

Lecture
2022–23



The importance of sport and physical activity in supporting education and rehabilitation in our prisons.

Professor Rosie Meek

Chartered Psychologist and founding Head of the
Law School at Royal Holloway University of London



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Chairman's Foreword

Sophie Fernandes



Sophie Fernandes
Chairman,
The Portal Trust

Welcome to the commemorative brochure for The Portal Trust Education Lecture 2022–23.

Firstly I'd like to thank our Immediate Past Chairman, John Hall, who has done a wonderful job over four years leading these lectures and introducing speakers with intellectual insight and a true panache which I would love to emulate, but I know will fail at miserably!

So, I will just have to introduce this first printed lecture under my Chairmanship by focussing on the topic at hand. And what a topic to open with! Not only is prisoner education close to my heart, and one of the Portal Trust's priorities, but we were privileged to have the speech delivered by the inspirational Professor Rosie Meek. Someone who not only speaks passionately on the subject but also takes action to ensure changes take place: Governments listen, and perhaps most importantly of all she makes sure that in everything she does, it opens up opportunities for those both in and out of prison who have the drive to make a change for their future.

Here at The Portal Trust, we also contribute to helping young people make a change to their future, and realising their potential through partnerships, our willingness to support (often 'off-trend') new initiatives, and by focussing on grant-making that fosters growth and creates impact.

We are proud at what we have achieved. Over the past decade alone, we have awarded £16.5 million in grants, supporting a range of projects that empower young people and foster a more equitable community. From young people in Peckham being

supported in gaining access to the creative arts, via projects such as Generation Next at Mountview, and young people across Hammersmith accessing the Start Programme, to our two London Schools, The Aldgate School in the City of London and Stepney All Saints in Tower Hamlets.

We have helped fund bursaries at Cambridge, Oxford, Goldsmiths and The University of Westminster, and we take great pride in the achievements of the young individuals who receive our grants. Their diverse pursuits, including Astrophysics, Urban Dance Studies, Medicine, Engineering, and more, serve as a testament to their hard work and determination. We celebrate their successes as examples of the potential that resides within our youth and the opportunities that education can provide.

Speaking of potential, and coming back to Rosie's topic in the following text, I would also like to re-state the Trust's commitment to supporting education within the prison system. We know there is a large amount of untapped potential amongst prisoners, and we are passionate about action and tangible outcomes to release and nurture that potential. That's why in the last 10 years we have committed £5 million to educational projects, working with young people either in prison or recently released, or in danger of entering the prison system. One of these projects is working with the London College of Fashion, to which we have committed £2 million to a project working with female prisoners in His Majesty's Prison Downview, supporting the transition from prison to society. Finally, thank you to Bayes Business School and its generous hospitality that allows us to host such inspirational events year on year. We really appreciate our continuing partnership in this and our other projects.

If reading text isn't for you, please do watch Rosie's lecture in full, on our website at www.portaltrust.org/news instead.

Want to join us at the next lecture? Email events@portaltrust.org or keep an eye out for announcements on our Twitter handle [@Portal_Trust](https://twitter.com/Portal_Trust)

Chief Executive's Foreword

Richard Foley



Richard Foley
Chief Executive,
The Portal Trust

The Portal Trust is a London-based education charity that works to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve their full potential. We provide funding for a range of educational programmes and resources designed to empower young people and promote social mobility. With a focus on building skills, knowledge, and confidence, The Portal Trust aims to break down barriers to education and ensure that all young people have access to the opportunities they need to succeed.

It is with great pleasure that we present this brochure containing the text of Professor Rosie Meek's lecture "*The importance of sport and physical activity in supporting education and rehabilitation in our prisons*". Held in February 2023, this lecture was a thought-provoking and inspiring exploration of the ways in which sport and education can positively impact the lives of individuals within the criminal justice system.

Professor Meek has conducted extensive research into the use of sport and physical activity as a tool for rehabilitation and reintegration. Her lecture drew on this research, as well as her experience working with prisoners and prisons, to provide a fascinating overview highlighting the many ways in which sport can contribute to the rehabilitation process, from promoting physical health and wellbeing to building social and interpersonal skills.

We are confident that readers of this brochure will find much to learn and reflect on within the text.

We would like to extend our thanks to Professor Meek for sharing her expertise and insights with us and to all those who attended the lecture and contributed to the discussion. It is our sincere hope that this brochure will serve not only as a record of the event but also as a valuable resource for anyone interested in the intersection of sport, education, and criminal justice, as a reminder of the power of sport and education to transform lives and inspire continued efforts to promote these vital programmes within prisons.

I'm also pleased to announce that Baroness Floella Benjamin OM, DBE, DL, has agreed to be our speaker for the next Portal Trust Education Lecture on the 11th January 2024. For details, do keep an eye on our website at www.portaltrust.org, or follow us on twitter at @Portal_Trust.

The importance of sport and physical activity

**in supporting education
and rehabilitation
in our prisons**

I am glad to say that joining us this evening are individuals with lived experience of either working in or being incarcerated in prisons. But even those without direct experience of being in a prison can, I'm sure, imagine what bleak settings these can be, and you will be aware of the woefully poor outcomes associated with people with experience of incarceration. But I am also acutely aware of the massive untapped potential in our prisons. So as an educator who has direct and personal experience of the transformative impact of learning, education is a criminal justice priority for me.

When we look at the purposes of prison, we have some competing priorities. It is a given that prisons can be pretty effective in detaining people, depriving people of their liberty as a form of punishment issued by the courts, and of course, preventing people from offending in the community whilst they are incarcerated. Research shows that the deterrence element of prisons isn't particularly effective, though. When we impose harsher sentences, there is no correlation with a reduced crime rate. And in terms of rehabilitating people, that final priority of a modern prison service, when reoffending rates remain consistently high, we know we are doing a poor job.

We are incarcerating a steadily increasing number of people in England and Wales (currently over 84,000: Ministry of Justice, 2023), and together with Scotland we have the highest incarceration rates in Western Europe. At just ten years of age, we have one of the lowest ages of criminal responsibility in Western Europe, indeed the world. We currently incarcerate around 500 children aged 18 and under (HMPPS/YCS, 2023), although a decade ago we incarcerated seven times that, 3500.

1 *This is likely to be an under-estimate due to the restrictions on court activity during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent backlogs that meant some reoffences weren't counted since they were not dealt with at court during the one-year follow-up period or the additional six-month waiting period to allow for offences to be proven in court.*

We are still over-incarcerating children, often unnecessarily. Most recent data from the Youth Justice Board (2023) confirms that a huge three-quarters of all children on remand in custody received a non-custodial outcome when their case finally went to trial, but on average children were waiting seven long months between the alleged offence and completion at court. And then one-third of all children who are released from our prisons each year at the end of their sentence reoffend,¹ rising to three-quarters of children reoffending who have a history of ten or more previous offences. So, there is a compelling case for sending fewer people to prison in the first place, investing more in diversion programmes and community-based sentences, particularly for those low-risk offenders and those convicted of non-violent offences. For those who *are* detained in our prisons, we need to be more creative and effective in meeting the rehabilitative aims of incarceration and it will come as no surprise that I think sport and physical activity has an important role to play here, a role that is often overlooked. By no means am I naïve enough to suggest that it is a cure all but there is capacity for a whole range of creative interventions in our prisons.

When I was undertaking my training in Psychology at Sussex University, I was a volunteer for a Criminal Justice charity called New Bridge and with the Brighton Youth Offending Team. Later I supported my studies through working for the Howard League for Penal Reform. Each of these experiences instilled in me at the same time a sense of despair about the state of our prisons and a recognition that we could and should do more. A few decades on and I am still struck by the wasted potential of those individuals I work with in prisons, both here and internationally.

In this lecture, I am focusing on children and young people in prison, for whom incarceration can be particularly damaging and re-traumatising. The school-to-prison (or Pupil Referral Unit-to-prison) pipeline is a term used to describe how children in

the justice system are disproportionately more likely to have experienced exclusion from school. Incarcerated children are also dramatically more likely to have been in the care system and to have endured adverse childhood experiences. It costs the taxpayer dramatically more to send a child to prison than it would to send them to Eton. So, prison is expensive and it is not working.

On the whole, prisons are overcrowded, under-resourced and understaffed. At the moment we are seeing particularly high staff turnovers with more than half of those who left the workforce last year having been in the role for under three years. There are high levels of staff absence, particularly in the youth estate where most recent figures confirm that Youth Custody Service staff had the highest sickness absence rate at 19 average working days lost per person per year (HMPPS, 2022). These operational challenges make it difficult for any prison to function effectively or safely. There are many educators in the room, and we are all aware of the transformative effect of education, but education in our prisons is still woefully poor (see HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021, for a sober reading of the detrimental educational and other outcomes for young adults in custody).

We do have some incredible individuals working in our prisons, operating in difficult and challenging circumstances with little recognition or reward. My research has led me to explore a range of issues in prisons, but the area where I have been most inspired, humbled and given some hope is in the area of sport and physical activity behind prison walls. Our failing prison system is partly propped up by an army of PEIs, Physical Education Officers² who oversee the prison gym, that cornerstone of the prison which is popular, offers some normality and can – with the right support – represent the start of positive journeys out of the criminal justice system.

² In preparing for this lecture I was able to access most recent data from the Ministry of Justice confirming that in the last ten years the number of Physical Education Instructors in English and Welsh public sector prisons has continued to fall, from 743 Full Time Equivalent in 2013, to 647 FTE in 2017 and 617 FTE in 2022.

Participants on the rugby academy at Portland Young Offenders Institute (Meek, 2011)
(Credit: Barry Clark).



So rather than bringing to mind the bleak prison exercise yard I want to relay the opportunities that can be realised through the fostering of positive relationships through sport.

To illustrate this, let me share two short quotes from young men from London whom I worked with while they were in prison. The first told me:

"Behaviour wise, when I was first sent down I was always on basic [which is a form of punishment] for messing around and then the PE department, I suppose they kept me out of trouble in a way"

And a second quote is from a young man on the first sports-based programme I evaluated, a legacy from the Ian Wright Football Behind Bars Sky TV project. This participant told me:

"Now I'm even considering going to university to do a foundation then possibly doing physiotherapy... before I never had anything like that in my mind".

I have seen countless examples of hardworking and inspirational individuals using sport to engage and motivate children and adults for whom other programmes and interventions are just not working. But this isn't only about promoting an individual's motivation, it's also about transferring lessons from this work to improving how we work in prison, recognising that *interpersonal relationships* are key. I can share a story which unfortunately is not an isolated incident. Recently I was in a youth prison speaking to boys who had been eligible to take part in a sporting initiative as part of my evaluation of this initiative. It was early afternoon and when the cell was unlocked the young man was asleep in his bed. The officer was unable to wake him and I was concerned for his wellbeing so asked to speak to the wing staff. I was told 'Oh he is the dream prisoner, he watches DVDs all night and sleeps all day, we never have a peep from him'. I asked when he was due for release and was told it was in a matter of weeks after a substantial sentence. What does this say about the culture of a prison, where success is a troubled young man who sleeps through his sentence?

Any form of engagement would be better than that, be it art, music, vocational skills, talking therapies and of course meaningful education. But that requires supportive, reliable, resilient staff. It requires a strong workforce and good leaders who promote positive values.

I have worked with children and young adults who benefit every day from the physical, social and psychological advantages of movement and exercise, but also those who have found a passion for learning, for reading and for further study through their love of sport. Children who build confidence in their educational abilities through sport. Learners who have started to appreciate the value of studying towards vocational qualifications to follow their dream of becoming a gym instructor, a personal trainer, a voluntary referee or a community coach.

There is also abundant psychological and educational evidence of the importance of *play* in healthy child development, particularly in working with those who have endured adverse childhood experiences, trauma and neglect, as we know is the case for so many people who are involved in the criminal justice system.

There is strong evidence for supporting sports-based learning in prisons, not just in promoting education for those reluctant learners who have faced multiple exclusions, and had negative or disrupted experiences of formal education and who therefore enter prison with poor English and maths, but also in equipping learners in prison with a realistic route into employment, training and education, including opportunities through the prison gate into the community and into our thriving sports and fitness sectors.

While I support a diverse range of activities and indeed my work has shown that diversity is key in promoting movement and exercise to all, not just those traditionally sporty types, I should be clear that I am not advocating boot camps, that political cheap shot that routinely gets touted as the next thing to cut youth crime. Indeed, in their recent evaluation of such initiatives, colleagues from Cambridge University (Gaffney *et al.*, 2021) found that young people did not respond well to the discipline element of boot camps and that they led to no reduction in re-offending. But it comes as no surprise that the young participants *did* value the physical activity element.

I have had the privilege of helping to establish and evaluate a wide range of partnerships between prisons and sporting groups and bodies, from Table Tennis Clubs, Boxing England and Parkrun, to local football and rugby clubs, rowing clubs and yoga practitioners.

Brighton Table Tennis Club in HMP High Down
(Credit: Brighton Table Tennis Club).



I am in awe of the prison educators who have recognised this opportunity and do strive to embed learning in sport and sport in learning. For example, Keith Potter and Michelle Glassup at Feltham Young Offenders Institute use sport in all their work, including education in subtle ways, making sure the boys in their care are gaining qualifications and relevant experience in the wide range of opportunities they offer. These include the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and Outward Bound activities on Dartmoor for those who are eligible to be Released on Temporary Licence.

What is it about these programmes that makes them effective? Yes, it is the physicality of the activities, but it is also the partnerships and the relationships, and the opportunities they offer.

Although promoting education is a significant feature of the potential of prison sports initiatives, in sports-based programmes with wraparound services such as mentoring and other support work, or other initiatives where sport is used as a 'hook' for engaging individuals, the type of sport being utilised may not be of primary importance as long as it serves to motivate and

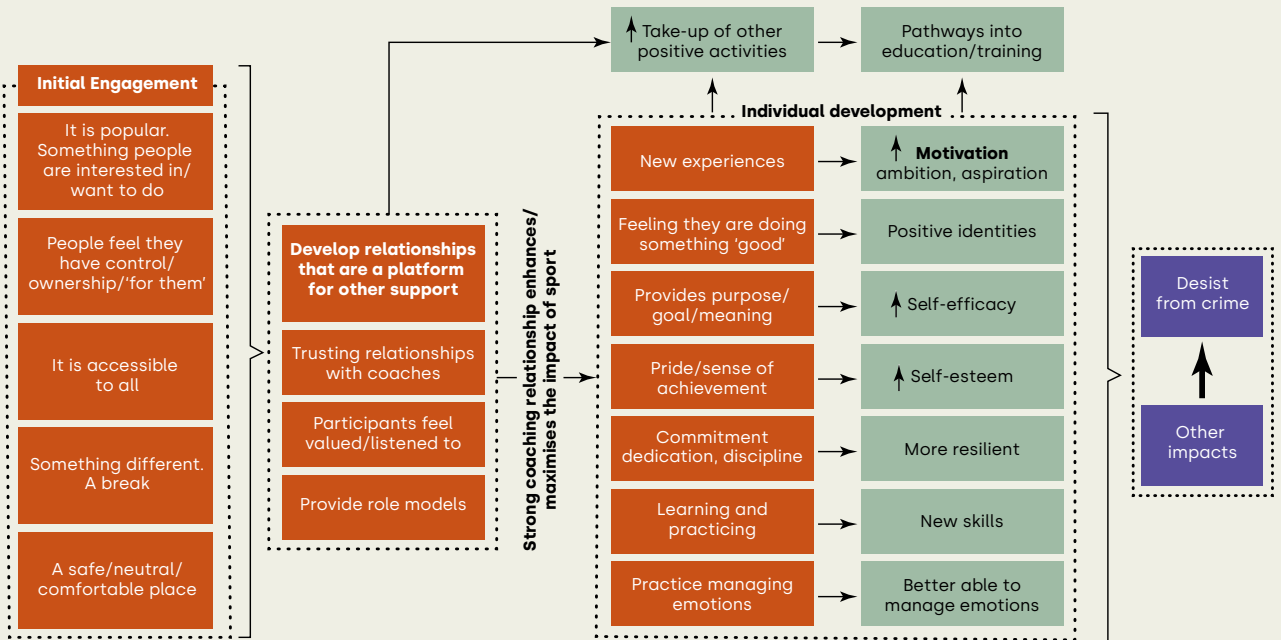
capture the attention of those it targets. In short, the success of any sports-based intervention may be as much, or more, determined by the strength of the non-sport components, and the charisma, experience and engagement technique of the delivery staff involved.

This Theory of Change diagram opposite depicts an overview of the mechanisms that are considered to be necessary when using sport as a means of reducing crime. With colleagues I have tried to articulate here how desistance from crime can occur when initial contact with a sporting activity leads to a deeper, more involved engagement from which relationships of trust and acceptance can be developed. This logic goes on to imply that these relationships provide a platform upon which the individual development of the participant can be built, and which may lead to further opportunities in education, training and employment.

This model is illustrated by the young man who told me that taking part in prison parkrun on a Saturday morning means he has something positive to tell his mum when she visits and has motivated him to improve his fitness.

Or the prison gym officer who establishes so much of a rapport with the angry young man who comes to his gym that he encourages him to enrol on a gym instructor qualification, his first-ever qualification.

Or the ex-prisoner who leaves prison and establishes their own charity supporting fellow ex-prisoners into education through sport.

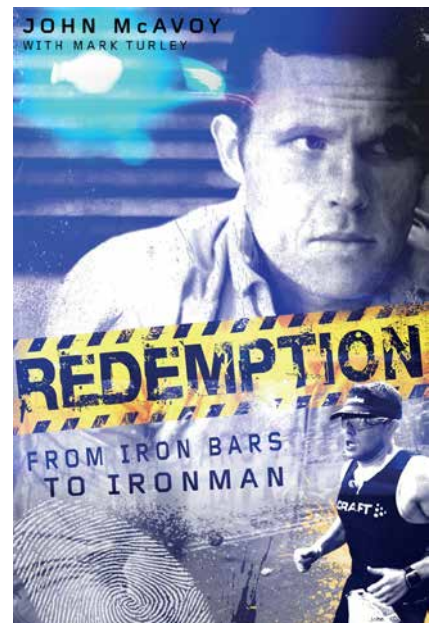
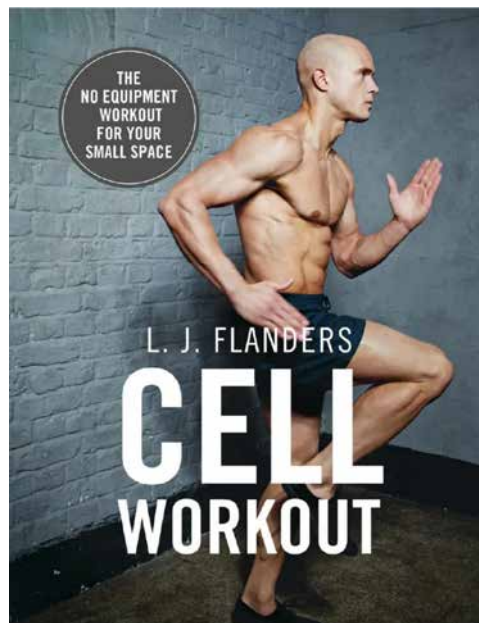


Theory of Change.
 Taken from Morgan,
 Parker, Meek & Cryer
 (2019).

And the learner who was told he'd never amount to anything who was inspired to learn to read and write by a functional skills tutor who realised that she would have more luck engaging with those in her care by taking the classroom to the gym... and bringing the gym into her classroom (I'm thinking specifically here of a brilliant tutor I worked with in Wandsworth prison many years ago. Sadly, her role was cut in the prison's new education commissioning contract).

In 2012, when the UK was gearing up to host the London Olympics, together with colleagues at the Prisoners Education Trust (who have previously benefitted from Portal Trust funding), I launched a report making the case for sports-based learning in prisons (Meek, Champion & Klier, 2012).

Following this publication we received lots of correspondence with further testimonials, from prison gym managers, sporting bodies, currently serving prisoners and those with previous convictions. Amongst these was LJ Flanders who in 2015 published his book *Cell Workout*, which he designed from his own prison cell where he also became a qualified personal trainer.



Another relevant example is the biography of John McAvoy who turned his life around through sport, becoming a world record holder in rowing, while serving a life sentence, attributing his success to the support of a forward-thinking, member of prison staff, Darren Davis, who joins us this evening.

Having read my book *Sport in Prison* (Meek, 2014), five years ago Dr Phillip Lee MP, then the Under Secretary of State for Justice (here in the audience tonight), instructed me to carry out an independent review of sport and physical activity in youth and adult prisons. I was given the opportunity to visit adult prisons, Young Offender Institutions, Secure Children's Homes and Secure Training Centres throughout England and Wales. I was given access to a wide range of data and had the opportunity to meet staff and residents across these facilities. To supplement my visits across the secure estate I collated written consultations from nearly 300 young people in prison and other stakeholders.



The resulting publication culminated in a dozen recommendations. The report is free to download, as is the accompanying government response to my 12 recommendations (accepting all but one of them).

One of my recommendations stressed the need for a women's and girls' strategy. Representing only around 4% of the prison population, women and girls are the least active group in prison, but that doesn't mean they don't want and need to benefit from the physical, social and psychological opportunities that physical activity offers.

Guest speaker
Natasha Jonas, British
professional boxer and
Olympic medallist,
leading a session on
behalf of England Boxing
at HMP Bronzefield
women's prison
(Credit: Marianne
Fagents).

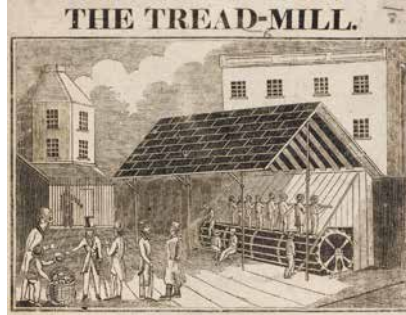


In our research exploring the barriers to women taking part in physical activity in prisons (Meek & Lewis, 2014), young women told me about being forced, in the short time allowed out of their cells, to choose between telephoning their children or using the gym; or not having access to sports clothing; or simply being offered a weights room designed for male prisoners.

In summing up, we have come some way in the 200 years that separate these two images.

A 1817 image of a treadmill (right) at Brixton Prison (London), held by the British Library (Credit: BBC)

A 'climbing wall' (far right) being used by children in detention in England, reproduced in Meek, 2018.



Above left, the treadmill, a form of punishment pictured here at Brixton prison. Above right, a group of children in prison during a communication and team building exercise led by a psychologist using the climbing wall.

But we do still have a long way to go until we see initiatives like this being properly embedded in our prisons. Lack of resources, leadership and investment means only a small percentage of people benefit from such opportunities. A great programme that occasionally engages 20 people in a prison of 400 is not reaching 95% of the people held in that prison.

Although I don't claim it can resolve all the complex issues that our prisons – and those that live and work in our prisons – face, I do believe that making better use of sustainable sport and physical activity programmes can have far-reaching benefits for people in prison and the communities to which they will return.

Never has there been a more important time to consider the use of engaging, innovative and creative approaches such as these; approaches that are aligned with renewed efforts to promote healthier and safer prisons.

Professor Rosie Meek
Twitter: @DrRosieMeek

With thanks

With thanks to my students – past and present – who have co-authored with me on this topic:

Dr Hannah Hammond (nee Baumer)

Melissa De Marco

Lisa Edmondson

Dr Anastasia Jablonska

Dr Gwen O'Connor (nee Lewis)

Dr Anita Mehay

Also included in the live lecture was an extract from this short film I made eleven years ago in a Young Offenders Institution where the young men explain (pitch side) the positive impact of the 2nd Chance Project/RFU rugby initiative on their learning trajectories.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjnKsOkjGD0

(This model was later partially replicated by Saracens Rugby Club)

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Professor Rosie Meek

Chartered Psychologist and founding Head of the Law School at Royal Holloway University of London



Professor Rosie Meek is a Chartered Psychologist and was founding Head of the Law School at Royal Holloway University of London, where her teaching and research expertise is in Criminal Justice and in particular, prisons.

As well as researching and writing widely on the role of the voluntary sector in prisoner rehabilitation, Professor Meek is best known for her work on the role and impact of sport and physical activity in prison settings: in addition to chapters, journal articles and evaluation reports on the topic, her book *Sport in Prison* (Routledge) was published in 2013, and in 2018 she conducted a national review of the provision of physical activity in youth and adult prisons, on behalf of the Ministry of Justice, which led to a number of policy changes.

A Distinguished Fulbright Scholar, she has served on the Economic and Social Research Council's Grant Assessment Panel and the Youth Justice Board's Academic Liaison Panel, is an Associate Editor of the journal *Criminology & Criminal Justice* and acts as advisor to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

Rosie is also a certified yoga teacher and a trustee of the Premiership Rugby Foundation.