

Putting more people in cages! That’s how we build our way out of the pandemic

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True to form prison expansion takes a centre stage in the Government’s 2.5 billion post pandemic recovery programme. On the 28 June 2020 [the Ministry of Justice \(MoJ\) revealed plans to build four new prisons which will create 10,000 extra places](#). This is in addition to work that has already started in Leicestershire and Northamptonshire to create 3,380 new places. In fact it looks like the Conservative Government has returned to a policy of a sustained prison expansion programme (see [the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies](#)).

More jobs and increased regional growth in exchange for greater dehumanization

The Ministry of Justice hails the expansion of cages as a means to create jobs and improve regional economies.

“Thousands of jobs will be created overall in the areas surrounding the prisons during construction and once they have opened. This will provide a major spur to local economies and support the construction industry to invest and innovate following the Coronavirus pandemic”.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore in her book *Golden Gulag* on mass incarceration in California captures this as the essence of prison expansion:

“In my view, prisons are partial geographical solutions to political economic crises, organized by the state, which is itself in crisis.”

The Covid pandemic has brought to the fore the systemic inequalities that produce discrimination based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability and age.

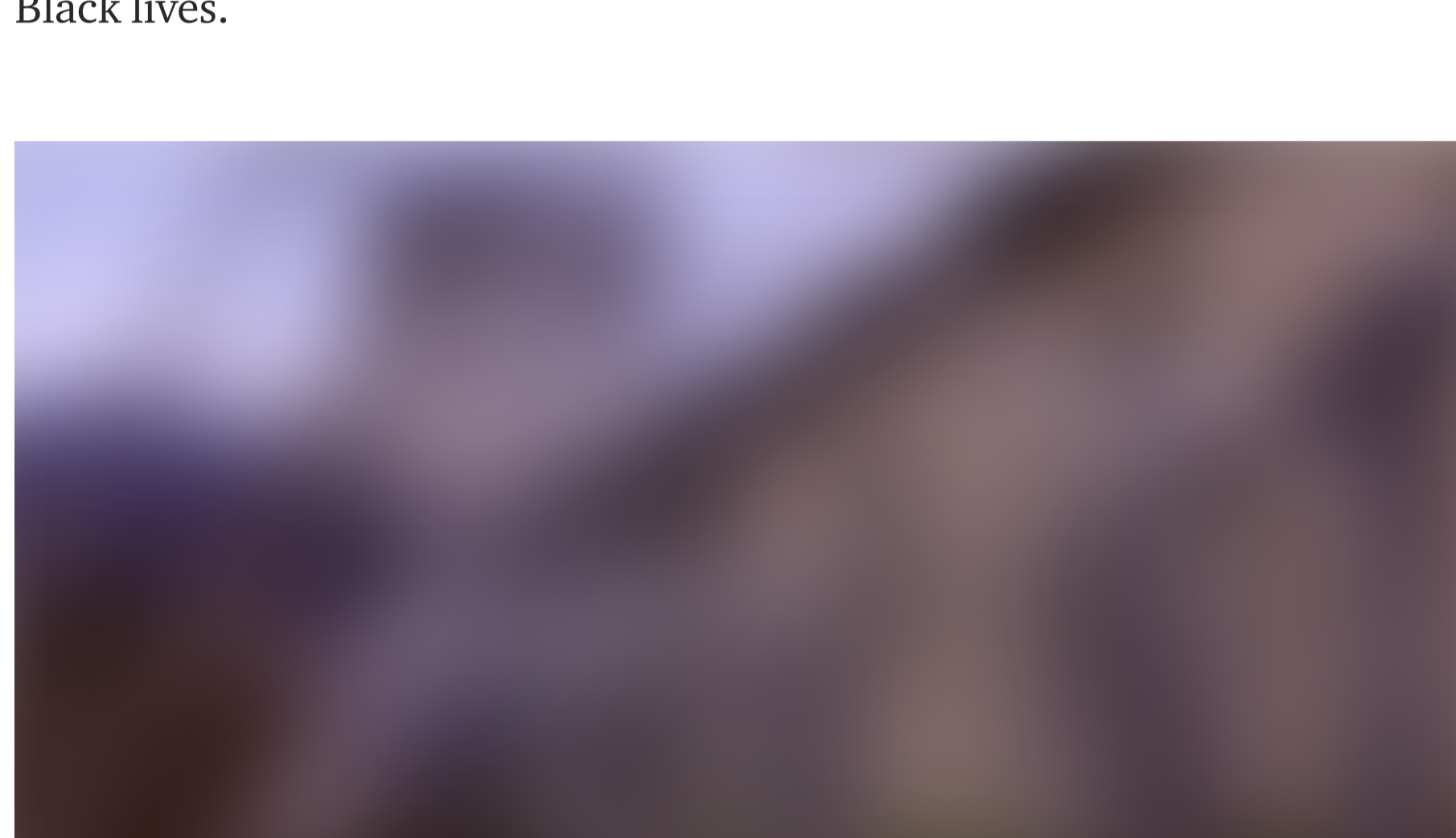
Black Lives Matter — challenging systemic racism and defund the prison!

Prison expansion was announced in the midst of the global Black Lives Matter movement against institutional racism and anti-blackness. On the 8th June 2020, the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson shared a [message](#) in which he highlighted the government’s pledges to “eradicating prejudice, and creating opportunity” and “defeat[ing] racism and discrimination wherever we find it”.

But by putting prison expansion at the heart of the UK’s post-COVID-19 recovery programme, the government reneges on these very commitments. These proposals seriously neglect the logics of racism that are central to the function of the prison. Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes the relationship between racism and the prison expansion project:

“Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. Prison expansion is a new iteration of this theme. Prisons and other locally unwanted land uses accelerate the mortality of modestly educated working people of all kinds in urban and rural settings and show how economic and environmental justice are central to antiracism”.

The government’s proposals signify their readiness to expand harmful systems of incarceration and to create new sites of racism, economic and environmental injustice in the UK. These proposals were released during a global pandemic that has shown to [disproportionately impact Black and BAME](#) people. More still, they appear against the backdrop of a global political movement in which Black communities are fighting for their lives. Rather than addressing what is truly at stake, these proposals promote discrimination and underline the UK government’s continued disdain for Black lives.



People are dying in prison

Prisons are fundamentally coercive and harmful places. A recent in-depth report from INQUEST, *Deaths in Prison: a national scandal* (January 2020), has found continued high rates of self-inflicted deaths and self-harm in prison since 2016 and many cases of premature deaths due to severely inadequate healthcare. Women and men in prison face a dehumanizing space in which they are isolated from caring relationships on the outside and often exposed to violence, bullying and loneliness on the inside.

“The report details repeated safety failures including mental and physical healthcare, communication systems, emergency responses, and drugs and medication. It also looks at the wider statistics and historic context, showing the repetitive and persistent nature of such failings.

Every four days a person takes their life in prison, and rising numbers of ‘natural’ and unclassified deaths are too often found to relate to serious failures in healthcare. The lack of government action on official recommendations is leading to preventable deaths.”

“Even in relatively ‘well-staffed’ prisons we find prisoners being treated with a lack of dignity and respect, linked to neglect, mental ill health and premature deaths. A tightening of security measures is likely to have exacerbated the distress and human misery behind prison walls, posing a greater threat to life”.

INQUEST explains that deaths and harms extend beyond the time spent inside. A disproportionate number of women and men die after their release either prematurely or self-inflicted. These deaths and high levels of self-harm demonstrate the harmful effects of incarceration and lack of community support.

Our societal healing and recovery must begin with care

We can’t build ourselves out of the current crisis with buildings that reproduce racism, economic and environmental injustice. Putting people in cages means that as a society we accept their dehumanization. This does not need to be the case. We have a choice, we can choose an economic recovery that decentres prisons and the police and centres mental health, housing, community support. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore asserts: [“crisis means instability that can be fixed only through radical measures, which include developing new relationships and new or renovated institutions out of what already exists”](#).

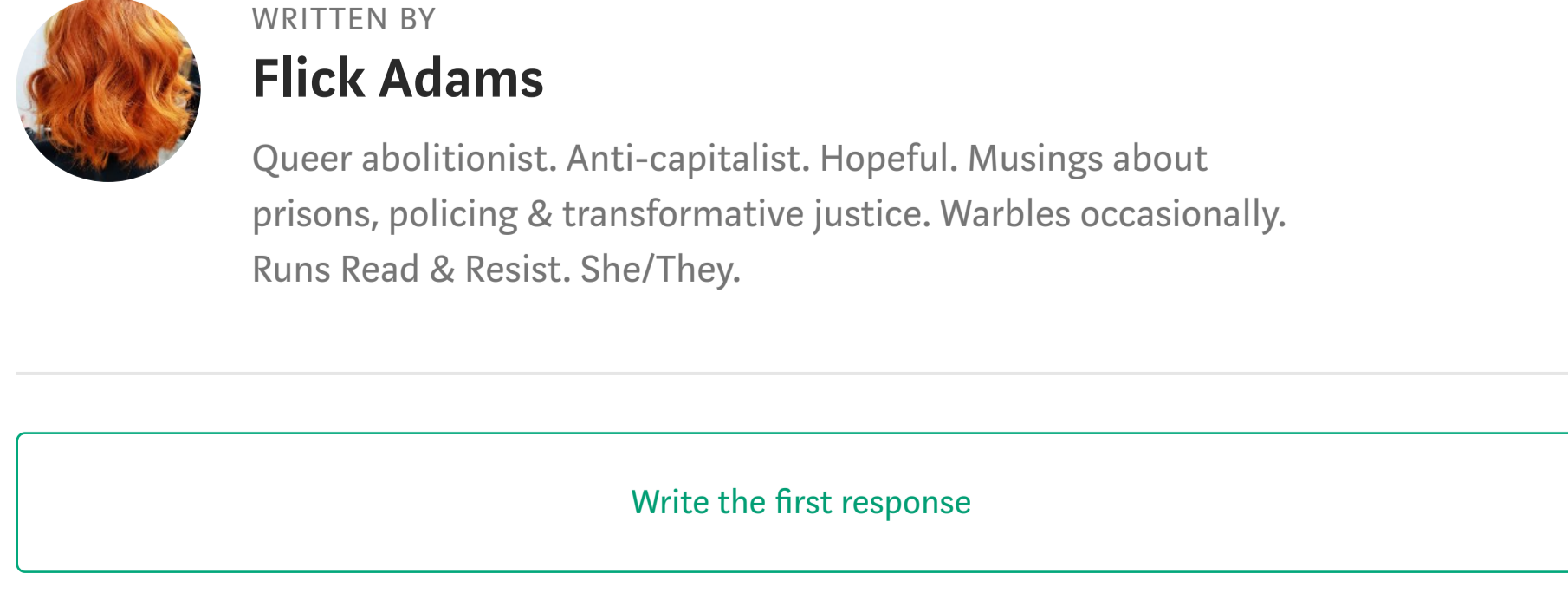
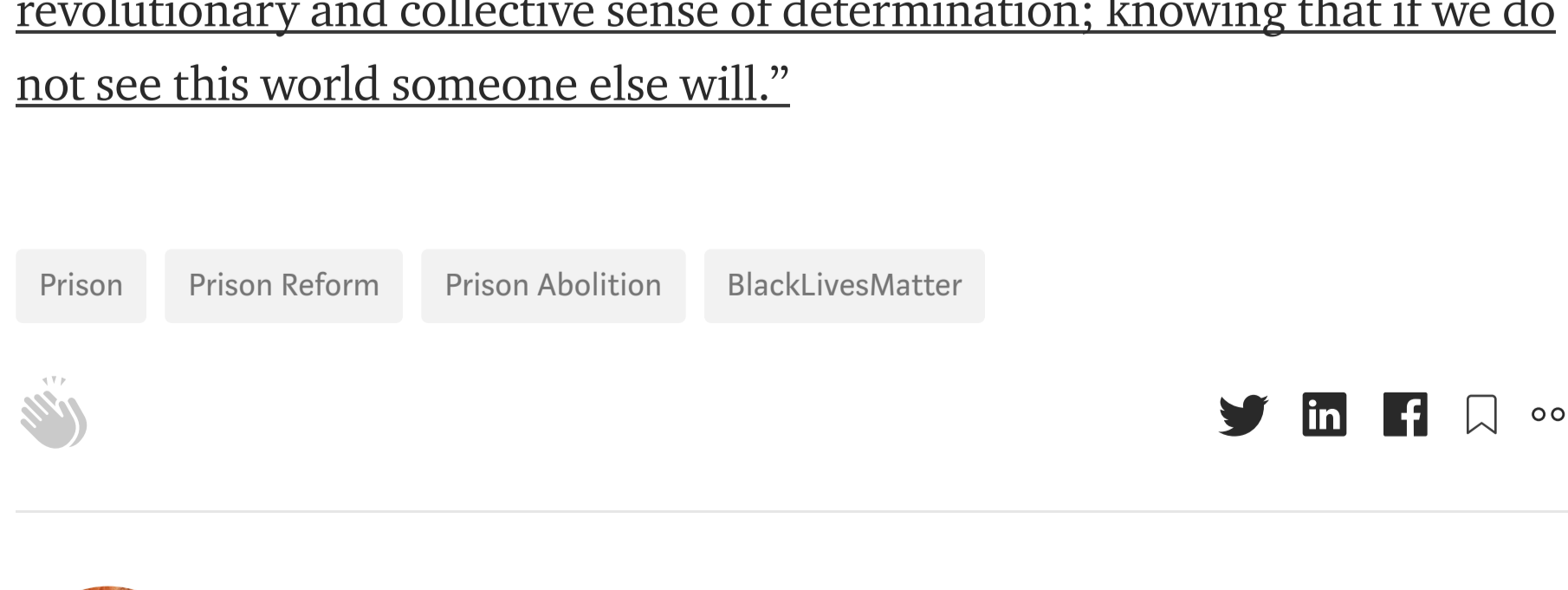
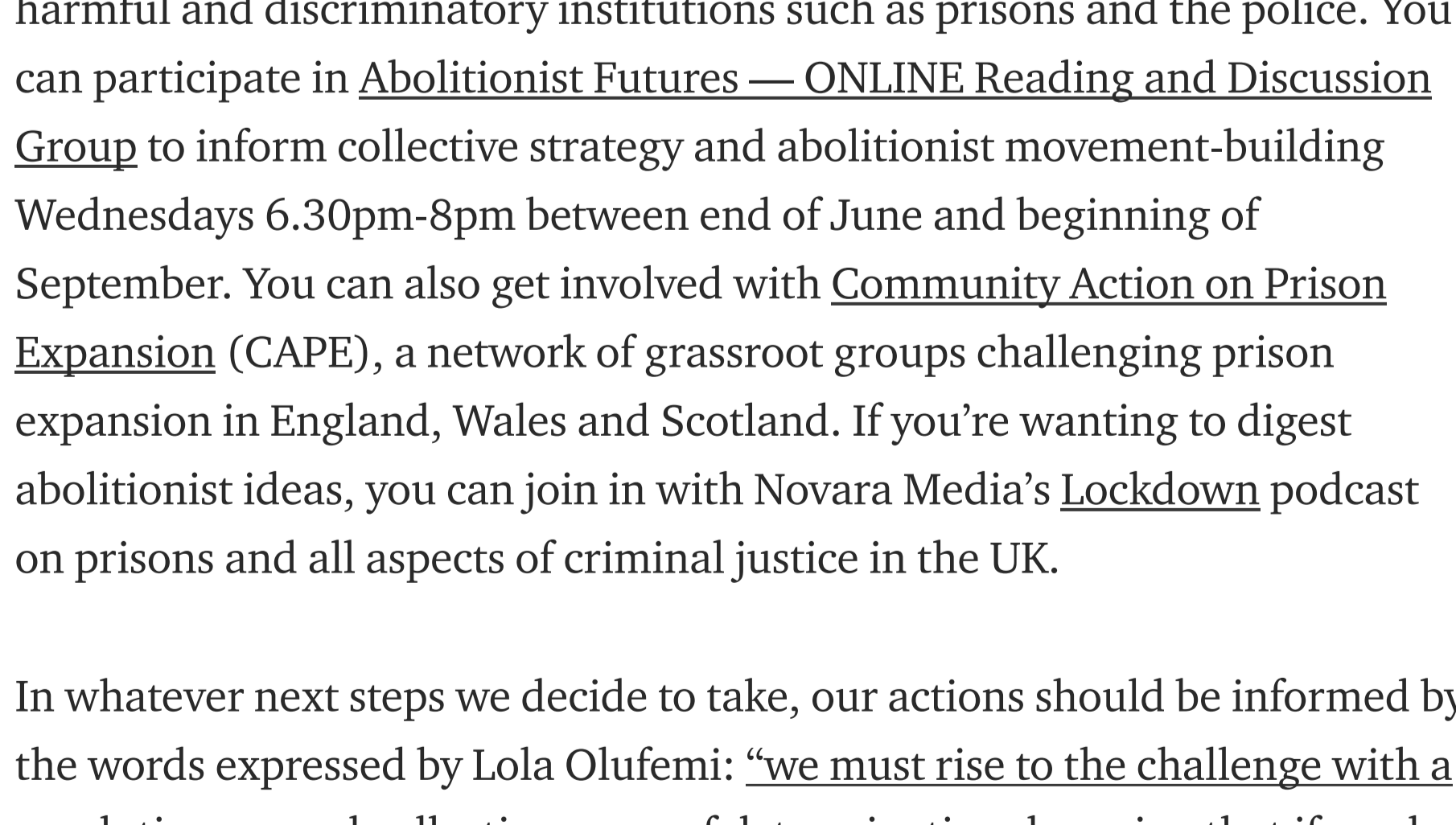
Angela Davis in her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* suggests we should not understand prison abolition as the process of replacing the prison with one other institution. For the prison is integrated in a “set of relationships that comprise the prison industrial complex.” This can help us think about alternatives to prison as a process of decarceration across a spectrum of different spaces: “demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all, and a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance”. In effect new institutions could “crowd out” prison.

“To reiterate, rather than try to imagine one single alternative to the existing system of incarceration, we might envision an array of alternatives that will require radical transformation of many aspects of our society. Alternatives that fail to address racism, male dominance, homophobia, class bias, and other structures of domination will not, in the final analysis, lead to decarceration and will not advance the goal of abolition” (Angela Davis).

Prison Abolition — Get involved!

There are a variety of digital community initiatives that work to abolish harmful and discriminatory institutions such as prisons and the police. You can participate in [Abolitionist Futures — ONLINE Reading and Discussion Group](#) to inform collective strategy and abolitionist movement-building Wednesdays 6.30pm-8pm between end of June and beginning of September. You can also get involved with [Community Action on Prison Expansion](#) (CAPE), a network of grassroots groups challenging prison expansion in England, Wales and Scotland. If you’re wanting to digest abolitionist ideas, you can join in with Novara Media’s [Lockdown](#) podcast on prisons and all aspects of criminal justice in the UK.

In whatever next steps we decide to take, our actions should be informed by the words expressed by Lola Olufemi: [“we must rise to the challenge with a revolutionary and collective sense of determination; knowing that if we do not see this world someone else will.”](#)



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