Justice Committee

Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons

Written submission from Families Outside

Families Outside is a national independent charity that works on behalf of families affected by imprisonment in Scotland. We do this through provision of a national freephone helpline for families and for the professionals who work with them, as well as through development of policy and practice, delivery of training, and provision of face-to-face support.

Families Outside is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the Justice Committee’s Inquiry into Purposeful Activity in Prisons. We do not feel we are in a position to respond to all of the questions in the call for evidence but will answer the ones we can and comment more generally about the principles involved. We are happy to elaborate on any of these should the Committee require additional information or specific references for the research findings.

1. What is meant by purposeful activity?

Families Outside would define purposeful activity as any activity prisoners undertake that meet the needs of the Scottish Prison Service’s nine offender outcomes. Consequently these activities focus on those that prepare prisoners for their return to the community, ideally as more prepared, settled, positive, and safe citizens. These can include a wide range of activities that have longer-term benefits for the prisoner and do not exist simply to pass the time.

3. What are the perceived benefits of purposeful activity, and are there examples of best practice?

The benefits of purposeful activity are that they help prisoners re-engage with the community. In our view, this should include work on relationships and parenting as well as meaningful contact with families, such as through quality visits and family learning sessions. Ideally these should be in line with equivalent programmes in the community to allow scope for follow-up after release (e.g. Triple P, support through Relationships Scotland or Caledonia Youth).

A number of excellent models of practice exist in this area. For example, the Learning Together project at HMP Parc in Wales is a homework club in which children go into the prison to do their homework with their dads. This encourages focused quality time between fathers and their children and that may not have taken place prior to the imprisonment. The fathers follow the curriculum in the prison so that they can support their children in their homework; this encourages them in their own literacy and numeracy in a non-stigmatising way. Similarly, Family Learning at HMP The Wolds, aimed at families with pre-school children, brings the whole family together for creative activities that stimulate children’s learning while bringing the family closer together.
Both projects show benefits to separated families as well in terms of improved communication and the shared aim of supporting their children.

In Scotland, HMP Low Moss hosts a homework club every weekday evening, supported by volunteers, as well as prison-based meetings for the Scouts and Guides. The Scottish Pre-School Play Association runs a project for fathers in prison at HMP Dumfries, which includes engagement with their partners and ‘hands on’ play experience with their children. Aberlour runs a small project for mothers and babies in HMP & YOI Cornton Vale. Further provision exists elsewhere as funding is available, but again access is inconsistent between prisons, and criteria for participation can be unclear.

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

While practice varies across the estate, many Scottish prisons continue to use quality family contact such as that described above as an incentive to good behaviour rather than as a basic right to family life. HMP Shotts, for example, has a written contract that prisoners must sign to acknowledge that special ‘bonding visits’ will be removed as a consequence of indiscipline in the prison, regardless of whether the breach has anything to do with conduct on the visit itself. This contravenes the UK’s 2012 acceptance of a recommendation from the UN Human Rights Committee’s Universal Periodic Review. It also goes against recommendations from Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People that quality contact should be a right of the child rather than a privilege of the prisoner (*Not Seen, Not Heard, Not Guilty* 2008 and 2012).

5. **Is access to purposeful activities consistent across the prison estate?**

Access to quality family contact and work on parenting and relationships is not consistent across the prison estate. HMP Barlinnie offers the Triple P parenting programme to prisoners and their partners, consistent with delivery across all of Glasgow, but it is currently the only prison to do so. Barlinnie also hosts the only Positive Relationships course for prisoners and their partners, developed and co-delivered by Relationships Scotland and HMP Barlinnie through the Routes Out Of Prison project. Caledonia Youth offers support to prisoners on sexual health and relationships in only five prisons. Homework clubs have been piloted in HMP Edinburgh but are currently only in use at HMP Low Moss. Many other examples of patchy provision exist as well.

6. **Can access to such activity be improved?**

Access to purposeful activity such as support for parenting and relationships can always improve. As with many activities, this requires funding to roll out as well as adequate resource for input from partner organisations. Families Outside would view more consistency of provision as a priority in terms of the value of these activities as well as the need for prisoners not to be deprived of such activities merely on the basis of geographical location. They should certainly not be put in a position to have to choose
between access to desired purposeful activity and progression through the prison system as part of their sentence (a situation many female prisoners find themselves in when they have to transfer back to Cornton Vale).

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Inquiry and are happy to provide additional information should the Justice Committee request it.

Prof Nancy Loucks
Chief Executive
Families Outside
24 January 2013