Justice Committee
Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons
Written submission from YOI Cornton Vale Visiting Committee

1. What is meant by “purposeful activity” and how can this be measured

In any work/activity, unless there is a meaningful and significant desire and belief by all parties in a project for it to succeed, there must be commitment by all parties participating.

Unless there is such commitment there will be little or no prospect of any activity succeeding.

It would therefore fall that “purposeful activity” requires “commitment” of all those involved whether it be prisoner or officer or senior management.

The meaning of purposeful activity must suggest that there will be a positive outcome from the activity.

Purposeful activity and the outcome it seeks to achieve might be highlighted under the following heads:

1. Preparing for release
2. Relieving boredom
3. Learning
4. Improving self-esteem
5. Providing income
6. Rehabilitation
7. Defeating “demons”
8. Understanding life
9. Getting on with life after release
10. Pastoral

All of these issues are addressed within the prison regime but the actual measurement of success or otherwise has no apparent yardstick to judge from. Until there is such a yardstick there can be no measurement.

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

Unless there is commitment from the prisoner, there is little or no chance of any activity succeeding.

In Cornton Vale YOI there are excellent programmes being presented by Barnardo’s in Plan B.

The participation rate of prisoners would indicate that some 93%, as at April 2012, consented to join the scheme and completed the various sections attended.
The fundamental core of Plan B is to agree on a plan and stick to it and before the liberation date there is a plan in place for housing, training and relationships after release.

There are several “hands on” activities which the young women enjoy and attend.

These include: life skills (cooking and baking); bike recycling; hairdressing; housekeeping; card making and gymnasium. These are well attended. Housekeeping and laundry assist in getting on with life after release as most of the YOs have led a chaotic lifestyle, sleeping rough and the like, and such an activity not only provides income, but educates.

The Link Centre provides entrance to education. The commitment of staff often exceeds that of the prisoner who would probably wish to stay in bed and watch TV. YOs have a somewhat negative attitude to education, despite their difficulty with literacy and speech, and there is no mechanism to force learning upon anyone, it must be a commitment.

Young offenders have a different type of personality to adult prisoners and different needs. They need to talk so that they can get the “demons” out of their system but they need to talk to officers and visiting committee members when they see them. I am of a view that, if more time could be afforded to the YOs simply to hear them, then this would be a constructive activity.

I have concerns with regard to “remand” prisoners who are whilst in jail “innocent”. Only recently have these young women been able to engage in any of the activities on offer as their time in jail was effectively being kept in custody for, in some cases, 140 days, which for most of the time involved watching TV in their rooms due to lack of desire to take up the activities on offer.

Cynics might suggest that while statistics show a reduction in crime rate, in fact, this increases the prison population and when sufficient time has elapsed the charge is dropped by the courts and the remand prisoner is freed, thus “reducing” the crime rate.

Whilst the opportunities are there, the YOs in most cases “can’t be bothered” due to their lack of enthusiasm and commitment, despite the best efforts of the management, and only participate in activities as, and when, it suits them.

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

In my view, the perceived benefits of purposeful activity particularly from a public view, would totally support as an example the “Pay Back Scheme” now being implemented. It would be of benefit if this could be further developed for the female YO population.

The activity opportunities provided for female YOs are available. However, due to short sentences, lack of space and, despite the best efforts of the regime, the lack of
enthusiasm of the prisoner, would indicate there are few real benefits for the prisoner.

Examples of best practice would be: life skill development, independent living and sustainability, dance and leadership and teamwork, highlighting involvement in the community on release.

In their small way, the YO baking group takes pride in making birthday cakes and the like for their co-prisoners showing a purpose, increasing their “can do” and thus improving self-esteem. Recently the YO team held a charity function where the sale of baking contributed greatly to the success of the team function and community involvement.

Management is rapidly addressing those issues, as best they can, and it is hoped that the purposeful activities now being developed will provide benefit to the YOs.

Young offenders will commit when they see a purpose and the corollary applies when they do not.

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

There are few barriers which prevent prisoners participating in activities operating within the establishment.

The regime encourages prisoners to be involved but, as previously stated, lack of commitment and enthusiasm does not make this easy.

The barriers I see are those created by the prisoners themselves.

Fundamentally, this is caused through lack of self-esteem (although this might not be apparent), lack of confidence in their perceived ability, loneliness and, in most cases, trauma.

I have believed for some time that if these causes can be properly addressed in an environment only for YOs, these barriers may well tumble.

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

Having had the opportunity to visit other prisons, it is very clear that consistency is not apparent and this is a management issue.

The female YO population facilities are limited and simply cannot be compared with the facilities of the adult population of other prisons.

There is an enormous difference in facilities provided for male adults and YOs and this is commented on frequently by the prisoners.
6. Whether access to such activity can be improved

With the advent of new establishments planned, there is clearly an opportunity to rectify and provide space for activities but that is in the future and we must address where we are now.

I can only address the activities for the Female YO population.

My belief is that access may be improved by:

A. More evening pursuits, such a team involvement, which is currently being pursued;  
B. Less locking up and more involvement with officers simply just to talk and be listened to;  
C. Letting prisoners see what is good outside by ‘Pay Back’; and  
D. Introducing more programmes which YOs can enjoy such as: gardening (all who have participated in the existing programme loved it), pet husbandry, painting and decorating etc. which could provide employment, and letting the prisoner understand that they can do this work and that they are good at it.

7. General

The female YO population at Cornton Vale is aged between 16 and 21 and there must be activities to suit that age group.

Bearing in mind that the YO population has for the majority never had a home life, and activities which include such aspiration and at the same time cope with the sometimes boisterous behaviour of all teenagers, are those NOW being addressed at Cornton Vale.

These are different to the requirements of the adult population and that should be borne in mind in forward planning of additional establishments

When asking the YOs what they want to do when they are liberated, my experience can be summed up in the words of many of them-

“I WANT A JOB, A HOUSE AND THE CHANCE TO GET ON WITH MY LIFE”

Our activities should mirror that wish to let rehabilitation work!

I thank the Justice Committee for the opportunity to submit my evidence and if required am prepared to provide oral evidence.

Jas H Scott  
Chair, Cornton Vale YOI Visiting Committee  
11 January 2013