

GLOBAL PRISON RADIO TOOLKIT

BUILDING BEST PRACTICE STEP BY STEP

Prison Radio International



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WELCOME TO OUR TOOLKIT

This global best practice guide to prison radio has been developed through the experience, insight and commitment of people around the world involved in prison radio projects.

By 'prison radio projects' we mean the production of audio content with people impacted by criminal legal systems[1] – both in prison and in the community.

This toolkit draws on collective practice across diverse contexts and is designed to support those starting or strengthening a prison radio project. It is structured around a series of questions – the same kinds of questions practitioners ask themselves every day. We believe that asking the right questions is essential to developing work that is ethical, effective and rooted in local realities.

The questions in this toolkit have been shaped through conversations with a wide range of stakeholders. These include people in prison and post-release, prison staff and policymakers, media professionals and those working in charities, NGOs and universities. What connects them is a shared understanding of the power of communication – and of audio in particular – to support positive change for individuals, institutions and society.

This toolkit is for anyone exploring prison radio, wherever you are and whatever your starting point. It is designed to help you ask better questions of yourself and others and to support you in identifying approaches that are right for your context, drawing on learning from projects across our global network.

It is not a guide on how to make radio. There are many excellent resources that cover the technical aspects of production.[2] Instead, this toolkit focuses on the ethical, relational and institutional challenges that define prison radio work. Our experience across the network is clear: the most significant challenges are rarely technical – they are about relationships, power, trust and context.

The examples included here are drawn from real situations encountered by projects around the world. They are intended to support reflection rather than prescribe fixed answers. In complex environments, good practice comes from curiosity, careful listening and a commitment to doing this work responsibly and well.

We hope this toolkit supports organisations of all kinds – including grassroots groups, media organisations and state institutions – to understand the role of prison radio in promoting dignity, strengthening communication and contributing to more informed and humane criminal justice systems.

This toolkit is for anyone exploring prison radio, wherever you are and whatever your starting point.

[1] We use the term 'criminal legal system' rather than 'criminal justice system' deliberately, to reflect the fact many of the ways our criminal legal systems work do not make our societies more just. For further understanding please see: https://cepp.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/RTI-CriminalLegal-vs-CriminalJustice-Brief-2022-08.pdf

[2] See for example: https://www.communityradiotoolkit.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Community-Radio-Toolkit.pdf ; https://radioworkshop.org/how-to-make-your-own-radio-shows/ ; https://journalism.university/electronic-media/effective-radio-programme-planning/#google_vignette ; https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio/commissioning/Guidelines_to_Making_Programmes_for_BBC_World_Service.pdf and https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio/commissioning/Guidelines_to_Making_Programmes_for_BBC_World_Service.pdf



THIS IS A LIVING DOCUMENT

We will continue to learn and develop it over time and we welcome contributions from across the network.

If you have examples or learning to share, please contact **PRI@prison.radio**

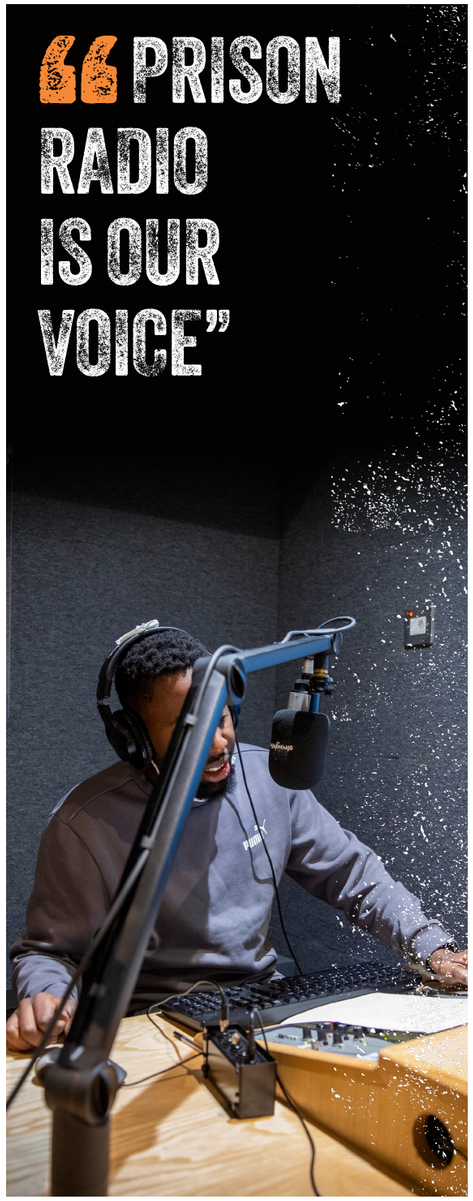
If you have not yet told us about your project, you can do so here: **https://prison.radio/global-prison-radio-survey**

The survey is available in multiple languages and is open to both existing and emerging projects.

With thanks to all those who have contributed to the development of this toolkit, especially:

Abbey Darling (Prison Radio Association), Andrew Wilkie (Prison Radio Association), Eli Wirtschafter (KALW's Uncuffed), Felipe Athayde Lins, Garth St Clair (Rise Maximum Radio), Gil Alessi (Journalist and Researcher), Greg Eskridge (KALW's Uncuffed), Heather Anderson (Griffith University), Herbert Alexander (Colorado Radio for Justice), Jefferson Nascimento (Porticus), João Luís Francisco da Silva, Maria Luiza Grillo (SEJUS), Maurício Monteiro (Founder,"Prisioneiro 84.901"), Nelson Rodrigo Pereira Merçon (SEJUS), Odair da Silva Loureiro, Phil Maguire (Co-founder, Prison Radio International), Priscila Gomes Palmeiro, Dr Ruth Armstrong (Justice Matters), Ryan Conarro (Colorado Radio For Justice), Samuel Rivero, Sarah Taylor (Prison Radio Association), Seth Ready (Colorado Radio For Justice), Urszula Doliwa and Valdirene Daufemback (Fazendo Justiça).

STEP 1 WHY MAKE PRISON RADIO?



Prison radio empowers people impacted by the criminal legal system to share their experiences, build skills in media production and foster meaningful connections within and beyond prison walls.

As an international network of prison radio projects (Prison Radio International – PRI), we embrace solutions-focused journalism.[3] This means moving beyond simply identifying problems to exploring how positive change can happen. We do not shy away from the harm caused by crime, but we seek to balance dominant punitive narratives with a focus on what can support progress, rehabilitation and growth. Our work is grounded in reality, while recognising the shared responsibility to build personal, interpersonal and social resilience.

A human right to communication

Prison radio projects in the PRI network are committed to upholding the right to communication for people involved in criminal legal systems. This right is set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by 175 states globally.

While this right is not absolute and prisons may impose restrictions to maintain safety, security and good order, any limitations should be lawful, necessary and proportionate.

Prison radio provides a vital channel for amplifying the voices of people in prison and after release, creating a bridge to the wider community. Through storytelling and solutions-focused dialogue, it can foster empathy, challenge stereotypes and contribute to more constructive conversations about justice, rehabilitation and reintegration.

[3] https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/

The impact of prison radio

Defending the right to communication for people in prison and after release has significant impact, evidenced by some of the radio projects in our network.

PROMOTE REHABILITATION AND SKILL-BUILDING

Participants develop communication, technical and media skills that support personal growth and reintegration.

“While working on the radio, I developed new skills I couldn’t have gained anywhere else. It helped me start believing in myself”

“I’m more confident to apply to jobs and do my CV because I’ve given things a go here that I wouldn’t have done before.”

91%

said working on National Prison Radio made them feel more prepared or confident to find a job or education on release

100%

said working on National Prison Radio improved both their confidence and digital skills

SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-EXPRESSION

Creative participation can reduce isolation and enable people to find and share their voice.

“The instrumentals allow me to express myself and transfer negative and positive energy into artistry and lyrics/poetry. The presenter’s words of encouragement and making me feel safe, welcomed and a part of the show really has made a big difference to how I cope and manage my anxiety and stress and general wellbeing in custody.”

“National Prison Radio is a constant reminder that I’m not in this alone.”

77%

of National Prison Radio listeners said listening helped them to stay positive in prison

93%

of National Prison Radio listeners said listening helped them feel motivated to make positive changes

Colorado Prison Radio won a Top of the Rockies Award for ‘Chow Time: Screaming in the Silence’ – a programme about the Colorado Department of Corrections mental health peer assistance programme.

COLORADO RADIO FOR JUSTICE

Global Prison Radio Toolkit 2026

STEP 1 WHY MAKE PRISON RADIO?

STRENGTHENS FAMILY AND COMMUNITY TIES

Broadcasts can help families and wider networks better understand the realities of imprisonment and offer more effective support.

> *"It has helped guide me through the unfamiliarity of having a family member go to prison and how to support them through their sentence"*

> *"You provide a sense of belonging and family, stability and comfort every week"*

> *"It is that one extra little link to our loved ones beyond the gates and bars"*

The Family and Friend's Request Show, on the UK's National Prison Radio, gives people in prison the opportunity to share messages and music with loved ones.



In Espírito Santo, Brazil, the programme Zap Zap Família allows friends and family to leave recorded messages for broadcast.

50%

of National Prison Radio listeners said listening has encouraged them to contact family/ friends

INFLUENCE PUBLIC PERCEPTION

By challenging stereotypes, prison radio can contribute to more balanced and compassionate public understanding.

The UK Life After Prison Podcast found that

95%

of listeners surveyed reported a better understanding of people affected by the criminal justice system.

> *"It humanizes and challenges misconceptions by sharing lived experiences"*
>
> Life After Prison listener

> *"Listening to your stories has changed my perspective on the justice system"*
>
> Uncuffed listener

AMPLIFY THE WORK OF PARTNERS

Prison radio can support organisations delivering services to people in prison and after release by extending the reach of their information and support, particularly for those who are socially isolated.

Shannon Trust is a UK charity that supports those in prison to improve their literacy and numeracy. Shannon Trust sponsor 'Free Flow' on National Prison Radio which is a show promoting expressing yourself through writing lyrics and poetry. During the show the benefits of Shannon Trust are regularly promoted.

CREATE SPACE FOR DIALOGUE BETWEEN PENAL SYSTEMS AND PEOPLE IN PRISON

Prison radio can enable constructive dialogue between those living and working within prisons. Editorial independence can sit alongside the ability to ask difficult questions and build mutual understanding.

Adj Hangot (Speak Out Association) in Hungary reported that their prison radio led to the first press conference where people in prison and prison authorities spoke side by side.[4]



CEO of the UK's Prison and Probation Service with the hosts of the 'Life After Prison' podcast

[4] Sparks, J.R and Bottoms, A.E. (1995) 'Legitimacy and Order in Prisons' in The British Journal of Sociology Vol. 46 No. 1pp. 45-62 https://www.jstor.org/stable/591622 and Deambrogio, C. (2025) 'Procedural Justice and Prison Legitimacy: Towards a Democratic Model of Inmate Participation' in Oxford Journal of Legal Studies, Vol. 45 Issue 3, pp. 801-820 https://academic.oup.com/ojls/article/45/3/801/8142501

TIME TO REFLECT

As you consider your own context, it may be helpful to reflect on the following:

- **Do these impacts resonate with you? Which matter most in your setting? Are there other impacts that matter in your setting not listed here?**
- **What does the 'right to communication' mean in your context? Where might tensions arise between communication and security?**
- **What does solutions-focused journalism look like in your context? What stories do you want to tell – and which might you choose not to?**
- **What is distinctive about your context? What opportunities, constraints or risks does this create?**

As you move through this toolkit, you may return to these questions. Your aims, values and boundaries will shape the impact of your work, the compromises you are willing to make and where you draw your red lines.

In the next section, we explore how prison radio operates in different contexts around the world.

STEP 2 PRISON RADIO AROUND THE WORLD

Prison radio is not one thing. Across the Prison Radio International (PRI) network, projects vary widely in where they are based, who makes the audio, who listens, how programmes are distributed and what resources are available.

At the time of publication (early 2026), PRI's global survey has received 127 responses from...

27 countries

78 prison radio projects

Most are run by charities, non-profits or NGOs, though organisational models vary. Some are run by prison authorities, while others are delivered through partnerships with universities, community organisations or other institutions. In South America, for example, over half of projects are linked to educational institutions.

The survey suggests a young and growing field: around half of projects have started in the last five years. There are likely many more projects globally than are currently captured. This is a rapidly expanding area, where sharing knowledge and resources is essential – particularly in contexts where funding is limited and political conditions make delivery challenging.

56% of projects we know about are based inside prisons

Others are produced outside and broadcast in, or developed through partnerships between community organisations and prison systems.

Across the network,

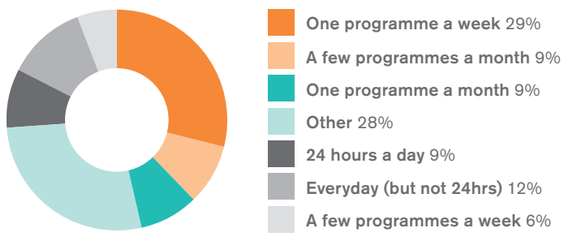
90% of projects involve people with lived experience of prison

71% involve people currently serving a sentence

In some countries, including Brazil, all surveyed projects included people with lived experience.

Globally, most projects produce weekly programmes rather than running a 24-hour station and much content is also shared publicly.

How much content do you broadcast?



PRI's AMPLIFIED blogs illustrate the diversity of approaches.

In India
Radio Parvaaz began during the Covid-19 pandemic in response to isolation and emotional distress. It now produces content on wellbeing, mindfulness, creativity and conflict resolution, with production taking place inside correctional facilities. Doctors have reported reduced anxiety and stress since its introduction.

In Trinidad and Tobago
RISE Maximum Radio has operated from Arouca Maximum Security Prison since 2012, with both prisoners and officers involved in production. It broadcasts inside the prison and streams online for families and the wider public, with programming shaped by regular listener feedback.

In Western Australia
Ngaarda Media produces a prison programme from its community studio, broadcasting music requests and messages between people in prison and their families. It is now developing an in-prison studio and storytelling workshops, with the aim of supporting production from inside.

In France
Les Repris de Justesse began as a journalism training programme for people in prison. Participants developed interviewing, writing and editing skills, with final edits completed externally before broadcast on community radio.

In Colorado
Colorado Radio for Justice began as Inside Wire, a 24-hour prison radio service operating across four state prison facilities during Covid lockdowns. It has since expanded to include re-entry, diversion work, podcasts, live events and resource-sharing led by system-impacted producers.

Across contexts, projects operate with very different levels of security, staffing and sustainability. Many rely heavily on volunteers and around half report being able to sustain their work for less than a year with current funding. Common challenges include funding, prison approval, censorship, safety, access and audience development. While models differ, all projects are shaped by the realities of their environment.



STEP 2 PRISON RADIO AROUND THE WORLD

How prison radio is produced around the world?

Production models vary widely and understanding this range can help you identify a realistic starting point.

Some projects begin with minimal resources – a microphone, a recording device and a notebook. In Colorado, work has continued using pen and paper while waiting for equipment to be reauthorised. In Buenos Aires, the project run by the Defensoría del Público in a federal prison operates without a dedicated studio, relying on portable equipment, political will and volunteer networks.

Many projects use a hybrid model: production takes place inside prison, while editing and broadcast happen externally. This reflects practical constraints, including limited internet access and restrictions on file sharing. For example, in France, Les Repris de Justesse supports people in prison to develop interviewing, writing and editing skills, with final edits completed externally before programmes are approved for community broadcast.

At the other end of the spectrum are projects with dedicated studios and continuous output. Inside Wire in Colorado operated embedded radio stations producing 24-hour content, while National Prison Radio in the UK runs a national service with a professionally staffed studio and significant participation from people in prison.

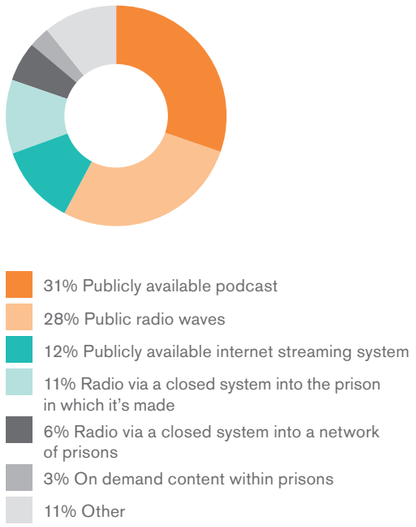
What matters most is not the level of technical sophistication, but how well production is adapted to the realities of the setting – including access to equipment, available spaces and security restrictions. Many projects use portable equipment and temporary studio setups.

The technology matters far less than clarity of purpose, realistic planning and the willingness to start simply and build over time.



Project run by the 'Defensoría del Público' in Buenos Aires, Argentina

What is your main way of transmitting radio?



How prison radio is broadcast around the world?

Broadcast models vary as widely as production models. Within prisons, content is most commonly accessed via a closed system radio. Other ways of broadcasting include in-cell televisions, loudspeakers and internet-enabled devices such as tablets or computers. The available infrastructure and institutional permissions determine what is possible.

In the UK, National Prison Radio broadcasts to prisons in England and Wales through a closed in-cell television system. In Trinidad and Tobago, RISE Maximum Radio broadcasts inside prison while also streaming online, enabling shared listening between people inside and outside. Inside Wire in Colorado operated at a larger scale, producing 24-hour content across multiple prison facilities and reaching both in-prison and external audiences.

Beyond the prison, the landscape has shifted significantly with the growth of digital platforms. Across the Prison Radio International network, 60% of projects distribute podcasts, 41% broadcast on public radio and 32% use online streaming platforms. Community audiences most often access content via the internet followed by radio but in a few cases MP3 players and CDs remain the most reliable route to listeners.

Choosing a broadcast method depends on your audience, infrastructure, permissions and resources. Projects focused on family connection may prioritise shared listening between inside and outside. Those focused on public engagement may prioritise podcast distribution. Many combine approaches.

There is no single correct model. The key question is who you want to reach and how to reach them from your current position.

TIME TO REFLECT

The questions below are designed to help you consider what might work in your context:

- **Which examples feel closest to your context and which feel furthest away?**
- **Where is production most likely to begin – inside prison, outside, or through partnership?**
- **Who is realistically able to make audio at the outset?**
- **What format is most achievable: a weekly programme, podcast, request show, workshops, or something else?**
- **What existing resources, relationships or platforms can you build on?**
- **What constraints will shape your model most strongly?**
- **How will your content reach its intended audience?**
- **What is the simplest way you could begin now?**
- **How might your project grow over time?**

There is no single way to do prison radio. Projects develop in response to their context, relationships and priorities. Being clear about your purpose, values and boundaries will shape the decisions you make in practice.

In the next section we discuss determining your goals and how these will drive the decisions you make.



STEP 3 MY GOALS & VALUES

What do I want to achieve (my goals) and how to do it (my values)?

We believe that clear goals (what you hope to achieve) and values in action (how you choose to work) are the touchstones of strong prison radio. What connects effective projects is not uniformity but clarity: a clear sense of purpose and a commitment to working in ways that align with it, even when this is difficult.

As Brené Brown writes in Dare to Lead:

> “A value is a way of being or believing that we hold most important. Living into our values means that we do more than profess our values, we practice them.”

A value is not simply something we state; it is something we practice. This is particularly true in prison radio, where decisions are rarely straightforward and competing priorities, relationships and constraints must be navigated carefully.

What are the goals of prison radio?

Evidence from across the PRI network shows that while projects differ widely, there are strong shared priorities. The most common goals are:

1. **Educating the public about life in prison to build knowledge and empathy**
2. **Protecting the right to communication and amplifying the voices of people in prison**
3. **Connecting people in prison with the outside world**
4. **Supporting rehabilitation and reintegration**
5. **Building skills in radio and media production**

These priorities are not evenly distributed. State-led projects may emphasise rehabilitation and reducing reoffending, while university-led or community-based projects may prioritise skills development, participation or public education. This means that even where projects look similar, decisions in practice may be guided by different underlying goals.

STEP 3 MY GOALS & VALUES

Values in action

If goals describe what a project is trying to achieve, values shape how that work is carried out, especially when there is pressure, disagreement or uncertainty.

Within PRI, guiding values have been developed to support the international network. These include inclusion and belonging, deep listening and respect, participation of people with lived experience, accountability and humility and a belief in communication as a tool for narrative change. One concept that captures this is Dadirri,[5] an Aboriginal Australian term referring to deep, respectful listening – the kind of listening that creates space for understanding rather than simply response.

Alongside these network-level values, locally grounded values also emerge. In a Brazil stakeholder workshop, participants from government, civil society, prison administrations and people with lived experience emphasised participation, trust, courage, persistence and avoiding instrumentalisation by the state or other actors. These reflect the specific social and political realities in which their projects operate.

Values can connect a global network, but they must also be shaped by local context.

What this looks like in practice

Goals and values matter most when something is contested or uncertain. The examples below show how different, equally defensible decisions can emerge depending on what a project is trying to achieve and how it chooses to work.

EXAMPLE 1 » The hot drinks dilemma

Your team begins each session with a shared hot drink, a small ritual that builds trust and a sense of community. One day, a member of prison staff insists that people in prison are not allowed to have hot drinks in the studio.

There is no single correct response:

- If your goal is systems change and your values emphasise dignity and participation, you might question the rule and advocate for change.
- If your goal is rehabilitation through skill-building and your values emphasise cooperation and relationship-building, you might comply in the moment and raise the issue later.
- If your goal is long-term sustainability, you might prioritise maintaining trust with staff and take a pragmatic approach.

Each response can be justified, but reflects different priorities and interpretations of values such as respect, dignity and compromise.

EXAMPLE 2 » Deadlines vs development

You are working towards a broadcast deadline. A new prison-based team member is still learning editing skills and would benefit from more time.

- If your goal is skills development, you may extend the timeline, prioritising learning over output.
- If your goal is consistency and public reach, you may meet the deadline and complete the edit yourself.
- If your values emphasise both participation and quality, you might find a compromise, supporting the participant while ensuring the programme is finished.

This tension reflects deeper questions about what the project is for and how it operates.

Turning values into decisions

One practical way to apply goals and values is through "even over" statements.[6] These help teams make decisions by clarifying what they will usually prioritise when tensions arise.

Many of the hardest decisions are not between right and wrong, but between competing goods: participation and quality, independence and access, speed and depth, honesty and relationship.

"Even over" statements can help you:

- Make values actionable
- Reduce uncertainty in pressured situations
- Support shared decision-making
- Avoid escalating routine dilemmas

For example:

- Participation even over polish
- Long-term trust even over short-term access
- Lived experience leadership even over professional control
- Dialogue even over broadcast perfection
- Editorial independence even over institutional comfort

These are guiding commitments, not rules. There may be times when you choose differently, but doing so becomes a conscious decision.

A useful exercise is to identify real tensions in your project and write 4–6 "even over" statements that reflect how you want to respond to them.

[5] The word, concept and spiritual practice that is dadirri (da-did-ee) is from the Ngan'gikuurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages of the Aboriginal peoples of the Daly River region (Northern Territory, Australia). It relates to inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. We use this term with kind permission of Miriam-Rose Ungumerr).

[6] For an example of how to use even over statements see: https://medium.com/the-ready/even-overs-the-prioritization-tool-that-brings-your-strategy-to-life-e4f28f2949ac

» TIME TO REFLECT

In prison radio, difficult decisions are inevitable. What matters is how those decisions are made.

- **What are we trying to achieve and for whom?**
- **Which values matter most in practice?**
- **Where are we willing to compromise and where are our red lines?**
- **How will we make decisions when goals or values pull in different directions?**
- **How will we ensure meaningful involvement of people with lived experience?**

Making these discussions explicit within your team can help you navigate complexity with consistency and care.

Prison radio brings together people in prison, those post-release, community organisations, institutions and wider audiences. With this comes both opportunity and complexity.

Clarity about goals and values does not remove that complexity, but it provides a way to navigate it with honesty, consistency and care.

In the next step we discuss the different stakeholders involved in a prison radio project and how you can work together effectively. »

STEP 4 WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

Prison radio projects are shaped by a wide range of stakeholders across institutional, community and media environments. Unlike many media initiatives, they do not sit neatly within a single organisational structure. They are usually collaborative by design, bringing together people with different roles, responsibilities and forms of authority.

Data from the PRI Global Prison Radio Survey highlights this diversity. Projects are led by:



- 40% Charity / Non-profit / NGO
- 19% Educational institutions (schools, universities, colleges)
- 14% State / government-run
- 10% Community organisations
- 4% Private companies
- 13% Other

The “other” category includes projects based in public radio stations, volunteer-led networks, prison-run initiatives, cooperatives, trusts, committees and individually led projects.

This distribution underlines a key point: prison radio is a multi-stakeholder field. Most projects rely on some combination of:

- People living in prisons and those post-release
- Prison staff and institutional leaders
- NGOs and community organisations
- Universities and educators
- Media professionals and producers
- Families, audiences and wider communities
- Funders, policymakers and government actors

Each stakeholder brings something different: lived experience, access, skills, infrastructure, legitimacy or resources. No single group holds all of these. As a result, the strength of a prison radio project often depends on how well these relationships are understood and managed.

Being clear about who needs to be involved and ensuring that people understand and support the aims and values of the project, are vital to its success and longevity.



Phil Maguire – Prison Radio Association founder, and Miriam Lewin – journalist, writer and Head of ‘Defensoría del Público’ in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Working together: opportunities and tensions

Because prison radio operates across these differences, collaboration is both necessary and complex. Evidence from the workshops held during the development of this toolkit suggests that the central challenges are rarely technical. They are relational, institutional and ethical.

Common points of tension include:

- Differing priorities between stakeholders, for example safety, participation, public communication or rehabilitation
- Unequal access to power, particularly around decision-making, funding and institutional control
- Questions of editorial independence and influence
- Differing expectations about pace, quality and outcomes
- The risk that projects are shaped more by institutional agendas than by the people they aim to serve

Projects across the network respond to these tensions in different ways. Some have agreed shared production guidelines to establish clear expectations.[7] Some have set clear red lines around partnerships, funding or editorial control – for example, refusing government money in order to maintain journalistic independence. Others invest in structured ways of working together, such as facilitated discussions, shared agreements and clear approaches to disagreement. Practices such as Brené Brown’s ‘rumble conversations’ are freely available online and can help different stakeholders to engage in honest dialogue when tensions arise.[7] These approaches do not remove difficulty, but they can create shared ways of navigating it.



Examples from the network

Different models of collaboration reflect different contexts and constraints.

In the UK

National Prison Radio is run by the Prison Radio Association, a charity working in long-term partnership with prison services. This gives the project national reach while maintaining an independent editorial voice shaped by people in prison.

It depends on sustained institutional relationships and clear boundaries around content.

In Espírito Santo, Brazil

prison radio initiatives have developed with strong government involvement, establishing professional radio studios in multiple prison units. The long-term aim is to have a radio studio in every prison in the state. Individual projects reflect the priorities of the prisons they serve. For example Rádio Black works closely with local priests and pastors to provide religious content, while Estaçao Purpurina supports LGBTQ+I prisoners to discuss the challenges they face. At the same time, shared formats such as family message programmes show how state-supported projects can also prioritise connection with communities outside prison.

In Buenos Aires

smaller projects such as the work of the ‘Defensoría del Público’ in a federal prison operate with minimal resources and no dedicated radio studio, relying on political will, institutional receptivity, informal partnerships and volunteer networks. These projects show how collaboration can emerge organically, but also how fragile it can be without stable infrastructure.

In the United States

KALW’s Uncuffed provides an example of deeply participatory practice. People in prison take on production and hosting roles, in collaboration with trainer/producers at a local radio station. The project is now co-directed by Ninna Gaensler-Debs, a long time producer of the project and Greg Askridge, a formerly incarcerated media maker who helped found the programme in 2012 and was released from San Quentin in July 2024. Their model foregrounds skill development and lived experience leadership within the bounds of an officially-sanctioned training programme.

[7] Some of these policies and guidelines at available the end of this toolkit in the ‘further resources’ section.

[8] See further: https://brenebrown.com/resources/the-story-rumble-process-a-guide-for-groups-and-teams/

Global Prison Radio Toolkit 2026

STEP 4 WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

Examples of working together in practice

The following scenarios reflect common dilemmas that arise when working with a range of stakeholders.

EXAMPLE 1 The editorial challenge dilemma

Producers include critical reflections on prison conditions in a programme, but the programme is reviewed by prison security before it is cleared for broadcast and the prison management raises concerns about reputational risk.

Would you:

- Proceed with the content as planned, prioritising the integrity of participants' voices and risking the relationship with the prison?
- Revise the framing of the programme to address concerns while retaining the core message?
- Pause, cancel or reshape the programme in discussion with those involved to order to preserve working relationships?

Each response involves a different balance between openness, partnership, trust and risk.

EXAMPLE 2 The partnership boundaries dilemma

A potential funder offers support, but with expectations about the themes or tone of content.

Projects might:

- Accept the funding and adapt their output
- Negotiate terms to retain editorial control
- Decline the funding to maintain independence

Some projects formalise these decisions through clearly defined red lines, while others take a case-by-case approach.

EXAMPLE 3 The decision-making power dilemma

In a collaborative project, external producers, prison staff and participants all have views on how a programme should be shaped and disagreement arises about how to handle a sensitive topic.

In your project, would you:

- Prioritise professional editorial judgment?
- Prioritise participant-led decision-making?
- Use structured dialogue methods to reach a collective decision?

There are many defensible ways to respond, but where no clear process exists, situations like this can lead to frustration or disengagement. Projects that invest in shared ways of handling disagreement often report stronger long-term collaboration, even if conversations are initially more difficult.



TIME TO REFLECT

Working with multiple stakeholders requires ongoing attention. It is not a one-time design decision, but a continuous process of negotiation, communication and adjustment.

As you consider your own project, the following questions may be helpful:

- **Who are the key stakeholders in our project and how are they involved?**
- **Where does decision-making power sit and how visible is this to everyone involved?**
- **What tensions are most likely to arise in our context?**
- **Do we have shared ways of handling disagreement or difficult decisions?**
- **Are there boundaries or red lines we need to define more clearly?**
- **How do we ensure that collaboration does not become tokenistic, but remains meaningful?**

Prison radio projects bring together people and institutions that do not always naturally align. Working well together does not mean resolving all differences. It means developing clear, thoughtful ways of engaging with them so that the work can continue with integrity and purpose.

Working effectively with prisons is often part of building a successful prison radio project. In the next step we explore this in more detail.

STEP 5 HOW DO WE WORK WELL WITH PRISIONS?

Across the PRI network, projects operate in very different institutional realities. In some contexts, prisons may appear closed to the idea of prison radio and even starting the conversation can feel difficult. In others, prisons actively seek partnerships but lack the resources to support them. In the most enduring examples, strong relationships are built over time through shared purpose, mutual respect and a clear understanding of roles.

Even where prison radio is initiated by the prison system itself, each prison has its own culture, leadership style and interpretation of rules. Thinking carefully about how to work well with this prison, in this place, is essential.

As Seth Ready, Co-Director of Colorado Radio for Justice put it:

Collaboration with prison staff and, where relevant, probation or post-release services, is central to success. Engaging staff as partners helps create safer, more communicative environments and supports the integration of radio into the life of the institution. At the same time, prison staff and radio teams bring different priorities and constraints. Recognising and working with these differences is key.

Working effectively with prisons requires persistence, respectful communication and a clear understanding of institutional hierarchies and processes. Success often depends on identifying and working with individuals who are open to collaboration and supportive of the project's aims.

> “This is not a one size fits all conversation.”

Different models in practice

Across the network, relationships with prisons take many forms.

In Argentina, RadiOculta, run by community radio station La Tribu in partnership with the Universidad de Buenos Aires, operates within a university centre inside a federal prison. While access to the centre is agreed with the prison, the space itself is not monitored by staff. Participants can record audio with relative autonomy and take it out to be editing and public broadcast. This model reflects a high level of trust and creates space for independence.

In other contexts, projects operate under tighter controls. Movement is supervised, equipment is regulated and content may be reviewed before broadcast. These differences reflect local legal frameworks, institutional cultures and relationships.



Makeshift radio studio inside Devoto Prison, Buenos Aires, where RadiOculta is made in partnership with La Tribu.

What helps build strong relationships with prisons?

Clarity of purpose and communication

Clearly communicate what the project is, what it aims to achieve and how it will operate. Regular, transparent communication helps staff understand the work and feel confident supporting it. In Brazil, stakeholders emphasised the importance of making the social purpose of prison radio visible, framing it as a tool for connection, dignity and constructive dialogue, with safeguards to prevent harm.

Alignment with institutional priorities

Understanding institutional priorities, such as safety, rehabilitation, education or wellbeing, can create shared ground. Where possible, identify points of alignment without compromising the integrity of the project.

Sensitivity to security and risk

Prison staff operate in environments where safety and risk management are central. Approaching this with respect and curiosity builds trust. It can be helpful to distinguish between real and perceived risks, and between practical and performative security measures. For example, misuse of recording equipment is a real risk, while concerns about participants speaking on air destabilising the prison may be perceived. Both need to be understood and managed.

Mutual respect and recognition of expertise

Recognise the responsibilities and constraints of prison, probation and parole staff. Being responsive to their needs, while clearly communicating your own, supports strong working relationships. Holding your own expertise while working constructively within the system is a key challenge.

Persistence and navigating bureaucracy

Gaining access and approvals often requires patience and persistence. Processes may take longer than expected, decisions may change and access may be withdrawn at short notice. Projects consistently emphasise the importance of following up, maintaining communication and working collaboratively to resolve challenges.

Navigating access for people and equipment

Access is a consistent practical challenge: who can enter, what they can bring, what they must wear and how equipment is approved and tracked. These processes should be understood and documented. They are not always applied consistently, so calm, respectful problem-solving is often required.

Access can be more complex when working with team members who have criminal records and may require additional permissions or be denied entry. In some contexts, such as the USA, prisons may go into lockdown without notice, preventing access entirely. Planning for disruption and building contingency into your work is essential.

Understanding institutional culture

Prisons are pressured environments with limited resources. Interactions may feel abrupt or resistant. Projects emphasise the importance of not taking this personally and of remaining professional, patient and grounded.

Building relationships with individuals

Within any system, some individuals are more open to collaboration than others. Identifying and building relationships with these people can be transformative. Both staff and participants often have valuable insights into how systems operate and creating space to hear these perspectives is important.

> “Working in prison the right way can be life changing if you know what change you want to bring.”
>
> Lady Unchained

STEP 5 HOW DO I WORK WELL WITH PRISIONS?

Challenges in practice

EXAMPLE 1 » Guest access and rules

A guest arrives to contribute to a programme but is turned away at the gate due to a dress code issue.

Do you:

- Accept the situation and rearrange the session?
- Seek clarification and escalate the matter to a more senior officer?
- Find a practical solution, such as sourcing appropriate attire?
- Improve preparation for future visits?

EXAMPLE 2 » Equipment access and processes

You have approval from senior leadership to bring in recording equipment, but security staff refuse access due to concerns.

Do you:

- Pause and arrange a discussion with both leadership and security staff?
- Insist on escalation to override the decision?
- Accept the concern and adapt your equipment?

EXAMPLE 3 » Navigating institutional culture

A new member of prison staff supporting your project is dismissive and unhelpful. As a result, participants are not arriving on time and some are not arriving at all. Requests to follow up with the wings are not being acted on.

Do you:

- Challenge the behaviour directly, explaining the impact on participation and the project's effectiveness?
- Seek to understand underlying pressures while clarifying the processes needed to ensure participants can attend?
- Work through more supportive staff or raise concerns with a trusted senior colleague?
- Create clearer communication and feedback channels so issues can be addressed early?

EXAMPLE 4 » Responding to performative security

You bring a small decorative item into the prison with gate staff approval, but a senior staff member later objects.

Do you:

- Name the officer who approved it?
- Minimise / make light of the issue?
- Remove the item immediately?
- Apologise and adjust your processes going forward?



» TIME TO REFLECT

Across our network, one of the biggest challenges is navigating relationships with prisons and with people who work in prisons and parole and probation systems.

You may find these questions helpful:

- **What is the institutional landscape you are working in?**
- **How are decisions made and by whom?**
- **How can you communicate your purpose in ways that resonate with institutional priorities?**
- **What are the formal and informal rules around access?**
- **How will you prepare for delays or disruption?**
- **Who are the individuals who may support this work?**
- **How will you build trust while maintaining editorial integrity?**
- **How will you navigate disagreement constructively?**

Working well with prisons is an ongoing process. It involves building relationships, understanding systems and adapting to changing realities, while holding onto the purpose and values that underpin your work.

In the next section, we explore what projects across the network have learned about centring people with lived experience in prison radio.

STEP 6 SYSTEM IMPACTED PEOPLE

How do I work well with system impacted people?

Working well with people in prison and post-release sits at the heart of prison radio. It gives the work its authenticity, ethical grounding and potential for impact. Across the Prison Radio International network, projects understand that the most important question is not simply what content you produce, but how you work with the people whose voices are at the centre of it.

56%

of projects we know about are based inside prisons.

Across the network,

90%

of projects involve people with lived experience of prison

71%

involve people currently serving a sentence.

This work takes place within complex environments, both in prison and in the community. People under the supervision of the criminal legal system often navigate intense personal, institutional, relational and financial pressures. Many have experienced trauma before prison and imprisonment itself can deepen that harm. At the same time, prison radio can create rare spaces for expression, creativity, connection and growth.

Stakeholders across the network have described this as both a privilege and a responsibility.

As one workshop participant put it, it requires the ability

> **“to understand my universe from other perspectives... and challenge myself to find solutions for different realities.”**

There is no single way to do this well. But across projects, a number of core areas or concerns consistently shape practice.

Five areas to think through when working with system-impacted people

1 Recruitment, access and fairness

Recruitment into prison radio projects is rarely fully within the control of the project team. In prison settings, eligibility may be shaped by security processes or informal judgements. In community settings, similar dynamics can arise through parole or probation structures. This means participation is often shaped not just by interest or ability, but by institutional constraints.

A strong starting point is to be clear about what the project controls and what it does not. One approach is for the prison or criminal justice system to determine eligibility, while the prison radio team selects participants from that group based on the skills, attitudes and commitment needed for the work. Without this second stage, there is a risk that a team may meet security requirements but not the collaborative or communicative demands of radio production.

The reverse can also be true: a prison radio project may judge that someone approved by the institution is not suitable for participation, for example because of gang dynamics, offence-related sensitivities or concerns about media risk. Individual risk assessment and close dialogue with prison or post-release staff can therefore be important and those judgements may need to change over time.

Ideally, criteria for inclusion and exclusion should be clear and transparent. In practice, decisions may be made without explanation and may shift over time. This raises questions of fairness and legitimacy, particularly where exclusions cannot be openly discussed.

There is also the question of informal hierarchy: who feels able to step forward, speak publicly or be visible. Recruitment processes, team culture and training all shape how representative participation really is.

Working well in this area involves balancing inclusive participation with institutional constraints. Being honest about those limits, while negotiating where possible, is central to fair and credible practice.

2 Informed consent, voluntary participation, identification and anonymity

Ethical practice in prison radio cannot be reduced to forms and procedures. It requires ongoing attention to power, context and consequence, especially when it comes to consent.

Participation may be shaped by pressure, expectation or assumptions about possible benefits. People may not fully anticipate how their story, identity or voice will circulate once content is published. The meaning of consent may also shift over time, especially after release, when someone’s circumstances and priorities can change dramatically.

For example, a participant may be willing to discuss their criminal history shortly after release, but feel differently later as they build a new life. What feels acceptable in one moment may carry very different consequences in another.

For these reasons, consent should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a one-off agreement. Projects need to create space for participants to ask questions, revisit decisions and, where possible, change their mind without penalty. They also need to be honest about what can and cannot be controlled once material has been published.

This applies both to prison radio team members and to guests. Participation should be genuinely voluntary and informed, even where security clearance has already been granted.

Questions of naming and anonymity add another layer of complexity. Projects across the network have had to navigate restrictions on real names, “street names”, pseudonyms and voice anonymisation. These questions can involve institutional rules, victim impact, the risk of re-traumatisation and a participant’s wish to be recognised as themselves.

Using first names only, or agreed aliases, can offer some protection while still recognising contribution. At the same time, technological approaches such as voice distortion can feel dehumanising if handled badly. As far as possible, participants should be meaningfully involved in these decisions.

STEP 6 SYSTEM IMPACTED PEOPLE

3 Boundaries, roles and professionalism

Prison radio often creates spaces that feel more collaborative and relational than the wider prison environment. That can be powerful, but it can also blur roles and expectations. Clear boundaries therefore matter from the outset.

Participants may look to the project for support beyond its remit, including help with issues inside or outside prison, ongoing contact after participation or hopes of future work. These requests are often understandable, but they can place pressure on projects in ways that are hard to sustain fairly.

Projects therefore need to be clear about what they can and cannot provide. This includes expectations around attendance, conduct and participation, as well as clear processes for addressing concerns. That does not mean ignoring urgent or human needs, but it does mean creating a safe, fair, professional and sustainable environment for everyone involved.

Maintaining boundaries is central to professionalism. Everyone involved needs clarity about their role and an understanding that stepping beyond agreed boundaries can create risks for both the project and its participants.

It can help to establish group agreements from the beginning. These may include expectations around respect, communication and accountability, as well as clear non-negotiables. Rivalries from outside the project space cannot be brought into it. Violence or threats of violence cannot be tolerated. Equipment must be used safely and appropriately. Breaches can then be dealt with through agreed processes, including removal from the project if necessary.

Some projects handle issues internally, while others share information with prison, probation or parole systems. This can mean that people face very different consequences for similar behaviour. That is both an ethical and a relational decision, shaped by the context in which the project operates.

Some of the most important boundaries are those set out clearly in advance and in writing: the expected length of participation, standards of attendance and punctuality, grounds for removal and the nature of any ongoing contact once participation ends.

Prisoners being trained in radio production at HMP Styal



4 Trauma awareness, safety and the role of joy

Many people who have spent time in prison have experienced trauma. Imprisonment can deepen it. This makes trauma-informed practice essential.

In practice, that means recognising the emotional risks that can arise through storytelling and participation and creating conditions in which people can engage safely. This may involve allowing participants to set boundaries around what they share, avoiding pressure to disclose personal experience and ensuring that interactions are predictable, respectful and contained.

Trauma-informed practice also involves attention to group dynamics and to how safety is experienced. Shared agreements can support this by creating clarity, structure and a greater sense of control.

But trauma-informed practice is not only about managing risk. It is also about creating the conditions for positive experience. As Abbey Darling, Director of Operations and Women's Projects for the Prison Radio Association in the UK, has noted:

> "Working at National Prison Radio can provide people with a space to invite small moments of joy into their lives, and our hope is that that they learn how to recognise and cultivate this for themselves in other environments."

Faye Dunn describes working on the radio station as "feeling like you're not in prison".

Creating space for moments like this, while maintaining safety, can be an important part of working well with system-impacted people.

5 Moving from trust, through empowerment, to leadership

The involvement of people with lived experience is central to prison radio, but involvement alone is not the end point. The strongest projects build trust, support empowerment and, where possible, create pathways to leadership.

Trust sits at the foundation of this work. It grows when stories are handled with integrity, when commitments are honoured and when decision-making is fair and transparent. It also grows when people are well-prepared, know their roles and produce work they are proud of. Across the network, audiences often describe prison radio as trustworthy precisely because it is shaped by people with direct experience of the system.

But trust also requires realism. Not all behaviour will align with expectations. Some participants may be under pressure from others, including gang dynamics and some may test the project's boundaries. Responding to this means balancing understanding with standards that protect the group. Where behaviour becomes unsafe, removal may be necessary.

Empowerment builds on trust. It comes from giving participants genuine creative agency – whether in shaping content, presenting programmes or making editorial decisions. When people see their work matter to others, it can affirm the value of their voice and perspective.

Leadership is the next step. Some of the most powerful developments in the network happen when people with lived experience move into roles as facilitators, trainers, producers or decision-makers. Supporting that progression requires intentional design: creating pathways, sharing power and recognising lived experience as expertise.

In this way, prison radio can become not only a platform for expression, but a vehicle for shifting power.

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STEP 6 SYSTEM IMPACTED PEOPLE

These scenarios are not right-or-wrong tests. They are examples of the kinds of decisions projects regularly face.



EXAMPLE 1 » Support, boundaries and expectations

A participant is about to be released and asks for help with housing, a phone, a bank account, emotional support and social services. They want to stay in touch with your team and hope for a future job on the project, but you don't currently have any openings.

Do you:

- Connect them to relevant services while being clear about the limits and rules around continued contact in your organisation?
- Explain you don't currently provide post-release support or have any positions available, but give them the information of organisations that do?
- Decide working with people through the gate is something you should develop as an organisation?

These choices raise questions about care, fairness, sustainability and role clarity.

EXAMPLE 2 » Selection and institutional power

You arrive at the studio and are told that several participants have been removed from the project because of undisclosed security intelligence.

Do you:

- Accept the decision and begin finding replacements?
- Liaise with staff to understand whether there is a route back for any of the participants?
- Communicate transparently with those excluded about what you know and who they might contact for more information?

This example highlights tensions between fairness, transparency and maintaining access and how good working relationships with staff can be helpful in these situations.

EXAMPLE 3 » Consent over time

A participant records their story in prison and consents to online publication. After release, they become uncomfortable with the public visibility of their criminal history and ask for the material to be removed.

Do you:

- Remove the content immediately?
- Negotiate partial removal or anonymisation?
- Explain the limits of what can be undone once material has been published as part of a wider programme?

This raises questions about ongoing consent, digital permanence and the long-term consequences of publication.

EXAMPLE 4 » Trust and behaviour within the group

A participant begins disrupting sessions, misusing equipment and using language that breaches agreed norms.

Do you:

- Begin a supportive conversation?
- Set clear expectations and consequences?
- Involve prison, probation or parole staff?
- Remove them from the project?

Clear rules matter, but projects also need to balance understanding with the need to maintain a safe environment. When behaviour escalates or becomes unsafe, firm action may be required.

EXAMPLE 5 » Identity and naming

A participant wants to use a name that reflects their street identity in a programme about accountability and repair. The institution is concerned about victim impact and public reaction.

Do you:

- Adhere strictly to institutional rules?
- Seek an exception?
- Agree an alternative name and adapt the format to protect anonymity?

This raises tensions between institutional rules, personal identity and narrative authenticity.

» TIME TO REFLECT

Working well with system-impacted people is not about finding one right approach. It is about thinking carefully, communicating clearly and making decisions that fit your context, goals and values.

You may find these questions helpful:

- **In what practical ways will your project show trust from the beginning?**
- **How will you make sure participation is genuinely voluntary?**
- **What parts of recruitment and selection are within your control and what parts are controlled by the criminal justice system?**
- **What can your project realistically offer participants and what can it not offer?**
- **How will you communicate clearly about the limits of your role?**
- **How will people with lived experience shape content, editorial decisions and project culture?**
- **What will empowerment look like in your context?**
- **How will you balance trust with the need to respond when behaviour becomes unsafe?**
- **Are there meaningful pathways from participation to leadership?**
- **How will you ensure that lived experience has real influence over the direction and standards of the work?**

System-impacted people are at the heart of prison radio. Thinking carefully about how you begin, run and, where necessary, end participation is central to best practice.

In the next step we go on to discuss how to go about training and supporting the team of people working on your project.

STEP 7 BUILDING YOUR TEAM

TRAINING AND SUPPORTING YOUR TEAM

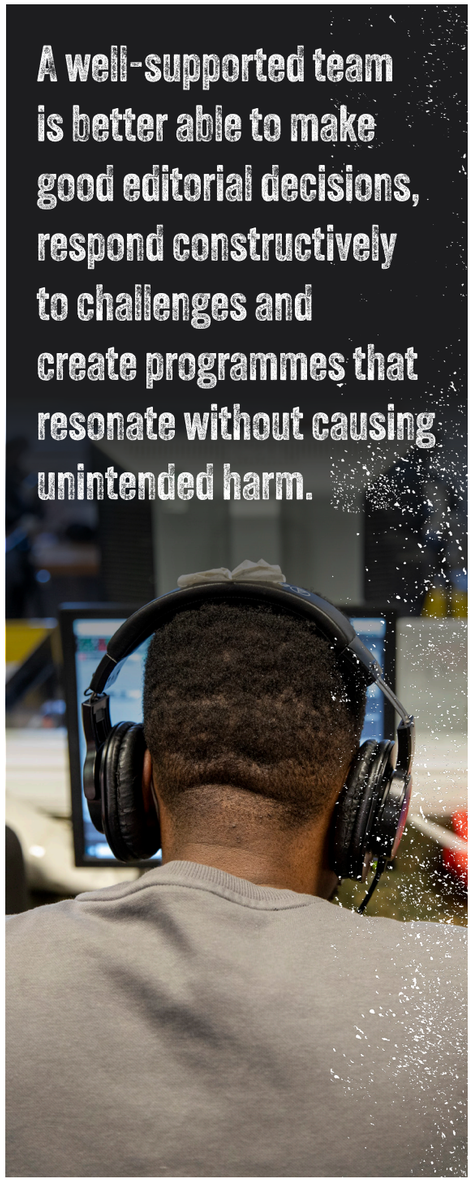
Equipping your team with the right skills, support and shared understanding is essential to building a prison radio project that is ethical, sustainable and capable of producing high-quality work. Whether your team includes external producers, prison-based staff, volunteers or people with lived experience of the criminal legal system, each person helps shape the culture, safety and integrity of the project.

Across the Prison Radio International network, projects emphasise that training is not only about technical competence. It is also about preparing people to work thoughtfully in complex environments, navigate competing pressures and uphold the right to communication in responsible and respectful ways.

This matters because prison radio audiences often include people living through periods of heightened vulnerability. Transitions into, through and out of prison can intensify emotional, social and practical pressures. Content that is careless, inaccurate or insensitive can deepen harm. Content that is thoughtful, grounded and well produced can offer connection, clarity and hope.

Training and support therefore sit at the intersection of ethics and practice. A well-supported team is better able to make good editorial decisions, respond constructively to challenges and create programmes that resonate without causing unintended harm.

Across the network, several core areas consistently emerge as central to building and supporting strong teams.



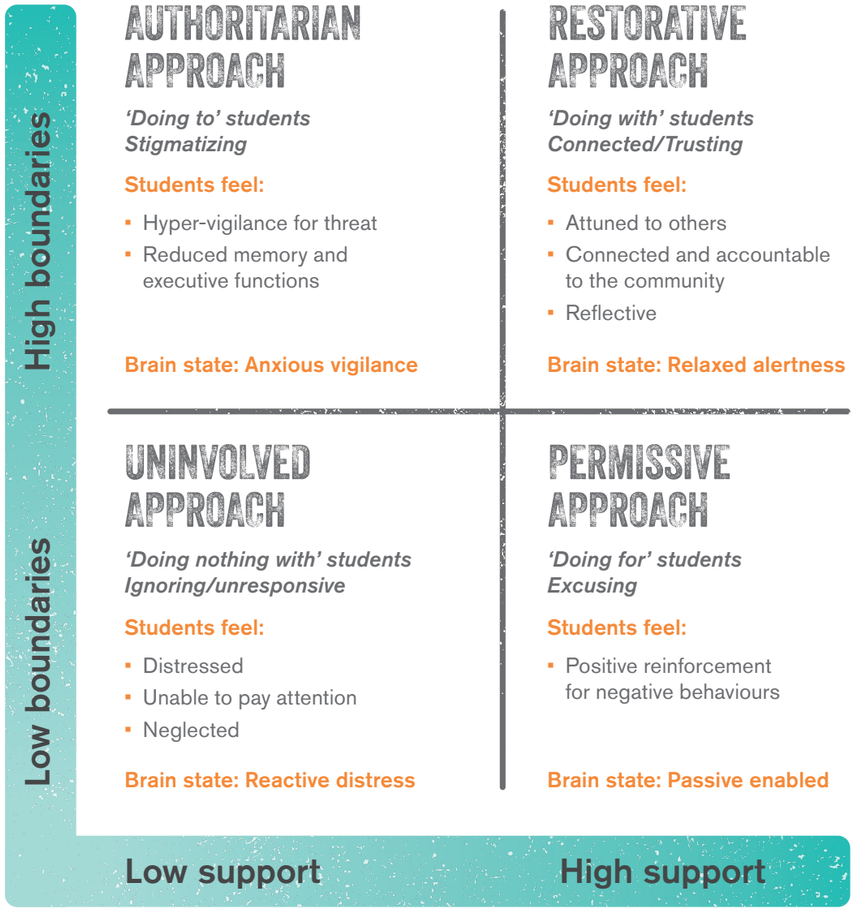
A team member in HMP Brixton

Establishing shared ways of working

From the outset, it helps to establish clear expectations about how the team will work together. Prison radio projects often bring together people from very different backgrounds and positions of power, including those living in prison, those working in prison and those entering from outside. Without shared agreements, this can lead to confusion, tension and inconsistency.

Many projects develop group agreements collaboratively, setting expectations around respect, communication and accountability. These often include clear non-negotiables: that violence or threats of violence are not acceptable, that discriminatory language or behaviour has no place in the space and that equipment and studio environments must be treated with care.

One approach used by the Uncuffed podcast in California draws on restorative practice, encouraging a culture of high boundaries and high support.[9] This means creating environments where people are supported to participate fully while also being held clearly to agreed standards. Establishing expectations early and revisiting them regularly, helps create a shared culture that can hold steady when challenges arise.



[9] Source: https://betterlesson.com/blog/social-discipline-window

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STEP 7 BUILDING YOUR TEAM

Building skills in media and ethical journalism

Training in media production is an obvious requirement, but across the network there is equal emphasis on ethical storytelling. Prison radio is not simply about producing content. It is also about how that content is produced, whose voices are heard and how stories are told.

Teams need to be equipped to make decisions about accuracy, representation and language. In some contexts, terms such as 'inmate', 'offender' or even 'prisoner' are experienced as dehumanising. In others, different language norms apply. For example, in many Latin American contexts, the term 'people deprived of their liberty' is widely used.

Uncuffed have adopted a language policy based on a guide developed by the Marshall Project, included in the links at the end of this toolkit.

Some projects develop shared language policies with participants, ensuring that the way people are described reflects both ethical considerations and local context. These decisions shape not only the tone of programmes, but how audiences understand the people and issues being discussed.

Editorial principles are often tested in practice. In one live recorded episode of The Secret Life of Prisons, Phil Maguire, founder of the Prison Radio Association and co-presenter of the podcast, gently challenged the UK Minister for Prisons and Probation, Lord James Timpson, on his use of the term 'offender' explaining that the Prison Radio Association's policy is to use person-centred language. The minister responded graciously and adopted that language for the rest of the interview. This illustrates how clear editorial standards, consistently applied, can influence even the most senior stakeholders.

Alongside internal values, it can be helpful to engage with existing editorial and broadcasting standards in your jurisdiction, adapting them where necessary for prison radio. Examples are included in the hyperlinks at the end of this toolkit. Those involved in shaping this toolkit agreed that drafting editorial guidelines with multiple stakeholders is one of the best ways to support ethical practice and reassure institutions that may initially be nervous about audio communication.

However strong your editorial guidance, training and production, prison radio projects are still likely to encounter complaints. Having clear values, a complaints process and an escalation route is part of being a professional media organisation.

Complaints from prison staff or participants need immediate attention, as they come from core partners in the work. Complaints from audiences often fall into two broad categories:

- Disputes about the factual accuracy of a programme
- Objections to the idea that people in or after prison should have this kind of platform or visibility

These require different responses. Complaints about factual accuracy must be investigated as a matter of journalistic integrity. Objections to the very existence of prison radio may be harder to resolve. As long as your team can defend the editorial decisions taken, the conclusion may simply be that the programme is not for that audience.

» Prison radio is not simply about producing content. It is also about how that content is produced.

Understanding institutional environments

Training also needs to prepare teams to work effectively within institutional systems, both in prison and, to a lesser extent, after prison. Prisons and other criminal justice settings operate through specific policies, hierarchies and risk-management frameworks. These shape what is possible in terms of access, content, equipment and participation.

Familiarity with these systems is essential, not only for compliance but for building constructive working relationships. This includes understanding security procedures, content review processes and the formal and informal ways decisions are made.

Teams may also need to navigate situations where rules are unclear, inconsistently applied or open to interpretation. Developing the confidence to ask questions, seek clarification and engage constructively with institutional actors is therefore an important part of training.

Cultural awareness, equality, diversity and inclusion

Criminal legal systems often reflect and amplify wider social inequalities, including those relating to race, gender, religion and class. In some contexts, segregation is formalised; in others, it is shaped by informal divisions. Gender segregation is standard practice in most prison systems and racial segregation is the de facto reality in many prisons in the United States. The overrepresentation of racial minorities and socio-economically disadvantaged people in criminal legal systems is also a global phenomenon.

Training that supports cultural awareness and inclusion can help teams navigate these dynamics more thoughtfully. This includes recognising the diversity of experience within the group and creating space for different perspectives to be heard and respected.

In Argentina, Radio Mosquito operates within the San Martín University Centre where men and women in prison work together to produce and present radio shows, creating a different dynamic from more segregated environments. Elsewhere, projects have built teams that include people from inside and beyond prison, creating opportunities to learn about each other's social and cultural contexts.

Attention to equality, diversity and inclusion is part of how diverse teams work effectively together, how stronger content is produced and how participants experience the project. Where resources allow, bespoke EDI training adapted to local legal frameworks and the prison radio environment can be valuable.



Inside Radio Mosquito studio: Diego is the external journalist directing the production of the podcast. Larry, next to him, is one of the incarcerated presenters. Another person, who is in prison, is producing the show working behind the glass.

» Criminal legal systems often reflect and amplify wider social inequalities.

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STEP 7 BUILDING YOUR TEAM

Conflict resolution and working through difference

Prison radio projects bring together people with different experiences, perspectives and positions of power. Tensions are therefore not unusual. What matters is how teams are prepared to respond.

It is helpful to include training in communication, active listening and de-escalation. This can include recognising emotional triggers, using neutral language and refocusing discussions on shared goals. Projects may use facilitated dialogue, regular check-ins or role-play to address issues early and practise responses to difficult situations.

The aim is not to eliminate conflict, but to create a culture in which it can be addressed constructively without undermining relationships or the integrity of the project. As noted in **STEP 4**, it is helpful to have agreed formats and times for difficult conversations and to assume that discomfort and disagreement will arise.

Trauma-informed training

Training your team to recognise and respond to trauma appropriately is essential to creating environments where people can participate safely and meaningfully.

Trauma-informed approaches in criminal justice settings tend to share several core elements: understanding the prevalence and impact of trauma; recognising how trauma can shape behaviour, communication and trust; creating environments that prioritise psychological and emotional safety; offering choice and agency wherever possible; working collaboratively rather than coercively; and avoiding practices that may re-trigger or re-traumatise participants.

» Training your team to recognise and respond to trauma appropriately is essential

In practice, this means embedding small but significant habits into everyday work. For example, being clear and predictable about what will happen in a session; giving people the option to step out or not participate in particular activities; avoiding pressure to disclose personal experiences; and paying attention to signs that someone may be overwhelmed or distressed.

A trauma-informed approach might also include agreements about not naming specific people, places or incidents that could put participants or others at risk. This allows people to explore themes and emotions without feeling exposed or unsafe. These agreements can be co-created with participants, reinforcing both safety and shared responsibility.

Trauma-informed training also emphasises the importance of choice. In environments where people often have very little control, even small choices – whether to speak, what role to take on, when to take a break – can significantly affect how safe and respected participants feel.

At the same time, trauma-informed practice is not only about avoiding harm. As highlighted in **STEP 6**, it is also about creating the conditions for positive experiences. Music, humour, creativity and shared moments of connection can all help people feel grounded and restored. Training can help teams recognise the value of these moments and build them intentionally into their work.

Training all of your team together, whether or not they have lived experience of the criminal legal system, can help create shared language and approaches that reflect the values of your project.

“The staff know I’m going through stuff and are patient with me and want to help so I know I can be open with them.”

Worker at HMP Brixton

“Since working at the radio I have started to regain my self worth and grow in confidence directly because of the way the team treat me.”

Worker at HMP Brixton



« Radio for Justice project, Colorado



» Prison radio project, Estaçao Purpurina, in Espírito Santo, Brazil, supporting LGBTQI+ prisoners to discuss the challenges they face.

STEP 7 BUILDING YOUR TEAM

Examples in practice

EXAMPLE 1
Creating safety through choice and shared agreements

A group session is focused on developing a programme about "turning points" in people's lives. As the discussion begins, one participant becomes visibly withdrawn while others start sharing quite personal experiences.

A trauma-informed team might respond by:

- Pausing the session to remind the group of agreed boundaries
- Offering participants different ways to contribute, such as speaking, writing or focusing on production tasks
- Checking in privately with the participant who appears withdrawn, without putting them on the spot

EXAMPLE 2
Responding to EDI and creating a trauma-informed working environment

During a long editing session, the group becomes restless. Some participants are losing focus and the quality of work is starting to dip. One team member suggests putting music on and having a short dance break.

Do you:

- Continue working as planned to maintain productivity?
- Allow a break, but keep it informal and brief?
- Introduce a short optional reset break with music as a regular part of editing sessions?
- Create a shared practice where participants take turns choosing the music?

EXAMPLE 3
Ethical journalism, freedom of religion and the risks of proselytising

During a recording, a participant speaks powerfully about the role their faith has played in their life. As they continue, the contribution begins to shift from personal reflection into encouraging listeners to adopt the same beliefs.

Do you:

- Broadcast the contribution as it is?
- Edit it to retain the personal story while removing direct appeals?
- Speak with the participant and re-record the segment in a way that focuses on personal experience rather than persuasion?
- Refer to an agreed editorial guideline that welcomes expressions of faith but does not allow proselytising?
- Invite a broader range of perspectives to ensure balance?

EXAMPLE 4
Staff safety and red lines in practice

Two team members are delivering a workshop in prison when a fight breaks out. The situation escalates and they find themselves caught in the middle of two rival groups, with no prison staff immediately present. They raise the alarm and, after a period of uncertainty, staff arrive and bring the situation under control. No one from the radio team is physically harmed, but the experience is frightening and raises serious concerns about safety and preparedness in the prison.

Do you:

- Continue the programme as planned, trusting this was isolated?
- Raise the issue informally and seek reassurance?
- Request a formal review of safety procedures?
- Pause the programme while clearer safeguards are put in place?
- Treat this as a red line and withdraw unless staff safety can be better protected?

Training in de-escalation, flexibility and relationship-building is essential, but there are also moments when clarity about limits becomes critical and when the safety of your team must come first.

TIME TO REFLECT

Training your team is not only about building skills. It is about shaping how people think, respond and work together in complex and often unpredictable environments.

The following questions may be helpful:

- **What knowledge, skills and shared understandings does your team need in your context?**
- **How will you prepare your team not only to produce content, but to make thoughtful editorial decisions about language, representation and accuracy?**
- **What shared agreements will you establish from the outset to support respect, accountability and consistency?**
- **How will your training help people understand and navigate the institutional environment they are working within?**
- **What awareness or training will help your team recognise and respond to issues of inequality, difference and inclusion?**
- **How will you equip your team to manage disagreement, tension or conflict constructively?**
- **In what practical ways will your training support a trauma-informed approach?**
- **How will you help your team recognise when flexibility and persistence are appropriate and when situations require escalation or stepping back?**
- **What support will be in place after training, particularly when challenging situations arise in practice?**
- **How will you create opportunities for reflection, learning and continued development over time?**

Training is not a one-off activity. It is an ongoing process of building confidence, judgement and shared practice. Done well, it strengthens not only the quality of programmes, but also the safety, integrity and impact of the work as a whole.

In the next step we explore different radio shows and what works well for prison radio projects.

STEP 8 WHAT SHOWS WORK WELL?”

What kinds of shows work well in prison radio projects?

Across the PRI network, powerful prison radio shows take many different forms: intimate and simple, technically ambitious, music-led, interview-based, educational or deeply personal. What connects them is not format but intention: a clear sense of who the show is for, what it is trying to achieve and how it treats the people making it and the people listening.

This step of the toolkit is designed to help you think about what kinds of content might work best in your context, why that matters for your goals and values and how you will know whether it is working.

What the network tells us

When we asked projects across the PRI network to describe their best shows and why they worked, the answers were strikingly consistent. The most effective shows were those that built a sense of connection, felt relatable and human, gave people a platform to speak with authenticity and motivated listeners to engage constructively with their lives and circumstances.

When projects told us why listeners liked their best shows, the most common reasons were connection, relatability, motivation and positive impact on wellbeing. These are not separate from a project’s broader purposes; they are often how those purposes are realised in practice.

What is the core purpose of the show?



Prison radio can reflect the full range of audio programming. It can include news, sport, music, entertainment, educational and rehabilitative content, personal storytelling, interviews, discussions and call-in shows connecting people with family and friends. Across the PRI network, projects produce a wide range of content, often combining multiple formats.

The shows different prison radio projects described as their best varied enormously in format.

In Colorado
Radio for Justice’s One Tune asked guests who were resident in prison to choose one song and explain what it meant to them. That single question opened up powerful stories of memory, identity and life inside and beyond the system. Its strength lay not in technical complexity but in the quality of the invitation it extended.

In the UK
National Prison Radio’s Request Show uses music dedications and spoken messages to connect people in prison with loved ones. Alongside this, it includes practical information and signposts to support services, meaning listeners often come for the human connection and leave with something useful and actionable.

In India
Radio Parvaaz combines educational content, storytelling and motivational programming created by people inside and outside prison together. One contributor described it as “by the listeners, for the listeners and of the listeners.” The show focuses on people in prison and their concerns, promotes hope and positivity, creates awareness of education and welfare opportunities and strengthens connection with families and communities beyond the walls.



81% Interviews

67% Educational and rehabilitative content

65% Music

42% Prison news

38% Entertainment

30% Signposting to services

29% Fictional stories and drama

35% Other formats

When projects told us why listeners liked their best shows, the most common reasons were connection, relatability, motivation and positive impact on wellbeing.

STEP 8 WHAT SHOWS WORK WELL?”



The importance of lived experience

The PRI network have shared that the shows featuring voices of people with lived experience are their best shows. The relatability, knowledge and understanding that comes with lived experience are only a few of the many reasons that make these shows the strongest.

Across the PRI network, of the shows identified as being the strongest

89% are made by people with lived experience of prison

56% are made by people currently serving a sentence

> “It’s good that it’s prisoners who are speaking, they’ve lived it, they get you with no judgement.”
>
> **National Prison Radio listener**

> “Every time I stepped in the Uncuffed studio at San Quentin, it was always a relaxation of freedom. I felt that sense of freedom to speak. It allowed me to be myself.”
>
> **Uncuffed workshop participant**



Ali, a National Prison Radio presenter, who was previously in prison, interviews men currently in prison to be broadcast on the radio.

Connecting content to your goals and values

The kind of shows you make should follow directly from what you are trying to achieve and how you want to work. This is where the goals and values you reflected on in STEP 3 become practical.

A project whose primary goal is public education may invest in carefully produced narrative podcasts that reach beyond the prison and challenge how audiences think about incarceration. A project focused on maintaining family connection may prioritise a request show or message programme that reaches people inside and outside simultaneously. A project centred on skills development may choose formats that require participants to research, write, interview and edit. A project working in a highly restricted environment with limited equipment may begin with something as simple as a recorded conversation and a microphone.

The following scenarios reflect the kinds of content decisions that projects across the network face regularly and show how different but equally defensible choices can emerge depending on goals, values and context.

Global Prison Radio Toolkit 2026

STEP 8 WHAT SHOWS WORK WELL?'

EXAMPLE 1

The sensitive story dilemma

A participant who is now released from prison records a deeply personal account of an experience of violence in which they were involved. The story is powerful, honest, repentant and likely to move listeners. However, it includes details that could identify other people involved, some of whom are still in prison.

Do you:

- Work with the participant to reshape the story so it keeps its emotional truth without identifying others?
- Decide the story is too sensitive to broadcast and explain why, while offering other ways to contribute?
- Broadcast it as recorded, on the basis that it is the participant's story to tell?

This raises questions about editorial responsibility, consent, safety and what it means to handle someone's story with care.

EXAMPLE 2

The institutional pressure dilemma

You have produced a programme in which people in prison speak candidly about conditions in the facility. The content is fair, accurate and in keeping with your editorial standards. Before broadcast, prison management asks you to remove those sections on the grounds of reputational risk to the institution.

Do you:

- Remove the sections to protect the working relationship and continued access?
- Defend the content and broadcast it as recorded on the basis of editorial independence?
- Pause, explain the situation to participants and decide together how to respond?

There is no universally correct answer. Your response will depend on your relationships, any agreed editorial guidelines and where your red lines sit in relation to editorial independence.

EXAMPLE 3

The format versus purpose dilemma

Your team has the opportunity to produce a regular entertainment show including music, informal conversation and popular culture news. Listener feedback suggests it will be popular. But your project's stated purpose is rehabilitation-focused: building skills, developing self-expression and challenging public stigma around incarceration. The proposed entertainment show feels like a departure from this core purpose.

Do you:

- Pursue it, on the basis that connection, joy and building an audience have value in themselves?
- Decline it, in order to stay focused on your core purpose?
- Justify it as rehabilitative in its impact on producers, presenters and listeners and gather evidence to test that?
- Combine both approaches, using a popular format as a vehicle for deeper content?

This is a tension between reach and purpose that many prison radio projects must navigate.

Understanding whether your show is working

Making a show you believe in is not enough on its own. Understanding whether it is achieving what you hoped, for those making it and those listening, is essential.

STEP 10 looks in more depth at how and why to evaluate your project and communicate its impact. But the foundation begins here, in the habit of asking after every show: did this do what we hoped? For whom? And what would we do differently next time?

TIME TO REFLECT

As you think about the kind of content you want to make, the following questions may help:

- **What kind of show would best serve the people making it and the people listening?**
- **How does the format connect to the goals and values you identified in STEP 3?**
- **What is the simplest version of a strong show you could make with the resources and access you currently have?**
- **How will you know if a show is working for the team, for listeners and for the broader purposes of your project?**
- **When you face pressure from institutions, from participants or from competing priorities, what will guide your editorial decisions?**
- **How will you communicate what your shows achieve in ways that are honest, meaningful and useful to the people who need to understand your work?**

Training is not a one-off activity. It is an ongoing process of building confidence, judgement and shared practice. Done well, it strengthens not only the quality of programmes, but also the safety, integrity and impact of the work as a whole.

Funding your project can be a challenge. In the next step we explore different funding options available.

STEP 9 FUNDING A PROJECT

How do I fund my prison radio project?

Funding is one of the most consistent and consequential challenges across the PRI network. It shapes what you can do, how reliably you can do it and how long your work can last. But funding is not only a practical question – it is also an ethical one. Where money comes from and on what terms, can directly affect the independence, integrity and purpose of your work in ways that matter deeply.

This step looks honestly at the funding landscape for prison radio projects globally, explores the main sources of income available to prison radio projects and the kinds of decisions funding can require.

What the data tells us

Across the network, many projects are operating with very limited financial security. PRI data shows that:

49% of projects can sustain their work for less than a year with their current funding

ONLY 14% have financial security beyond five years

≈ 35% of projects have no paid staff at all

33% pay only part of their team

≈ 50% of people working in prison radio globally are volunteers

In terms of financial security, how long can you sustain your prison radio project on the current funds you have available or promised?



This reflects both deep commitment and structural vulnerability. Reliance on unpaid labour affects continuity, quality and the ability to retain and develop talent.

Funding opportunities also vary widely. Some projects can access grants, public funding or broadcasting partnerships. Others rely almost entirely on in-kind support, institutional goodwill and unpaid time. Understanding what exists in your context – and the conditions attached – is an essential starting point.

Sources of funding

Prison radio projects across the network draw on a range of funding sources and most sustainable projects combine multiple income streams.

Grants from governments, foundations and organisations working in criminal justice, education or social change are the most common source of grant funding. They can support equipment, staffing, training and delivery.

Building relationships with funders matters as much as making applications, as does being able to demonstrate impact. In the United States, projects such as Prisoncast have secured support from major arts and humanities funders including the Mellon Foundation. In the UK, National Prison Radio is part-funded with a grant from the Ministry of Justice, alongside charitable and earned income.

What funding you can access will depend in part on how your project is set up. Many grants are only available to not-for-profit organisations such as charities or NGOs, so your legal structure can have important implications for what becomes possible.

Partnerships with media organisations, universities and community broadcasters can play an important role in supporting prison radio projects, but they take time to build and depend on shared purpose. Where they work well, they can provide access to funding, equipment, training, broadcast infrastructure and wider audiences.

Community radio stations, public broadcasters and journalism or media schools have all served as important partners for projects across the network. These relationships tend to be most effective when values are aligned and when expectations, roles and boundaries are clear from the outset.

Public fundraising can generate income while building public awareness and support. In contexts where public fundraising drives for broadcasters are culturally established, such as the United States, this approach can be particularly effective. The Prison Radio Association in the UK has used social media campaigns to engage public supporters directly. An example of Prison Radio Association's public fundraising campaign is here on their @prisonradiouk Instagram account. The suitability of this approach will depend on your local context and on whether you have the audience reach and public profile to make it viable.

Sponsorship and corporate partnerships can support specific programmes or costs, but require careful alignment with your values and clear boundaries around editorial independence. Prison Radio Association in the UK, for example, has worked with Santander Bank to produce a programme about money management called 'Money Mondays'. This was a partnership that served listeners, aligned with the project's informational aims and brought in specific programme funding without compromising editorial independence.

Earned income – generating income through content production is an approach some projects develop over time. This can include commissioned shows or partnerships with external organisations, where the content aligns with your editorial purpose.

For example, the Prison Radio Association produces The Secret Life of Prisons, a podcast with a significant audience, and has worked with partners such as the University of Greenwich to create commissioned episodes exploring questions like "What is criminology for?".

This approach can provide a useful income stream, but it requires clear boundaries to ensure that commissioned content remains aligned with your values.

Volunteers and in-kind support remain the foundation of many prison radio projects. They can significantly extend what a project is able to achieve, particularly where paid roles are limited.

However, they are not a free resource. Volunteers need to be recruited, trained, supported and retained, especially when working in criminal justice environments. This requires time, care and, often, financial investment. As set out in **STEP 7**, a well-supported volunteer base can be a major strength, but only when it is properly resourced and valued.

STEP 9 FUNDING A PROJECT

A strong funding application

Whatever sources you pursue, funders will want to clearly understand what you do, why it matters and how you know it is working.

Strong applications typically include:

- A clear and compelling account of your purpose and the need you address
- Evidence of impact, or a credible plan to measure it
- A realistic and detailed budget
- Evidence that you have the organisational capacity to deliver what you propose

Investing in evaluation is not only good practice – it is essential if you want to make a strong case for support.

> ***"Without evaluation, fundraising would be almost impossible. Numbers and quotes help build trust and allow funders to visualise what their donation could achieve. Clear, measurable targets get people excited and make them want to back a project financially, while strong follow up data and impact quotes prove that impact and show funders what they've been part of. It's about painting a picture of a project for people who aren't always in the room with you, and then proving that you did what you said you would do – and did it to a high standard. When you can show that, people want to be, and stay, part of what you're doing."***
>
> **Evie Dickinson**, Head of Fundraising & Communications at Prison Radio Association

Most funders publish guidance on what they look for in applications. It is worth reading this carefully and, where possible, speaking to a programme officer before you apply.

Learning from other projects in the PRI network can also strengthen your approach. You can use the network map to connect with projects that have secured funding in contexts similar to your own. Sharing knowledge and building capacity across the network is a core part of what PRI exists to do.

Funding dilemmas

Funding decisions are rarely straightforward and the following scenarios reflect the kinds of choices projects across the network face.

EXAMPLE 1 » The compromised independence dilemma

A government funder offers significant support. The funding would allow you to expand substantially and pay your team properly for the first time. However, the funder expects content to reflect positively on the prison system. Sensitive or critical programming is unlikely to be approved.

Do you:

- Accept the funding, on the basis that the good made possible by greater resources outweighs the constraints and that more favourable editorial terms may be negotiated later?
- Decline to protect editorial independence?
- Negotiate clear editorial red lines and proceed only if they are respected?

This is one of the most difficult decisions in prison radio. Editorial independence is not just a principle, it underpins the trust that makes your content meaningful to listeners. At the same time, working in prison settings often involves constraints on what can be said and how.

Being open with listeners about those constraints can be part of maintaining that trust. For example, the Radiotopia podcast, Ear Hustle, made this explicit by including a sign-off from the prison's Public Information Officer confirming that each episode had been reviewed and approved for broadcast.

Balancing independence with pragmatism is part of the reality of this work. Financial insecurity can also limit what you are able to do. Being clear in advance about your red lines makes it easier to approach these decisions with clarity and confidence.

EXAMPLE 2 » The values-aligned funder dilemma

A foundation offers major support, but its principal donor has made public statements about criminal justice that conflict with your project's values.

Do you:

- Accept the funding, on the basis that the donor has no direct editorial influence and that you can use the resources to advance the values your project stands for?
- Decline the funding, on the basis that accepting it could undermine your credibility and compromise your integrity?
- Consult your team, board, or network and consider whether accepting the funding requires you to be transparent about your position and values?

There is no single right answer. What matters is that the decision is made consciously, in line with your values and with full awareness of the reputational and relational implications.

EXAMPLE 3 » The ending well dilemma

A time-limited project grant comes to an end and no successor funding has been secured. The project has a committed team, a loyal audience and strong relationships within the prison. Ending abruptly would leave participants without something they value and risk damaging relationships built over time.

Do you:

- Continue on a reduced basis using volunteer time while seeking new funding, accepting the pressure on your team?
- Approach the prison and partners to explore whether the project could continue in a different form or with shared support?
- Bring the project to a planned close, ensuring participants are informed and supported and that the work is properly concluded and archived?

Ending a project carries responsibility. Where people have come to rely on the space and relationships it provides, closure needs to be handled with care.

Planning ahead for this possibility is part of working with integrity. Where closure is necessary, taking a considered approach helps protect both the people involved and the project's legacy.

TIME TO REFLECT

Consider the following questions:

- **What funding sources are realistically available in your context and what are the conditions attached to each?**
- **Do you rely on a single income stream and how might you diversify?**
- **Where are your funding red lines? Are they clearly defined and agreed with relevant stakeholders?**
- **How will you evidence impact, without allowing funders' priorities to distort what you measure or how you tell the story of your project?**
- **If your funding ended tomorrow, what would you do? Is there a plan and does your team know what it is?**

Prison radio is difficult to fund well. But clarity of purpose, strong evidence of impact and a diverse income base will put you in the best position to sustain your work – and to do so on your own terms.

We have spoken about how evaluation is an important part of funding your project. In the next step we go into more detail on how to evaluate and why it matters.

STEP 10 HOW DO I EVALUATE MY PROJECT

How do I evaluate my prison radio project and why does it matter?

Evaluation is one of the most valuable habits a prison radio project can develop and one of the least consistently used.

PRI's global survey found that while...

68% **of projects receive some form of listener feedback**

ONLY 52% **formally evaluate their impact**

That gap matters, not only for funders and institutional partners, but for the projects themselves. Without evaluation, it is difficult to know what is working, for whom and why, or to make informed decisions about what to change.

This step looks at why evaluation matters, how to approach it in ways that fit your context and values and what a simple, adaptable framework might look like in practice. Although it appears as the final step, evaluation is most effective when it is built into a project from the start.

Evaluation sits at the centre of this toolkit. In **STEP 3**, you identified your goals and values. Evaluation is how you test whether you are achieving them. In **STEP 8**, you considered what makes a strong show. Evaluation tells you whether it is landing as intended. In **STEP 9**, you thought about making the case for funding. Evaluation is what makes that case credible.

But evaluation is not only about accountability to external audiences. It matters because the people involved in your project deserve to have their experiences understood and taken seriously. It matters because prison radio operates in complex environments where it is easy to continue without stopping to ask whether something is still working. And it matters because the global prison radio field is still building its evidence base. Every project that evaluates its work contributes to that shared knowledge.

At the same time, evaluation does not need to be complex to be useful. Some of the most valuable insights come from simple, regular practices such as asking people a few questions directly on a wing, a short check-in at the end of a session, or a conversation with a participant about what they have gained. The aim is not perfection, but consistent and honest attention to whether your work is doing what you intend.

> "We would never have got funding to do this campaign with National Prison Radio if it is wasn't for the excellent evaluation from the last campaign as that proved using the radio works."
>
> **HMPPS employee**

Evaluation and your goals and values

What you evaluate and how you do it should follow directly from the goals and values you set in **STEP 3**. A project focused on public education may look at shifts in how audiences think about incarceration. A project centred on skills development may track how participants grow over time. A project grounded in the right to communication may focus on whether people feel heard and respected.

This works in both directions. Your goals shape what you measure and your values shape how you measure it. Evaluation that feels extractive or purely instrumental can undermine the trust your project is trying to build. The most effective approaches are done with people, not to them. They are transparent, give people agency and feed findings back to those who contributed.

It is also important to consider who benefits from your evaluation data. Funders may prioritise rehabilitation outcomes. Prison authorities may focus on behaviour or institutional stability. These are legitimate interests, but they may not fully align with your project's goals or with what participants themselves value. Being clear about these differences and honest about how you navigate them, is part of evaluating with integrity.

Programme evaluation and research: an important distinction

It is important to distinguish between programme evaluation and research. Programme evaluation is the ongoing process of understanding whether your project is achieving its goals and how it can improve. It is something every project can do.

Research involving people in prison is different. It is usually subject to formal ethical review processes designed to protect participants from harm or undue pressure. If your project is involved in research, whether by contributing to it or commissioning it, you need to understand the requirements in your context and ensure appropriate expertise and oversight.

A useful rule of thumb is this. If you are gathering information to improve your own project or demonstrate its impact, you are doing evaluation. If you are generating knowledge intended for wider publication or academic use, you are likely to be undertaking research and will need to follow formal ethical processes.



STEP 10 HOW DO I EVALUATE MY PROJECT

Most prison radio projects will benefit from evaluating across three areas:

1 » Participant experience and impact focuses on the people making the radio, including those in prison and post-release. This is central for projects concerned with skills, confidence and personal development.

The Prison Radio Association tracks participant development through induction, appraisal and exit processes, including self-assessment across areas such as production skills, confidence, teamwork and communication.

	Radio production skills	Confidence in using digital software & technology	Time management and the ability to hit deadlines	Creativity	Ability to work well in a team	Listening and communication skills	Confidence to express myself	Mental health and wellbeing	Self belief
% who significantly improved	85%	85%	54%	54%	46%	62%	67%	83%	83%
% who slightly improved	15%	15%	46%	46%	54%	38%	33%	17%	17%
% who had no improvement	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Over time, this builds a picture of growth that is meaningful for participants and useful as evidence of impact. Qualitative questions add depth, for example: What have you gained? What are you most proud of? What would you change?

“I learnt how to be more professional, with work, in everyday life, and able to deal with other personalities,

being around guys that’s going through stuff, some people might wake up with a bad mood, just learning how to deal with different people at different times. I was anti social, but now I’m able to talk to people and learn stuff from new people.”

Uncuffed workshop participant

“Since I started working at RMR, I was able to establish a healthier emotional mindset

by having something meaningful and beneficial to look forward to daily. Being part of RMR has opened doorways and avenues that I would not have thought possible during my incarceration.”

Prisoner at Rise Maximum Radio, Trinidad & Tobago

2 » Listener experience and engagement focuses on those who hear the content. In prison settings, spoken surveys are often more accessible than written ones, particularly where literacy levels vary.[10] Reaching a range of wings, prisons and demographics helps ensure that feedback reflects different experiences, not just the most accessible voices.

For listeners outside prison, online tools such as Google Forms or SurveyMonkey can collect anonymised data and podcast platform analytics can show which content reaches and engages audiences. Focus groups can provide more detailed feedback for complex or long-form work.

In all cases, it is important to explain how responses will be used and whether they are anonymous. This is both an ethical requirement and essential for honest responses.

“I’ve grown and learnt with NPR. You provide advice about in and out of prison so you can see the clear path and what you could do when you leave. I would like you to include more success stories from people who have been in prison.”

National Prison Radio listener

3 » Audience and broader impact looks at wider effects, including public understanding of incarceration, institutional relationships, reach and influence. This can be harder to measure but is important for projects with public education or systems change goals.

Metrics such as listener numbers and engagement give a sense of scale, while surveys can track changes in understanding. For example, the Prison Radio Association has found that...

95% of Life After Prison listeners report a better understanding of people affected by the criminal justice system.

“I’ve been listening to the podcast a lot and it’s really helped me see and feel the humanity of people who are incarcerated in ways that revealed unconscious biases I didn’t know I had.”

Uncuffed listener

Some projects may also explore **institutional impact**, such as whether prison staff notice changes in the atmosphere, or whether the project has influenced how the institution approaches communication. This can be valuable, but may require careful framing to ensure evaluation reflects your values, not only institutional priorities.

EXAMPLE » Rádio SEJUS in Espírito Santo, Brazil:

The project began at the Linhares Detention and Reintegration Center in 2018, with the goal of improving internal communication and promoting the reintegration of inmates. The results were remarkable, with a significant reduction in indiscipline,

FROM 324 administrative procedures in 2017 to just 69 in 2024

Given this success, the model has been expanded to 12 other prison units, where positive impacts are already being observed. We believe that this initiative strengthens discipline, social reintegration and prison management as a whole.

A note on what not to measure

Funders and state parties are often interested in recidivism rates. Recidivism is basically a measure of something that does not happen: whether people who have been convicted of previously committing a criminal offence and have participated in your project go on to reoffend after release.

While understandable as a systems goal, recidivism is a limited and often unreliable measure. It reflects patterns of detection as much as behaviour and the relationship between participation in a radio project and long-term reoffending is complex and influenced by many factors beyond your control.

It is usually more useful to measure outcomes your project directly influences, such as skills development, confidence, strengthened relationships and access to information and services. These are more immediate, more reliable and more meaningful indicators of impact.

[10] Surveying listeners in ways that can highlight literacy deficits can cause pain and increase vulnerabilities and should be avoided.

STEP 10 HOW DO I EVALUATE MY PROJECT

A simple evaluation framework

The matrix below is designed as a starting point tool you can adapt to your own project's goals, context and values. It is not intended to be exhaustive and not every project will need every element. The aim is to offer something simple enough to actually use, flexible enough to work across very different contexts and grounded enough in the realities of prison radio to be genuinely useful. Adapt the questions to reflect your own project's goals wherever you see [your project goal] or [your project value].

Instructions

Use the sections relevant to your project.

Quantitative questions use a 1–5 scale (1 = strongly disagree / not at all; 5 = strongly agree / very much).

Qualitative questions invite open responses. Adapt bracketed prompts to your own project's goals and values.

Section A: Participant Experience

For all people in your team who make the radio in prison or post-release

Quantitative (1–5 scale)	1	2	3	4	5
I feel my voice is heard and respected in this project	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have developed skills I didn't have before	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel more confident as a result of this work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel I am treated with dignity in this project	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This project helps me work towards [your project goal]	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This project works in ways that reflect [your project value]	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Qualitative

1. What have you gained from being part of this project?
2. What are you most proud of in your work here?
3. Has anything about how this project works felt uncomfortable or unfair? If so, what?
4. What would you change and what should we keep doing?

Section B: Listener Experience

For system impacted people who listen in prison or in the community

Quantitative (1–5 scale)	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy listening to this programme	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I find the content relevant to my life	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Listening makes me feel less isolated	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I trust what I hear on this programme	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This programme helps me feel connected to people outside / inside prison (delete as appropriate)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This programme helps me with [your project goal]	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Qualitative

1. What do you most value about this programme?
2. Is there anything you would like to hear more of, or less of?
3. Has anything you heard on this programme made a difference to you? If so, what?

Section C: Audience and Broader Impact

For public or community listeners, adapted for online or in-person use

Quantitative (1–5 scale)	1	2	3	4	5
Listening to this programme has changed how I think about people in prison	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This programme has given me a better understanding of prisons and criminal legal systems	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would recommend this programme to others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This programme feels trustworthy and well-made	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This programme has helped me to [your project goal — e.g. understand rehabilitation / support a family member in prison]	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Qualitative

1. What do you most value about this programme?
2. Is there anything you would like to hear more of, or less of?
3. Has anything you heard on this programme made a difference to you? If so, what?

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Using what you find

Evaluation only matters if it is used. Within your project, set aside regular time to review findings and discuss them with your team, including participants. What is working? What is not? What needs to change?

For funders and institutional partners, evaluation is most effective when it is presented honestly and clearly, including where things did not go as planned. Transparency about what you measured, how you measured it and the limits of your evidence builds credibility.

Across the PRI network, sharing evaluation findings, even in summary form, contributes to a growing global evidence base for prison radio and can strengthen global practice.

The more projects that evaluate their work and share what they learn, the stronger the case for prison radio becomes and the more support is likely to be available for projects just starting out.

Project run by the 'Defensoría del Público' in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

TIME TO REFLECT

As you think about how to approach evaluation in your project, the following questions may help:

- **What are the two or three most important things you want to know about whether your project is working? Do your evaluation methods actually answer those questions?**
- **Are there differences between what your funders want you to measure and what your project's goals require you to measure? How will you navigate that?**
- **How will you ensure that evaluation feels respectful and meaningful to the people it involves, rather than extractive or intrusive?**
- **What is the simplest evaluation practice you could begin now, even before you have a formal framework in place?**
- **How will you feed findings back to participants and listeners and how will you use them to improve your work?**
- **If your project were to end tomorrow, what evidence would you have of what it achieved and would that evidence tell the story you would want to tell?**

Evaluation is not a bureaucratic requirement. At its best, it is a way of taking your work seriously. It shows whether your intentions are being realised, helps you improve what you do and strengthens the case for continuing and expanding the work. It is an act of care for the people your project serves, care for the integrity of your work and care for the future of prison radio as a field. Done well, it turns good intentions into demonstrable impact and demonstrable impact into the foundation for everything that comes next.

AFTER WORD

5 KEY QUESTIONS ????

When we brought together a group of people in Brazil to help shape this toolkit, including prison administrators, operators, legislators, civil servants, academics and people who had themselves been in prison, they offered five key questions. These were not questions about microphones, formats or funding. They were questions about what makes this work difficult and what makes it worth doing.

1 How can we ensure the project respects and values the dignity of people in prison?

This question runs through every step of this toolkit. It is present in **STEP 1**, where we make the case for prison radio as a human right and in **STEP 6**, where we think carefully about what it means to work with system-impacted people in ways that are genuinely respectful rather than extractive. It shapes **STEP 7**'s focus on trauma-informed practice, **STEP 8**'s insistence that content treats participants and listeners as fully human and **STEP 10**'s reminder that evaluation must also be conducted with care. Dignity is not a value to state. It is a practice to uphold, decision by decision, session by session, show by show.

2 How can we ensure real participation and leadership of people deprived of liberty?

This question asks every project to consider who is at the centre of the work. **STEP 6** traces a path from involvement, through empowerment, to lived experience leadership. **STEPs 3 & 4** ask who makes decisions and whose voice shapes direction. **STEP 8** shows that the most powerful work is made by people with lived experience of prison, not by chance, but because authentic participation is fundamental to what prison radio is. The goal is not to include people in someone else's project. It is to build work that is genuinely co-produced and co-led.

3 How can we build trust between people deprived of liberty, staff and project organisers?

Trust runs through the entire toolkit, because without it, nothing else works. **STEP 5** explores how to build it with prison staff and institutions through patient, consistent engagement. **STEP 6** addresses trust with participants, grounded in transparency and respect. **STEP 3** reminds us that trust depends on alignment between what we say we value and how we act. **STEP 9** asks whether funding choices can strengthen or weaken that trust.

4 How can we deal with different perspectives and concerns among those involved?

Prison radio brings together people who do not always agree. It asks people in prison, staff, NGOs, media organisations, funders and governments to contribute to something shared. **STEP 4** addresses this reality, including the tensions it creates and how they can be navigated. **STEPs 5 & 6** show how these tensions play out in practice. **STEPs 8 & 9** raise further dilemmas around editorial independence and funding. The toolkit does not pretend these conversations are easy. It aims to help you have them more clearly and more constructively.

5 How can we ensure sustainable funding for prison radio?

This is a question many projects return to repeatedly. **STEP 9** sets out the range of funding sources projects draw on globally, the ethical questions they raise and the importance of diversification and the courage required to say no to money that comes with conditions that compromise the work. But sustainability is not only about money. It is also about relationships, evidence and public trust. This is why **STEP 10** is not an afterthought. It underpins everything that follows.

& YOUR NEXT STEPS

These five questions do not have final answers. They are questions to keep asking, in every meeting, every decision, every programme. They sit at the heart of prison radio done well.

We began this toolkit with a quotation by Dr Anne Fernald: "Sound is a kind of touch at a distance." We end it with a voice from a formerly incarcerated radio producer who now is employed with the organisation on the outside.

When Anthony Ivy of Uncuffed was asked what the world needs to understand about prison radio, he said:

> "Prison radio gives people an in-depth look on what a person might be going through, or what they went through... that can sort of bond people from different worlds, combine them together and give them something they have in common... It's here and here to stay. These stories help people get through their life, through situations... I just want people to put some respect on it and help out."

That is what we are asking too. Put some respect on it. And help out.

Wherever you are in the world, whatever stage your project is at, you are part of something that matters. The stories you help people tell, the connections you build across walls, the voices you help to be heard, these things change people. They change the people making the radio. They change the people listening. And slowly, show by show, they can change how we understand crime, punishment and what it means to build a more just society.

For now, we hope this toolkit helps you ask the right questions, find your own answers and strengthen the work you are doing. And we hope, when you discover what works and what does not, you will share it with us, so we can continue to learn from each other and grow this network together.

This is a living document and it will only ever be as good as the community that shapes it.

With thanks and with hope

Prison Radio International



The workshop held in Brazil to help shape this toolkit.

SOURCES CITED/ FURTHER RESOURCES

1. Collaborative Journalism Guide
2. Press in Prison Guidebook
3. Solutions Journalism Explained
4. Illustrated Solutions Reporting Checklist
5. The Marshall Project – Language Guide
6. Prison Journalism Project
7. Council of Europe Recommendations on Prison Broadcasting
8. UNESCO Media Development Indicators
9. Beyond Violence Program
10. Best Practices in Broadcasting
11. Uncuffed DEI Orientation Manual, KALW Public Media
12. UK PSI on Prison Radio Communications
13. Prisoners' Access to the Media: PSI 37/2010
14. Community Radio Continuous Improvement Toolkit
15. Prison & Probation Policy Frameworks: GOV.UK
16. Media in Prison Handbook – Colorado Radio for Justice
17. Authorised Communications Controls and Interception Policy Framework
18. Secure Social Video Calling Policy Framework
19. HM Prison and Probation Service Framework Document
20. Prison Service Instructions (PSIs)
21. Prison Service Instructions – 49/2011 – Prisoner Communication Services
22. Prison Public Protection Policy Framework
23. Social Media Use – HM Prison and Probation Service
24. The Marshall Project Guide to What Words We Use – and Avoid – When Covering People and Incarceration
25. Engaging Story Telling Techniques Resource
26. Podcast on Why Good Charity Endings Matter (and how to have one)
27. Prison Radio Association Impact Report – available on their website



Prison Radio International Conference in Norway June 2023.



Prison Radio International Co-founder, Phil Maguire and Jimena Monsalve, Judge of Criminal Execution in Argentina and PRI supporter