Justice Committee  
Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons

Written submission from Positive Prison? Positive Futures

We are very pleased to respond to this invitation and trust that you will find it of use and interest. The views expressed here have been developed through conversations with serving prisoners, ex-prisoners and members of some of their families.

1.00 Positive Prison? Positive Futures

1.01 We are a charitable organisation made up of and representing people who have been through the criminal justice system and found it possible to change their lives in positive ways and avoid re-offending. We work to help and support others still within the system by offering opportunities to change their lives for themselves, their families, friends and communities.

1.02 We were registered as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation in September 2012. We work with, and receive support from, the Community Justice Division of the Scottish Government, the Scottish Prison Service and the Violence Reduction Unit of Strathclyde Police. We are actively engaged with academic researchers in the field of Criminology.

1.03 Our trustees are practitioners working in a variety of roles within the criminal justice system and the members of our group are widespread across Scotland, some of them serving prisoners.

2.00 Purposeful activity and how can it be measured?

2.01 In an ideal world all activities within prison would be designed and provided to offer prisoners the best possible circumstances and opportunities to be well prepared for their return to the community as constructive and contributing citizens. The circumstances and opportunities vary from person to person thereby requiring those devising and offering activities to prisoners to develop an understanding of each of them as individuals.

2.02 Purposeful activity should lead to prisoners being equipped with useful skills and capabilities to enable them improve their family relationships and to gain employment after release.

2.03 Purposeful activity should enable everyone engaged with it to develop, discover or rediscover their sense of self-worth and self-confidence within the wider framework of personal wellbeing.

2.04 Measuring purposeful activity is a complex process given that its effectiveness can be seen as the ‘distance travelled’ as well as the meeting of standard benchmarks. The measurement process would require to identify individual starting points with some accuracy and clarity.
2.05 The simplest form of measurement of the effectiveness of purposeful activity is based on whether somebody who has been in prison returns to offending after release and, in the case of repeat offenders, whether the length of time between release and reoffending has changed.

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

3.01 The length of a prison sentence will have a direct bearing on the nature and range of the activities that might best address an individual’s needs to help them realise their potential during imprisonment and/or after their return to the community.

3.02 Whilst it would appear to be the case that across the prison estate a wide range of activities are on offer it is also apparent that there is a serious lack of capacity. The number of people who can engage with purposeful activity at any one time, let alone on a frequent and regular basis, would appear to represent a small proportion of the prison population. The ratio of time spent on purposeful activity versus time on the wing or in cells is very much less than might be considered desirable or effective.

3.03 There is significant reporting of timetable conflicts that inhibit or prevent access to programmes, courses or activities. This can lead to someone having to make a choice between two equally useful or purposeful courses with few if any alternative available.

3.04 Community work placements could offer an effective supplement to activities in prison for some individuals.

4.00 Perceived benefits of purposeful activity and examples of best practice

4.01 Purposeful activity should have a positive effect on an individual’s senses of self-worth and self-confidence. These effects will manifest themselves in different ways for different people. The single most obvious benefit of purposeful activity would be for someone to leave prison and not reoffend. This would then present an opportunity to re-engage with the wider community as reformed and contributing citizen.

4.02 Some activities, programmes and courses address individual issues such as poor personal wellbeing, lack of literacy, addictions, behaviour and anger management and can produce positive results. Equally, access to physical activities such as the gym, outside exercise and sport enables some people to improve their fitness.

4.03 Ideally activities and courses should be provided and delivered in and by a partnership of all the organisations and agencies involved and with the constructive guidance from the prison management. The partnership should put the needs of the individual prisoner at the centre of all decisions and planning processes to offer the greatest benefit to that person.
4.04 The creative and performing arts provide a wide range of excellent opportunities for purposeful activity. A good example of this would be the Koestler Trust annual awards programme. The Koestler Trust currently runs a mentoring project in England & Wales which they seek to develop on Scotland in the near future.

4.05 The Prison Phoenix Trust currently runs yoga and meditation classes in Aberdeen, Addiewell, Barlinnie, Cornton Vale, Edinburgh, Greenock, Perth and Polmont. The spiritual benefits are highly beneficial for the people who participate in these classes which also support individual daily practice within a prison cell.

4.06 The Bike Station project in Edinburgh, Castle Huntly and Polmont has provided some excellent purposeful activity and opportunities for the people involved. Unfortunately, it would appear to be the case that this activity is not necessarily offered to prisoners likely to return to the community within the near future thereby diminishing its purpose.

4.07 The St Giles Trust in London have developed and provided an excellent programme for the training of some prisoners as peer mentors in London prisons. For many this leads to the award of NVQ Level 3 in Advice and Guidance. The St Giles Trust currently employs around 55 case workers many of whom have achieved their qualifications as prisoners. A significant proportion of these case workers then move into other jobs having been identified as excellent advocates on behalf of the disadvantaged people they represent.

4.08 The production of waste skips in Glenochil appears to be a very effective form of purposeful activity in that it offers some training in skills such as metalwork, welding and painting in a team working arrangement. It is hoped there are similar initiatives being undertaken and developed elsewhere in the prison estate.

5.00 Barriers that prevent prisoners engaging in purposeful activity

5.01 There is significant reporting of prison staff making what appear to be personal or random decisions to allow or prevent some prisoners from taking part in purposeful activities. These decisions cannot be easily challenged without the risk of some form of subtle retribution.

5.02 There is significant reporting of people taking part in courses and programmes only because they are aware that to refuse to do so could lead to some form of personal or institutional retribution or negative reporting. The opportunity to ask if the course is relevant to individual needs and what the consequences might be for not taking part is not universally offered.

5.03 For some prisoners it is very difficult to recognise what purposeful activity is and what it might offer. This can lead to a failure to engage.

5.04 For some prisoners the fact that they are required to attend certain courses and programmes sets their mind against participation.
5.05 The lack of appropriately trained staff and suitable accommodation restricts the frequency with which some courses are run. For some short term prisoners the length of their sentence doesn’t enable them to engage with activities that might be to their benefit.

5.06 The lack of appropriately trained staff and adequate accommodation restricts the numbers of courses that can be run at any one time and limits the numbers of people who can participate. There are times where demand or interest in a course exceeds capacity and it appears little or nothing is done to provide additional sessions.

5.07 Operational decisions at management or individual level can restrict access to purposeful activities sometimes without warning or explanation. In some cases numbers are limited and participation is dependent on being near the front of the queue to attend.

5.08 Peer pressure in a variety of forms can influence participation in purposeful activity, usually with a negative effect. This can vary depending on the regime within different parts of prisons.

6.00 Access to purposeful activities across the prison estate

6.01 It would appear as though basic education services are reasonably consistent across the prison estate although probably not in sufficient quantity to fulfil the potential of everyone involved.

6.02 It would appear as though opportunities for physical activity are reasonably consistent across the prison estate although probably not in sufficient quantity to fulfil the potential and energies of everyone who might wish to be involved.

6.03 Outwith education and physical activity it appears as though there is no consistency of provision of purposeful activity across the prison estate. It is not known if this is due to lack of suitable facilities, suitable staff or lack of resources generally.

7.00 Improvements to purposeful activity

7.01 Peer mentoring could improve the relevance of purposeful activity to each prisoner’s life and how it might improve their chances of not only developing their personal well-being and employability but also avoiding re-offending. Ideally this would start a short time after someone begins their prison sentence and continue through the release process and beyond until it becomes clear such support is no longer required or welcome.

7.02 Given that employment post-release offers one of the more reliable routes away from re-offending it would make sense for much of the focus of purposeful work within prisons to centre on employability and relevant useful skills that relate to the real world to which prisoners will be released. This would require some work in the business community to develop the willingness and capacity of potential employers to recruit people who have been in prison.
8.00 In conclusion

8.01 We seek to help people in prison to reach the stage where they can make their own decisions about how they could live their lives after release as reformed members of the community and without committing further offences. Purposeful activities within prison can contribute to this personal development but there is a great need for provision on a greater scale with improved consistency across the country.

8.02 We believe there is scope for significant development of the nature, content and availability of purposeful activities in Scottish prisons and would be pleased to contribute to this process should the opportunity arise.

8.03 If you have any queries or wish to discuss any of this submission please do not hesitate to make contact.

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25 January 2013