Justice Committee

Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons

Written submission from Circle

Family Service Unit Scotland trading as Circle

Circle is a well established voluntary organisation which aims to support some of the most vulnerable children and families in Scotland. We believe that, by supporting families, we can improve the lives of the most disadvantaged children.

Circle is writing in response to the decision taken on the 4 December 2012 when the Justice Committee of the Scottish Parliament agreed to undertake a short inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons. I understand the full remit of the inquiry is to consider issues around the opportunity prisoners have to engage in purposeful activity in the course of their imprisonment. In particular you advised the Committee is looking for responses which address the six points laid out below:

1. What is meant by ‘purposeful activity’ and how can this be measured
2. The extent to which prisoners have an opportunity to engage in purposeful activity;
3. What are the perceived benefits of purposeful activity and whether there are any examples of best practice;
4. What barriers may exist to prevent prisoners engaging in such activities;
5. Whether access to purposeful activities is consistent across the prison estate;
6. Whether access to such activity can be improved.

Point 1) Circle’s view of the meaning of ‘purposeful activity’ implies an offender being involved on either a mental or physical level with an opportunity for learning which is primarily of benefit to the prisoner and secondly to wider society.

Circle would suggest that purposeful activities should be framed around the nine offender outcomes which are as follows:

1) Sustained or improved physical and mental well-being.
2) Reduced or stabilised substance misuse.
3) Improved literacy skills.
4) Employability prospects increased.
5) Maintained or improved relationships with families, peers and community.
6) The ability to access and sustain community support, including financial advice and education.
7) The ability to access and sustain suitable accommodation.
8) The ability to live independently if they choose.
9) Improvements in the attitudes or behaviour which lead to offending and greater acceptance of responsibility in managing their own behaviour and understanding of the impact of their offending on victims and on their own families.

Given the 9 offender outcomes require to be addressed in the community by providers Circle feels it makes sense for the offender’s journey towards meeting
these outcomes should begin in the prison. Any improvement made through participating in the purposeful activity could be measured via feedback from both the provider and the individual taking part.

Circle staff members are constantly shocked by the limited abilities of both men and women who are in prison. It is Circle’s view that imaginative classes could be run to teach the prisoners many of the personal and inter-personal skills they will require in the community.

Point 2) Circle has been concerned about the lack of opportunities available to remand prisoners. Opportunities to engage in purposeful activity can be limited by space, resources (financial, tools, staff), imagination, safety concerns or indifference.

Point 3) Circle’s view is that purposeful activities should contribute to reducing the risk or cost the offender poses to society. Feedback has shown women best enjoyed a) literacy classes run by a particular man in HMP Cornton Vale b) hairdressing and beauty classes 3) bike repair classes 4) gardening type activities 5) card making classes 6) gym classes. Men appear to best enjoy physical activities. An unfortunate issue is that many of the offenders we have worked with have very little understanding of how society works and several have been entirely illiterate. As Circle is a Children and Family organisation which seeks to work across silos with whole families the offenders we work with have children. The lack of understanding imprisoned parents have of the skills, attitudes and behaviours they need to embrace in order to be ‘good enough parents’ concerns us. It is frequently the case that the prisoners have experienced traumatic childhoods themselves and have little resources to rely on. Nonetheless, it is Circle’s view that intensive, sensitive learning and support could be provided in order to interrupt the less than ‘good enough parenting’ which contributes to concerning inter-generational imprisonment statistics and much personal pain.

Point 4) Barriers to prisoners engaging in purposeful activity can be limited by poor self-esteem, poor self-image, internal resources, fear of failure, lack of confidence, previous learning experiences, personal trauma, anxiety, indifference, being resistant, being in fight or flight mode, denial, poor mental or physical health, isolating oneself and injury.

Point 5) It is Circle’s view access is not consistent across the prison estate largely due to some of the estate being older and not easily adapted for a wide range of purposeful activity.

Point 6) It is Circle’s view that access to purposeful activity could and should be improved wherever possible.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry.

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