library services for all within the prison setting. Increasingly in terms of best practice, this is also taken to include prison staff as library services can support them professionally and personally as well as establish positive modelling for those that are incarcerated and integrate the library more fully into the life of the prison (Stearns, 2004; Finlay, 2022).

IFLA's guidelines state that access to library services "should be available to all prisoners, regardless of their security classification and location within the prison" (Garner & Krolak, 2023, p.9), and, as noted previously, this is typically written into national legislation and local prison policy as well as being prominent in advocacy literature relating to prison libraries. For example, UK Prison Rule 33 states: "A library shall be provided in every prison and, subject to any directions of the Secretary of State, every prisoner shall be allowed to have library books and to exchange them" (The Prison Rules 1999).

Despite these legal mandates, access to a physical library space and to the resources that a library provides is not always guaranteed during a person's sentence. Access to the library space is often hindered by a lack of available staff to open the prison or by timetable clashes with other activities in the prison (Finlay, 2022). This is compounded by the fact that library services are undervalued and rarely prioritised within the prison (De Agostini, 2022; Finlay, 2022). Staff shortages severely impact on the time prisoners can spend out of their cells (Taylor, 2022) and the prison library is often at the forefront of restrictions when there are insufficient

officers to safely supervise the movement of prisoners (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2019). There are additional challenges when providing library services to segregated prisoners or those who cannot make it to the library space due to accessibility issues.

User, or patron-centred provision reflects the need to ensure library collections are built around the actual needs and interests of the library users – and not what others consider to be ‘best’ for them. As Austin and Jacobson (2021) state: “Patron-centred services in jails involve creating collections and programs that are based on professional expertise while incorporating feedback and suggestions from library patrons” (p. 298). A user-centred approach also aligns with the values and practice of ‘Whole Person Librarianship’ where “Communication and collaboration between staff members [in the prison setting] opens avenues for new understanding and can help library staff to tailor resources and services to better meet the needs of their users” (Finlay, 2022, p. 11). Furthermore, collection development and library service provision in a prison library context is now widely regarded as needing to go beyond access to books and include a wide range of resources and programmes, including access to digital technology and resources. The most recent Prison Trends Report published by Penal Reform International (2022) notes that improving digital literacy of people in prison is a key priority, and skilled library staff have the potential to help support digital literacy development of their patrons.

### ***Professional library staff***

IFLA’s Guidelines recommend that all prison libraries be managed or supervised by a professional librarian with the necessary qualifications and skills (Garner & Krolak, 2023). This need for professional staffing is echoed throughout prison library literature (e.g. Vogel, 2009; Krolak, 2019; UIL, 2020). Despite clear guidance on hiring professional prison library staff and evidence of the benefits of having a professionally run prison library (see Lehmann, 2011; Finlay & Bates, 2021), staffing remains one of the greatest challenges facing prison libraries globally. In many contexts, the library is operated by prison officers or workers or volunteers from within the prison population. A survey carried out in Croatia in 2014 found that none of the 21 prison libraries surveyed were run by trained library staff but instead were run by prisoners, officers or other staff members (Šimunić et al, 2014). More recently, De Agostini (2022) notes that prison libraries in Canada tend to be understaffed or staffed with untrained workers, contributing to the devaluation of prison library services.

The model suggested in the revised IFLA guidelines is one where there are a range of inputs within the prison library setting, so that overall management falls under the responsibility of a professional librarian, but supported by prison officers and prisoner volunteers who could study librarianship while in the role. This was also reflected in the recommendations in the recent Review of Prison Libraries in Ireland (Finlay et al., 2022; Ulster University, 2023), where researchers found a particular need to ensure an equitable provision of services nationally so that prisoners are not disadvantaged in terms of access to professionally managed library services depending on where in the country they are incarcerated. There is also a valuable opportunity here for providing prisoner volunteers or workers appropriate training and new skills to work in a library environment.

### ***Collaboration with public libraries***

Krolak (2019) notes four main models of co-operation with public libraries currently taking place globally, ranging from full integration as a branch of the public library; working closely with the public library; having limited co-operation with the public library; and having no co-operation with the public library. Strong collaboration helps to raise the professional standard of the prison library service and creates positive links with community initiatives (UIL, 2020). In contexts where little co-operation between the two entities exist, this can lead to “a great inequity of services and the lack of uniform organization throughout the country” (Costanzo & Montecchi, 2011, p.150). Close co-operation is also recommended so that prison librarians remain aware of current developments or technologies in the wider field of librarianship (Singer, 2000). Challenges again exist in developing partnerships and working collab-

oratively with public libraries. In the UK, despite many prison libraries falling under the responsibility of the local public library authority, close collaboration between prison and public library staff is often hindered due to staffing constraints in public libraries and the geographical distance between prisons and local towns or cities (Finlay, 2022).

### Approach to Present Study

Six semi-structured interviews were undertaken with global prison library experts as part of the Review of Prison Library Services in Ireland, carried out in 2021 by the authors. Each of the six interviewees have a well-established professional career and significant knowledge and expertise relating to prison library services. Given the geographic locations of the interview participants and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (and associated government and health restrictions), interviews were all conducted online and recorded with the informed consent of each individual. Ethical approval for the research interviews was granted by Ulster University in May 2021 and the interviews were carried out in June 2021. The researchers had a series of fifteen possible questions, although not all were put to each interviewee as it depended on their specific role and involvement with prison libraries as to which questions were relevant to their professional background. These included questions on their involvement in prison library provision, the role of prison libraries, best practice, collaboration (both within the prison and outside the prison, including partnerships with public libraries and voluntary organisations), lessons learned from the pandemic, evaluation of services and challenges and hopes for future prison library policy and practice.

Template analysis (King, 2004, 2012), a specific approach to thematic analysis, was used to organise and analyse the interview data. This approach involves the development of a coding ‘template’ which is created from both the pre-existing literature through the generation of initial a priori themes and then through analysis of an initial engagement with the interview data in an iterative process. The coding template is then applied fully to the data set once in its final form. Template analysis has been used previously in wide-ranging prison and criminology studies, for example Viotti (2016), Quigley (2018), and Turner et al. (2022) and to a lesser extent in librarianship research - for example, Martzoukou and Elliott (2016) and Curry (2017).

Templates were initially devised from the literature and then revised as the interview structure was cemented. Two templates were developed, one which focused on strategic and tactical aspects of prison library provision, and the other on operational facets. The final versions of the templates were driven by the research data.

### Research Findings

The six interview participants (labelled GE1-GE6) were from the UK, wider Europe and Australia and included academics, practitioners and people in oversight roles across prison library practice and policy.

**Table 1.** Interview Participants

| Participant | Role                      |
|-------------|---------------------------|
| GE1         | Prison library management |
| GE2         | Prison library research   |
| GE3         | Prison library research   |
| GE4         | Prison library management |
| GE5         | Prison library management |
| GE6         | Prison library oversight  |

The following findings are presented under headings that closely correspond to the set of ten principles which emerged from the Review (Finlay et al., 2022; Ulster University, 2023), and were also influenced by the draft version of the most recent edition of IFLA's Guidelines (Garner & Krolak, 2023). The development of these principles (Table 2) are discussed later in the paper. Findings highlight examples of good practice as well as detailing existing challenges and future priorities and objectives.

**Table 2.** Principles for prison library provision in Ireland (Finlay et al., 2022; Ulster University, 2023)

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

### ***Prison library policy and buy-in***

The importance of guidelines, particularly those developed by IFLA, was discussed. In relation to the updating of IFLA's guidelines, it was noted that the outreach work of prison libraries should be at the fore (GE3) and this would help to show decision-makers that the role of the library extends beyond the provision of books. GE3 also emphasised the need for international guidelines to be specific and to have a "minimum basic checklist", taking into account what is realistically achievable in different parts of the world.

Those participants working in prison libraries did not currently use any specific national or international guidelines to inform their work. GE1 suggested that these guidelines should be disseminated to "those who need to know about them". Both GE5 and GE6 referred to the

inconsistency in library provision that results from a lack of standardised policy. GE6 noted that, in their jurisdiction, there is no “systematic policy structure to develop libraries”, only “a set of library standards that were developed as an alternative to policy” and this has led to a “mixed bag” of provision across library sites. Their national audit of prison library services in 2015 was considered to be “a nice thing to do rather than a must-have” and it resulted in very little change, with services continuing to vary across the region.

This inconsistent level of library provision across prisons was also considered to be linked to the “buy-in” from prison governors and other senior staff members in the prison service. GE6 noted that “you’re at the mercy of the individual and individual aspirations.” The support of the prison governor was considered vital to the success of the prison library: “our acting governor is an avid reader and is fantastic; totally interested and supportive. He says yes to everything we suggest...it does make a difference. The governor once said to us ‘if you walk into a prison library, you’d be able to tell how the prison is run by how well the library works’” (GE4). A prevailing issue was the lack of value placed on the library by others in the prison. GE2 described the biggest challenges of prison libraries to be “the lack of understanding within the prison system management about the value of prison libraries within the prison system” and not recognising that “a good library service makes prisons a safer place, they support the goals of the prison system.”

### ***Range and scope of provision***

Participants discussed the range and scope of library provision both prior to and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Beyond the provision of books and physical resources, the library was also seen to play a key role in providing outreach activities such as reading and writing groups, workshops and classes (GE3), where prisoners practice new skills (GE5), share poetry (GE2) and support and encourage each other (GE6). The library was also seen as a place for individual study (GE1), writing letters home and doing activities like puzzles and worksheets (GE5) and reading newspapers (GE1).

In response to library spaces being closed during the pandemic, new services were developed which participants were keen to see continue. This included remote provision “in which sets of books were regularly sent to the wings, with the help of [prisoner volunteers]” (GE1). GE1 noted the success of this as it had led to increased book requests and also served prisoners who could not access the library space during opening hours. GE4 agreed that this remote request system developed during the pandemic should continue and commented on the quality of book requests. Other examples included the distribution of activity sheets, puzzles and book review forms, which in some cases were added into education packs (GE1).

Insufficient budgets or public spending allocations were seen as the main challenge to the provision of library resources. GE6 noted that there is often no separate budget for prison libraries and some prisons “have more disposable income than others, especially the bigger ones, which can benefit from economies of scale.” GE1 stressed the need for a good turnover of stock relevant to the users’ needs with relatively frequent deliveries, to avoid boredom during time in prison.

### ***Universal access***

The theme of access included physical access to the library space as well as access to library resources and activities. The need for improved access to ICT was also highlighted. There was a particular emphasis on achieving a user-centred and inclusive service which could provide resources and activities for all prisoners, regardless of their literacy levels or security status in the prison.

Participants viewed the prison library as a vital place “that can take people away from the chaos of the landings, the strict regime, difficulties the prisoners may be having” (GE5) and the deep sense of separation from their families. It needs to be seen as a safe, welcoming and friendly space (GE1), a cultural space, a “community space” (GE3), a “more normal space” (GE2), a space that caters “for every single prisoner that comes in” (GE5); where there is “an

ethos of respect” (GE4), where “they know they won’t be judged” (GE1, GE4), a sanctuary or haven (GE6), where prisoners cooperate and prevent others from engaging in topics which might threaten the sense of safety (GE4). In one case, a prison library received an award for being a “haven of learning” (GE4).

Despite the importance of the library space, there were often barriers preventing regular access to the library. Officer shortages prevented prisoners from being escorted to the library. GE1 noted that “very often the first person to be taken off is the library [officer]” during a staff shortage. Security issues can “lead to unequal access to prison library services for prisoners that have restricted movement” (GE2). The pandemic also impacted on access to the physical library space, although there were also positive reports of sizable book donations during this time (GE2, GE6) and increased access to books for separated prisoners (GE1).

Access to the library catalogue was frequently discussed. It was suggested that prisoners should have access to a shared library catalogue that would enable the sharing of stock across prisons as well as public libraries, either using a more restricted locked down version for prisons or having access to a wider public access catalogue. An example was shared of prison libraries in Berlin having access to catalogues in their local public library authority, which increased access to book stock and collections for prisoners (GE3).

Increased access to digital technology was seen as crucial and was raised as one of the key challenges in prison library provision. Participants recognised the security problems associated with open access to the internet but discussed ways of providing closed access. GE1 considered this to be a priority area for prison library policy so that prisoners could have better access to computers “with lockdown elements” that would also enable access to newspapers in different languages. GE3 also highlighted the importance of accessing technology and shared examples of increased access during the pandemic, such as being able to video call family members and access offline materials, as well as “isolated exceptions where [prisoners] were able to use the Internet with a prison guard standing behind them.”

### ***Partnership and collaboration – internally and externally***

Participants provided numerous examples of working alongside others to strengthen prison library services and broaden the scope of their provision. These examples included internal collaboration with other prison departments and staff as well as liaison or formal partnerships with external organisations and public libraries.

The importance of collaborating with the education department was recognised by participants and GE3 asserted that the “value of prison education and prison libraries and how they could work together needs to be understood more within the prison system.” The prison library also had the potential to be the “hub” of the prison by feeding into different areas of activity in the prison and by the library space being used as a space for events (GE5). GE5 described the effort they made to work with other prison departments, which helped to raise the profile of the library:

*We do a lot of trying to become the hub of the prison. We work very strongly with both the prison service and all the partners that exist within these prisons...What we’re there for is to be somewhere that everyone can feed into. So if there’s a particular course going on at the gym, can we help? Can we get books in? Can we get somebody in? We try to offer that to every department. We try to be involved in all the prison meetings with partners...We offer the library for meeting rooms (Finlay et al., 2022, p. 23).*

One library helped to assist another department to organise a ‘wellbeing day’ which provided opportunities “to give out free books to staff and prisoners” (GE4). GE6 added that opening up reading challenges to staff as well as prisoners is an opportunity to build “great relationships between staff and prisoners.”

GE2 and GE3 mentioned the importance of having a strong relationship with public libraries. “Every prisoner has the same right to a modern library system as everyone else” (GE3). Links with public libraries, for example, provide “more freedom for ordering stock” (GE4).

Offering public library cards to prisoners prior to release was mentioned both by GE3 and GE4, as well as the importance of letting them know that they are welcome in their public library and can “access the same services, the same range of books, computers, courses, book clubs, [programmes] going on for families and for mental health” (GE5). Several examples were given of successful collaboration with public libraries including mention of a women’s open prison where the prisoners “can go to the public library and use the computer to search for housing, jobs, etc” (GE1). “We try to mirror the public libraries as much as we can ... [for example] the way the book stock is displayed is very reflective of public libraries” (GE5), although it is also important to recognise when an initiative in a public library is less likely to work in a prison setting (GE5).

Running the same library programmes and events in both prison and public libraries provide a continuity and connection with the outside community. GE6 offered the example of a prison reading group which was also taking place in local colleges and public libraries, and where prisoners and college students exchanged book reviews:

*It’s fantastic for prisoners to know that this same project is running outside the walls so that they feel part of the community again so it’s now established in schools and in public libraries...it just becomes this wonderful massive public reading group then and there’s no longer that barrier of ‘we’re inside, we’re no longer part of society, we no longer contribute in any way’. It makes such a difference (Finlay et al., 2022, p. 24).*

### ***Staffing, training and networking***

All participants stressed the importance of a professionally run library. Hiring qualified library staff can ensure that professional standards are adhered to in the prison library and is “crucial for a good prisoner experience” (GE2). GE1 noted that it is important “to have knowledgeable staff that will go the extra mile to discover what prisoners need, including signposting them to relevant material.” GE2 concurred that a good librarian will have the expertise to “develop the library collection around prisoner needs.” The need for professional development and training opportunities for prison library staff was also mentioned. GE1 concluded that prisons “need to invest in this and to support people to develop in this area.” GE3 agreed that there needs to be increased training opportunities for all staff involved in the delivery of prison library services.

The involvement of prisoners in running the library was encouraged. This not only helps to extend library opening hours (GE2) but also offers opportunities for prisoners to develop job and life skills (GE1), helps to increase their self-esteem (GE2, GE4) and allows “prisoners to take pride in their involvement” (GE2). GE1 gave an example of a prisoner working in a prison library “who went on to become a library assistant in a public library after release.” It was also noted that training prisoners as library assistants does not negate the need for a professionally run library. GE3 noted that “normalising non-professional librarian posts would ultimately make it hard to deliver a professional service” (GE3).

### ***The library as a support while in prison and as a stepping-stone for re-entering society***

Library services were seen as both providing support for library users during incarceration and in preparation for returning to their community. Examples of successful practice included the previously mentioned reading group (GE5) and family literacy events, where storybooks are shared and recorded by incarcerated parents, thus maintaining family ties and increasing confidence in reading to their children (GE1, GE5). The primary challenges related to funding and selecting effective programmes that foster creativity and enhance intrinsic learning (G6). Prisoners were sometimes inhibited from approaching or fully utilising the library due to self-perceptions of their own literacy abilities (G4).

Participants were keen to see a greater emphasis on outreach work and support for prisoners in terms of both social interaction and accessing digital technology, not only during their sentence but also so that they can better cope when they return to their communities. People

come into prison as “members of a digital world and need to be able to exist in that world when they leave” (GE3). Preparing prisoners for access and use of public libraries post-release is vital, perhaps also including giving prisoners “member cards for public libraries on their release” (GE3).

### ***Review, evaluation and user feedback***

Having already noted the risk of libraries being overlooked and undervalued in prisons, participants reflected on the need to share good practice, strengthen advocacy (GE1, GE3 and GE5), carry out research that would evidence impact (GE3) and to get buy-in at top levels (GE6).

The need for prison library staff to be proactive in demonstrating their achievements was noted. It was suggested that librarians need to “attend all the meetings and [be] proactive... it helps when prisoners talk about the libraries - sometimes prison officers can’t see its effects without this type of evidence” (GE1). GE5 suggested that eye-catching displays can attract the attention of “officers and managers walking [past]” (G5). GE4 also considered it important that the library be included in prison inspections because “it’s in the governor’s interest for the library to be working well.”

Where service level agreements exist between prisons and local public library authorities, participants noted that book issues are recorded and there are monthly reports (GE1, GE4) on stock, number of library members, activities, language and age range of users “to ensure we have enough stock in different languages” (GE1), and there are regular inspections (GE4, GE5). Feedback is collected from prisoners and prison managers on what the prisoners like, do not like, and would like to have (GE1, GE4). Determination of user needs must involve the input of the users. “If you’re going to be user-centred, you’ve got to use your users. You’ve got to have their input” (GE5). This participant added the idea of asking prisoners to write short book reviews as the “best way of recommending books to another prisoner is from another prisoner.” GE2 suggested creating a “prisoner library committee so that prisoners can feed back into library provision” which also allows prisoners to take pride in their involvement.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Writing about the value of evidence-based practice in the health-library setting, Eldridge (2000, p. 289) makes the point that “evidence-based librarianship offers a decision-making framework, which integrates the best available research evidence.” This helps to provide a stronger foundation on which to build library services and within a prison library context, the aim is to develop library services that support the individual in custody (and their re-entry into the community) and have value and benefits for the individual, their families, those that work within the prison setting, and wider society. This paper sought to draw together existing evidence with new findings to identify issues that should be prioritised by decision-makers and opportunities to close the gap between prison library guidelines and practice.

The qualitative findings discussed in this paper present a united vision among practitioners and researchers about issues of concern and where opportunities lie to strengthen library services offered to people in prison. There is also a clear consistency in priorities, experiences and emphasis between the interview findings and wider literature. Publishing these findings is an initial step in moving forward the work that needs to be done. One outworking of the Review of Prison Libraries in Ireland was the development of a set of ten principles which are intended to inform and guide future provision of prison libraries in Ireland (see Table 2). 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. They offer a good summary of the findings in this paper which highlight the need for *policy-driven* provision which ensures *universal access* that is *user-centred* with *professionalism* driving provision. This should be achieved through working in *partnership* to ensure that *the range and scope of provision* meets the needs of library users and that services are designed to reflect those accessible to the wider *community*. It is important to emphasise

the dual roles of *the library as a support while in prison* and *the library as a stepping-stone to re-entering society*, and the importance of and need for regular *review and evaluation*.

These principles were developed from a detailed critical analysis of the prison library context in Ireland and from a broad evidence base which involved collecting and analysing data from a range of stakeholders and perspectives (including the interview findings reported here). They start with the understanding that library services must be underpinned by a national policy of prison library provision. This paper has shown the need for improved policies at both national and local levels to inform effective library provision. While existing international guidelines offer a good starting point, it is crucial that these are adapted to reflect local contexts and there should be regular liaison between “representatives of prison libraries, prison authorities and relevant stakeholders” to “further review and develop these documents” (UNESCO, 2020, p.4). In her examination of prison library policy implementation, Conrad (2017) warns against vague and unclear policies which can result in interpretations changing from one administrator to the next. If written policies are not clear and detailed, they “may be interpreted differently and the role of the prison library may gain or lose importance as a fundamental service for prisoners” (p. 10).

Šimunić et al. (2014, p. 77) identified the issue that national policies and discussions are often “made by prison administrators who lack a fundamental understanding of library work in the prison environment.” This paper has demonstrated the value of library services, which extend far beyond the provision of reading material.

*A professionally developed prison library collection, along with professional library staff, innovative programming, and an educational mission all work together to shatter the misconception that a prison library can simply consist of a collection of donated books* (Colorado Library Consortium, 2020, p. 20).

It is positive that there has been a recent surge in international prison library literature alongside the publication of the most recent edition of IFLA’s guidelines, but it is imperative that this work reaches researchers, practitioners and policymakers outside of the niche field of prison librarianship to deepen understanding of the wide-reaching benefits of prison libraries and to ensure they are afforded the attention they merit within wider prison strategy and policy documents. We know there are strategies that work in relation to the provision of prison library services – that evidence base, of which this paper is part, exists and is growing. Findings discussed in this paper can contribute to the global discourse around key priorities for prison library provision and offer suggestions to decision-makers about how to bridge that gap between policy and practice in the effort to improve prison library provision in local contexts. This research also highlights the value of taking a global perspective even when the focus is on national provision of library services. Embedding strategic reviews within a global context ensures a strong international evidence base on which to build both national and local directions.

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