

COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

Suicide Prevention Pathway in
Scottish prisons





Our Vision

Since 2016, Scotland's prisons have used the Talk to Me strategy to prevent suicide and respond to self-harm, this is a protocol designed to strengthen support for people in custody. An independent academic review, led by Professor Graham Towl, has been undertaken. Alongside recommendations from Fatal Accident Inquiries (FAIs) and the Towl review, these provide the foundation for a comprehensive overhaul of our approach to suicide prevention. It highlights that Talk to Me is not the right approach in its current format, and that rather than a suicide prevention framework, Talk to Me operates as a crisis response.

This paper sets out a new bold and compassionate vision to support those in crisis within Scottish prisons. Every action is designed, based on evidence, to help each person in custody feel confident and able to make informed choices about their own circumstances and to keep them safe, healthy, and supported. Suicide among individuals in custody reflects the complex intersections of mental health, trauma, and systemic challenges that many within our care experience. We know that we need to involve the individual at the centre of every decision.

Maintaining contact with trusted loved ones - whether family members, close friends, or supportive peers - can be a lifeline for individuals in crisis. In moments of vulnerability, these connections provide reassurance, emotional stability, and a sense of belonging that is often critical to recovery. Allowing and facilitating this contact is not just compassionate; it can play a vital role in helping someone feel supported, understood, and less isolated during one of the most challenging times in their life.

Our commitments align with Scotland's national suicide prevention framework: "Creating Hope Together. Scotland's Suicide Prevention Strategy 2022-2032" and translates into practical steps: rapid crisis intervention, equipping staff with the right skills, strengthening peer support, and tailoring care to each person's needs and lived experience. It recognises the unique vulnerabilities of the prison population and the need for tailored evidence-based responses that reflect the lived experiences of those affected.

Our vision is that this pathway creates a safer environment, underpinned by a culture of respect and compassion, where every individual feels valued and empowered to seek and receive help when needed.

Beyond Crisis

This document marks the beginning of a new approach. The crisis response has been prioritised for rapid overhaul, but this is only one part of a wider ambition.

This Commitment to Change is a starting point, and we will go beyond crisis intervention - linking closely with our mental health strategy to ensure suicide prevention is understood as part of keeping people well, not just responding when things go wrong. This broader approach will embed prevention into everyday practice, strengthen resilience, and address the underlying factors that contribute to distress.

Our Commitment to those in our care:

We recognise every person in custody will have their own complexities and individual needs. Our prison population includes people with diverse needs shaped by trauma, mental health challenges, and life experiences. This requires us to think differently about how we provide care and support and requires a cultural shift across our organisation. We are committed to creating an environment where every individual feels valued, respected, and safe and are treated with time, space and compassion. This means:

- **Compassion at the core** – Every interaction will be grounded in empathy and dignity.
- **Safety with compassion** – We will protect without punitive or isolating practices, reducing distress and risk.
- **Person-centred care** – We will treat people as individuals, listen to their voices, and involve them in decisions about their care.
- **Hope and connection** – We will provide support that fosters trust, purpose, and practical coping strategies for the future.



These commitments are not just words - they shape how we train staff, change our culture, design interventions, and measure success. They guide every decision and action within the new suicide prevention pathway and remain relevant even as we move through a period of change.

Our promise is simple: every life matters, and every person in our care deserves compassion, safety, and hope.

Our Commitment to our staff:

We recognise the extraordinary work our staff do every day in challenging circumstances. Our prison population is becoming increasingly complex and demanding, with diverse needs shaped by trauma and life experiences. Understanding this complexity is essential, as is changing the culture in which we work and we must look differently at how we provide the right support - not only for those in our care, but for the staff who care for them.

Our commitment is to:

- Build confidence and capability** with all staff and with tailored training that reflects the unique needs of the prison population.
- Create opportunities for shared learning** with dedicated forums to exchange best practice and strengthen collective expertise.
- Consider creating dedicated resources** within establishments to strengthen capacity for critical duties and consider specialist assistance where needed.
- Ensure wellbeing support** through responsive HR packages and practical tools that help staff manage the challenges of their role and protect their own wellbeing.



Our promise: We will work with staff to design solutions that make their roles safer, more sustainable, and more supported - because caring for those in custody starts with caring for those who serve.

How we Deliver Change

These principles on how we deliver change have not been developed in isolation. They reflect the collective expertise and experience of a wide range of partners across health, justice, and community sectors. Through workshops, consultations, and lived experience input, we have shaped a shared this approach that prioritises safety, compassion, and person-centred care. This collaborative process ensures that the principles are practical, evidence-informed, and supported by those who will deliver and experience change.

By framing each principle as a 'We will' statement, we make our intent clear: these are actions we will take to deliver meaningful change across Scottish prisons.

- **We will lead with compassion** – Respond with empathy, respect, and active listening, so every person feels heard and supported.
- **We will protect with compassion** – Implementing safety measures that reduce distress, avoiding punitive or isolating practices.
- **We will work together, with a person-centred** – Treat individuals as whole people and make decisions collaboratively, respecting diversity and dignity.
- **We will build human connection** – Ensure no one is left alone - maintain trust through ongoing contact and involve supportive networks.
- **We will foster a culture of hope and future focus** – Provide support that builds purpose and practical coping strategies beyond the immediate crisis.
- **We will empower staff with confidence**– Deliver training and clear processes so staff act decisively and ask sensitive questions without fear about whether someone is suicidal.
- **We will communicate and coordinate**– Share information promptly and work as a team to prevent fragmented responses.
- **We will design systems that enable care**– Create policies and tools that uphold dignity, fairness, and relational care across all establishments.

What success looks like

Success is defined by the voices and experiences of those in our care. The “I Am” statements represent what every individual should feel, this is our goal. When people can say:



...then we know we are achieving real change.

Our ultimate goal is to prevent deaths by suicide in prison custody. Success is striving towards eliminating suicides in prison altogether. It's about creating an environment where people in our care have hope, dignity, and quality of life.

Success in Practice

- People in crisis feel heard, respected, and safe - not judged or punished.
- They experience connection, hope, and practical coping tools for future distress.
- Individuals feel able to speak openly about suicidal thoughts without fear.
- Staff feel skilled, supported, and confident, with clear handovers and continuity of care.
- The prison system delivers a consistent, fair, and joined-up approach across locations and services.

- By shifting to a person-centred approach in suicide prevention, we anticipate a measurable reduction in suicide rates, as interventions become more tailored, responsive, and effective for individual needs.

When these experiences and outcomes are real, our vision becomes reality. This is the standard we strive for every day.

What we'll do



Delivering meaningful change requires clear, practical actions. We have grouped these into four areas that will transform how we prevent suicide and support wellbeing in custody:

Prevent

We will identify and act on early warning signs before crisis escalates. This means acknowledging triggers, recognising changes in behaviour and situational indicators - such as bad news or self-neglect - and responding proactively to reduce risk.

Respond

We will deliver rapid crisis intervention when someone is at acute risk. Immediate response protocols and work with partners to have 24/7 support within prisons and a new Enhanced Support Team dedicated to supporting those most in need.

Support

We will strengthen communication and coordination, so individuals feel safe and supported. Information will be shared, where the individual chooses, with staff and loved ones, respecting their consent. Staff will receive mandatory suicide prevention training tailored to the population they are supporting with specialist advanced development for key roles. A dedicated Enhanced Support Team will provide skilled, consistent care.

Innovate

We will introduce practical solutions that make support easier and more effective. This includes exploring IT tools for real-time updates, developing an intervention toolbox for high-risk situations (safe spaces, family contact, comfort items), expanding peer mentoring and the Listener Scheme, and creating tailored care pathways informed by trauma and mental health needs.

Turning Commitment into Action

What we have set out is not a quick fix - it is a whole-system change which is a new way of working and includes training and culture change. Delivering this vision will require commitment and collaboration across the justice and health systems, and from our partners in the community. It will also need the voices and trust of those in our care. Change of this scale takes time, and we will prioritise it to make sure progress is steady and meaningful.

As we navigate this period of transformation, it's important to emphasise that everything outlined in this document is already actionable. These principles and commitments represent the core values and practices we should strive to uphold every day. Our immediate priority is to embed these values into daily practice, ensuring they guide decision-making and interactions across all areas and all aspects of our culture and our work. At the same time, we are laying the foundations for long-term sustainability by building the structures, systems, and a culture that will support these principles well into the future. This dual approach - acting now while planning for tomorrow - will help us maintain consistency, strengthen trust, and create lasting positive change.

Success will come from shared ownership. We will work openly with partners, staff, and people in custody to ensure this pathway is not just designed for them, but with them.

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