Justice Committee

Inquiry into Purposeful Activity in Prisons

Written submission from the Association of Visiting Committee

Q1: What is meant by ‘purposeful activity' and how can this be measured

The Prisons and Young Offender Institutions (Scotland) Rules 2011 provide

Arrangements for work, education and counselling

81.—(1) The Governor must obtain reports about a prisoner’s particular needs and wishes concerning work and education as soon as practicable after that prisoner is received into prison.

(2) The Governor must, following receipt of the reports referred to in paragraph (1), and in consultation with the prisoner, determine a programme of work, educational activities and counselling for the prisoner with the objectives of improving—

(a) the prospects for the prisoner’s successful resettlement in the community; and

(b) the prisoner’s morale, attitude and self respect.

Purposeful activities

84.—(1) The Governor must provide a range of purposeful activities for prisoners which, so far as reasonably practicable, takes into account—

(a) the interests and need of prisoners to obtain skills and experience which will be of use to them after their release; and

(b) the requirements of the operation and maintenance of the prison.

(2) “Purposeful activities” include—

(a) work;

(b) education of any kind, including physical education;

(c) counselling and other rehabilitative programmes;

(d) vocational training; and

(e) work placements outside the prison.

In our experience, there is a much greater emphasis on the operation and maintenance of the prison than on activity which will be of use to them after release. Spending time cleaning, working in the kitchen or laundry, making teas and coffees, and cutting grass and weeding grounds can be helpful in providing activity and in some cases instilling a pride in work, but it does little to turn lives around. Many activities have a purpose, but may not be regarded as a catalyst for life change and reducing re-offending.

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Effective purposeful activity prepares for release, leads to successful rehabilitation, advances personal skills and development, improves literacy and numeracy, achieves meaningful qualifications which lead to attainment of gainful employment post release and successful resettlement in the community, raises self esteem and cements the family unit. The aim being to reduce the likelihood that the prisoner will re-offend.

Physical exercise promotes a healthy lifestyle, relieves stress and improves self-esteem. In some prisons, there is an opportunity to achieve a fitness instructor qualification which can lead to employment.

Education provision, courses, awareness programmes, workshops, tend to be benchmarked/measured against the terms of education contracts, KPI's, percentage of hours of "Purposeful Activity " undertaken rather than being measured by the percentage of prisoners who, upon release, do not re-offend and return to prison. Too often, linking "Bums on Seats" and hours fulfilled is considered an "Achievement" but has re-offending been reduced?

What seems not to be measured is the final outcome for prisoners, post release. No research or statistics are available to measure the success of prison regimes and how many prisoners find jobs, college courses, apprenticeships etc after release.

Nor as far as we are aware is any assessment made of the improvement in skills, abilities and qualifications of the prisoner between entering prison and being liberated. We regard this as particularly important in relation to numeracy and literacy. Around 80% of the prison population have literacy problems. Prisoners do undergo an initial screening when they enter prison but in many cases little is done to address identified problems and no measurement is made of any improvement.

Q2: The extent to which prisoners have an opportunity to engage in purposeful activity

Remand prisoners are frequently not offered the opportunity to undertake any education, work or programmes but can be held in detention for prolonged periods while awaiting trial or sentencing. Of the average daily prison population of 8178 in 2011-12, 1600 or 20 % were remand prisoners. Once their case has reached court, 60% are not given a custodial sentence.

Short sentence prisoners are offered little as waiting lists for all manner of regimes are lengthy and the duration of courses is incompatible with the length of sentence. In at least one prison no programmes are offered to prisoners serving less than 45 days. In another, those with a sentence of less than 6 months are not offered any access to programmes.

Long term prisoners are offered the chance to engage in many programmes and many prisons offer a wide range of activities but prisoners are under no compulsion to attend education.
Q3: What are the perceived benefits of purposeful activity and whether there are any examples of best practice

**Benefits**
Ensures that prisoners, (in many cases for the first time) have a routine, improves self esteem, improves life skills, relieves boredom, gives experience of team work, addresses drug and alcohol addiction, prepares for release, improves literacy and numeracy, gains qualifications and certificates. Ultimately, purposeful activity should reduce re-offending.

**Best Practice**
Independent Living Units which prepare prisoners for release, life skills classes, addiction programs, local community involvement, fund raising for charity, outwork placements, positive parenting programme, peer tutoring by prisoners with specific skills, The John Muir Trust programme, (work by prisoners in Tentsmuir Forest), Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme participation, Paws for Progress scheme and the Bike workshop at Polmont, Young Business Enterprise projects.

Q4: What barriers may exist to prevent prisoners engaging in such activities

The unwillingness of prisoners to engage in programmes, particularly education, and lack of self motivation.

The almost constant availability of television in many prisons. For example, in Polmont YOI, prisoners (all aged 16-20) can watch television all day and most of the night if they wish. Daytime viewing is a more attractive way of passing the time for many prisoners and those who watch through the night are tired and unfit for activities the next day.

The differential in cell wages which means that prisoners get paid more for attending workshops than going to education. This militates against prisoners tackling the educational issues which may be a barrier to future employment prospects and to reducing re-offending.

Moving prisoners from prison to prison whilst in the middle of courses or programmes which are not available in the prison to which they have been moved.

In some prisons, long waiting lists for education/training courses which many prisoners never embark upon.

Short sentences are too short to allow any meaningful activity. Many prisoners on short sentences undertake little or no purposeful activity. Repeat offenders who receive multiple short term sentences thus spend years in prison with very little being done to influence their offending behaviour.
Too many on remand and undergoing no purposeful activity to reduce their re-offending. The range of activities for Remand prisoners is the worst of all prisoners. In HMP Perth, for example, only 8 Remand prisoners out of a Remand population of about 100 attend education.

Prisoners spending sentences undertaking activities which benefit the prison but at the expense of their personal development.

Closing of workshops as a result of the officer in charge being on holiday, off ill, moved to another duty, or posted elsewhere. Often, only one officer in a prison is qualified to provide a particular course or programme. The overwhelming majority of staff delivering workshops are SPS staff. We understand that in the whole of the prison estate there are only 3 civilian staff delivering workshops. Surely it is not necessary to have prison officers in charge of workshops etc. Greater use could be made of civilian plumbers, joiners, slaters etc to deliver vocational programmes - alongside an officer to keep discipline if necessary. This is the approach in relation to education where further education college staff runs the class.

Too few places on workshops and programmes. No workshops for the women at Cornton Vale.

Too much time in workshops spent on playing cards or sitting about chatting rather than learning the trade.

Short term initiatives. There are examples of "best practice" which achieve e.g. a Butler Trust award, but are created in isolation and are often wound up instead of rolled out across the prison estate.

Frequent turnover of Governors in Charge who change policy, direction, programmes, workshops, in a stop start of countless initiatives which are confusing and destabilising for both staff and prisoners alike.

Lack of strategic consistency in application of SPS policy, too much left to the individual discretion of Governors.

Insufficient resources and staff devoted to finding jobs for prisoners at release. For example, in Edinburgh, the second largest prison, only 1 member of staff devoted to this role.

Many learning packages depend on Internet access which is not generally permitted to prisoners. Whilst there are understandable reasons for this, it ought to be possible to allow restricted or controlled access to facilitate learning.

Library access is patchy. Edinburgh for example has excellent library facilities provided in partnership with the local authority. By comparison, in Polmont, the library was closed.
for over a year because the SPS librarian staff member was transferred. The library was re-opened only when an HMCIP inspection was imminent.

**Q5: Whether access to purposeful activities is consistent across the prison estate**

There is very little consistency in access to purposeful activities across the prison estate. The infrastructure and capacity varies from prison to prison and too much discretion on what activities to offer is left to the Governor in Charge. There should be more emphasis on national strategy and approaches.

In addition, prisons have to link with a number of Local Authorities, Health Boards and CJAs, with different geographical coverage and different policies, programmes and approaches relating to provision for prisoners and former prisoners. This is a further barrier to linking purposeful activity to opportunities in the community and a reduction in re-offending.

There are examples of good practice and good work being done by dedicated and skilled officers, but these examples tend to operate in isolation. Learning from good practice should be shared across the estate.

Time out of cells varies from prison to prison. In Addiewell for example – in compliance with their contract - almost all prisoners are out of their cells during the day.

**Q6: Whether access to such activity can be improved**

A rigorous initial assessment of a prisoner’s skills, abilities and educational capacity on entering prison would be helpful in identifying the needs to be met and inform decisions about access to activity.

There should be greater encouragement to undertake education and other purposeful activity especially to improve literacy and numeracy. Indeed, this might be regarded as a requirement in terms of Rule 81.

Access to and enthusiasm for education would be greater if the time allocations were shorter. At present, in most prisons the staff routine and numbers means that prisoners who wish to attend education have to spend an entire morning or afternoon in a particular class, far longer than would be the case in a school or college setting.

Greater involvement of the local community in the prison by employers, good role models colleges etc might encourage greater participation in activities.

There could be more workshops and emphasis on trade qualifications.

Greater use of the Open Estate would be helpful in preparing prisoners for release by providing activities specifically designed to aid re-settlement in the community.
There could be more informal work in residential halls on basic interpersonal and literacy skills. At Polmont some officers do this on their own initiative and it has a positive effect.

Association of Prison Visiting Committees
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