** **Lucy Vincent** the 25-year-old is spearheading change with [Food Behind Bars](https://foodbehindbars.co.uk/).

*When did you decide to start Food Behind Bars?*

I launched my campaign in December last year. For most people who know me, the cause came seemingly out of nowhere - my background is in the fashion industry and before this point, I'd never met anyone who had been to prison. I stumbled across an official report about prison food, which brought up the question of how poor diet was affecting those eating it, and how it may be contributing to the kind of prison disruption that was dominating the news at the time. It was an eye-opener. I then spoke to prisoners and ex-prisoners and built a bigger picture - soon enough I was hearing first-hand accounts of severe weight-gain (and loss), converting religion to receive better food and plenty of dinnertime horror stories (roast potatoes too hard to cut with a plastic fork, dishcloths found inside casseroles - I could go on). I felt absolutely sure that a nutritional improvement in prisoner diet would have far-reaching effects. Food contributes to both our mental and physical health. It influences our emotional wellbeing, our mood, our self-worth - and here is an environment home to people who statistically suffer with these issues more than most. I felt compelled to at least raise awareness about the issue.

*Why does this cause feel so important to you?*

Fundamentally, it's a human-rights issue. The minute these individuals are sentenced they are put into the care of Her Majesty's Prison System. The punishment has been inflicted - their freedom has been taken away from them and now it's the prison's responsibility to rehabilitate them. However you only have to glance at a newspaper at any given time to realise that severe cuts to prison staffing and funding is making the job of rehabilitation very difficult indeed.

*If you could sum up the ethos of the project in five words, what would they be?*

Rehabilitation

Decent nutrition is an imperative part of a much bigger picture that will ensure these individuals are leaving prison in a better state than when they entered - and therefore not reoffending.

Forward-thinking

At the moment, prisoner diet is not being recognised in the way it should be. If more fruit and vegetables, fewer additives and more appetising food can transform school classrooms, why can't it have the same affect on our prisons?

Education

It's all very well putting the message out that prisoners should be fed better, but who's to say that all of them want this? Statistically, many of these individuals come from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and the idea of "healthy eating" may have never factored into their lives before. So there's a huge amount of work to do in educating them as to why they should be prioritising nutrition more.

Self-value

Most prisoners and ex-prisoners I've spoken to have implied the same thing: that the food served to them lets them know how much the system values them. Therefore how do they feel about themselves when they're fed cold dinners or the only fruit that's provided to them is bruised and out of date?

Choice

Choice is a big deal in prison. Primarily because prisoners don't have much say in anything - particularly their diet. The eventual aim of my project is to positively influence the limited choices these people have, and allow them more choice and control when it comes to what they eat.

## *What has been the biggest obstacle you’ve faced thus far?*

One word: access. Prison is a closed-off world and probably one of the last remaining areas that favour pen and paper to email. Before I launched Food Behind Bars, I couldn't tell you the last time I sent a letter. Now I send a few a week and have started to sacrifice flat whites for books of stamps. Things often move slowly - finding the right person to talk to, working out how to contact them - everything is slower and I'm notoriously impatient. My work as a journalist has also proved to be a slight obstacle at stages. A team of kitchen staff at a women's prison refused to talk to me quite early on. All I really wanted was to gain some insight into how things functioned, but I think they thought I would be critical of how they ran things - I completely understood their reasoning. Prison food standards vary hugely from prison-to-prison and the kitchen teams are running a massive operation on a tiny budget and under pressured circumstances. I certainly couldn't do what they do on a daily basis - but that doesn't mean I don't want to help them improve it.

I've started a conversation about something, which before, wasn't a conversation. I've allowed prisoners and ex-prisoners a voice through my writing on the subject. I've encouraged people to rethink what they might assume about prison food. The old fashioned "bread and water" ethos is outdated and completely counteractive to rehabilitation.

Although certain parts of the media like to make us think that prisoners get an easy ride and live in holiday camp luxury - the reality is very different. No-one is passing them fish and chips through their cell windows and on a normal day they'd be lucky to hit even a couple of their five a day. Society now understands the impact good nutrition can have on everything from depression to lifespan. Prison has been forgotten. Simple, healthy and affordable meals could revolutionise not only prison environment, but prisoner health and wellbeing too. The entire country would benefit from lower rates of reoffending and a better functioning prison system. We can’t rule out food as part of this. Hopefully I can convince people it’s absolutely integral.