Justice Committee

Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons

Written submission from Open Estate Castle Huntly Visiting Committee

1. *What is meant by ‘purposeful activity’ and how can this be measured*

In the context of the inquiry it is interesting to note that the SPS define “purposeful activity” as “anything that results in the reduction of re-offending”.

Purposeful Activity – how the prisoners spend their day. Not just ‘out of cell time’ but actual work. Not all prisoners have the same learning ability. The scale can range from poor literacy and numeracy to being a peer tutor. It can be difficult but not impossible to arrange individual tuition instead of ‘one size fits all’.

A buddy system has been introduced at the induction and it is hoped that this will help prisoners to find their ideal activity to help them through the Open Estate and make the most of their time there.

Activities include: education, gardens, placements, computing classes, music, art etc.

Home leaves allow prisoners to attend appointments while in the community and having to think for themselves and to take responsibility for their actions.

There is insufficient staff to deliver all the training that should be available within the Open Estate. No longer on offer are trades such as painting, bricklaying, plumbing, fork lift truck operation etc. These were popular with prisoners before they were withdrawn and opened up jobs and self-employment opportunities.

Training should be meaningful by obtaining a certificate of competency and not just an attendance certificate.

How valuable is a placement in developing future employment? Placements achieve many skills and some can lead to full time employment on release. Unfortunately, placement opportunities have fallen off in recent times. Employers cannot be seen to be giving placements to prisoners in the present economic climate.

Recreational activities for prisoners and activities of interest will address the problem of boredom at weekends and evenings.

2. *The extent to which prisoners have an opportunity to engage in purposeful activity*

Is all prisoners’ activity purposeful? Perhaps not as much as it should be.

The Open Estate has a raft of placements designed to give prisoners a trade or experience to take with them on release. It is hoped that the experience they receive can lead to employment on release. Certificates received by prisoners only prove
that they attended a course and not that they qualified as being able to carry out the task competently.

Prisoners have suggested that they be given rewarding work in the community. They feel that they would be giving something back to the community.

Could they be given a 12 month course to prove that they can achieve a target?

Not all prisoners can or are given the opportunity to engage in purposeful activity. This is an on-going agenda item at the prisoners’ forum and it is hoped that some activities will go forward to help build prisoners’ self-confidence and a feeling of self-achievement. Team building will help in future projects and future working.

3. What are the perceived benefits of purposeful activity and whether there are any examples of best practice

If a prisoner is in purposeful activity, it can achieve many things. It can keep them away from drugs. They have a goal and it keeps them occupied. While undertaking a project, all their time and attention is taken up with it and there is no time for them to become ‘bored’ and look for a diversion.

The examples given below have led many of the prisoners to a more purposeful and fulfilling life. They have left prison with a work ethic and with the confidence to live a useful life and to seek work on their release.

- **ILLU (Independent Living Unit)** – They are taught life skills. Shopping and budgeting, storing food and preparing meals for themselves. They attend classes at the training kitchen where they are taught how to prepare meals. They are also taught how to operate a washing machine and do their own laundry. The aim is to help prisoners make a smooth transition to home life.

- **Anne Frank Exhibition** at Castle Huntly. A few prisoners were trained as Guides. Visitors were then shown round the exhibition by the prisoners. The prisoners attained experience and self-confidence with this activity.

- **The John Muir Trust** has had support from prisoners at the Open Estate over the past few years. One example is Tentsmuir Forest which has benefited over the last 2 – 3 years.

- **The Open Times** magazine is written and produced by prisoners with guidance from staff. This is an excellent example of team working.

- **Prisoners and some ex-forces staff** built a memorial garden at Noranside. An act of remembrance was held on Armistice Day 2010. Brigadier Hugh Munro attended the opening service. When Noranside closed and prisoners were transferred to Castle Huntly, ex-forces staff and prisoners were inspired to create a beautiful memorial and garden of contemplation at HMP Castle Huntly. A dedication service was held on 24 September 2012 and veterans in custody and ex-forces staff stood shoulder to shoulder wearing their medals.
received during conflict serving their country. This act helped prisoners to restore pride in themselves.

- Prisoners are to be given the opportunity to tend allotments. These have now been prepared and are ready for spring planting. This was a request by prisoners and has now come to fruition. This will help to relieve boredom in evenings and weekends.

4. What barriers may exist to prevent prisoners engaging in such activities

The press coverage given to Castle Huntly when anything goes wrong has a detrimental effect on prisoners. There is seldom any credit given to prisoners when they are involved in worthwhile causes and the good things that they accomplish at the Open Estate. Prisoners are not given the chance to prove that they can carry out projects within the community. Progression opportunities are limited.

Prisoners feel that the lack of internet access for college courses is a major barrier. The Open Estate should be given this facility for prisoners undertaking college courses. This can be restricted access and available when there is a tutor present. Prisoners experience difficulty in continuing a course when moving from closed conditions to the Open Estate.

The number of governors appointed to the Open Estate and their apparent ability to implement policy at their own discretion has had an unsettling effect on both prisoners and staff.

5. Whether access to purposeful activities is consistent across the prison estate

Serving time at the Open Estate is towards the end of a prisoner’s sentence and therefore not comparable with closed conditions. As this is the only national open estate facility, there is no comparison in the overall prison estate.

6. Whether access to such activity can be improved

There is always room for improvement. The Open Estate no longer offers many trades and certificated courses previously enjoyed at Castle Huntly such as plumbing, bricklaying, forklift truck operation etc. It is hoped that they can again be on offer to prisoners sometime in the future. At present there is insufficient staff to cover all these activities but consideration should be given to see how this can be achieved.

In conclusion, we would support a greater focus in the involvement of communities, which from recent experience of the visit of a para-Olympian to the Open Estate was regarded by prisoners as “inspirational”.

I look forward to learning the outcome of the inquiry.

Vera Joiner
Chair, HMP Open Estate Castle Huntly Prison Visiting Committee
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