Justice Committee

Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons

Written submission from the Public and Commercial Services Union

The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) represents over 270,000 members in the civil and public services and in the privatised commercial sector, over 30,000 of which are in Scotland. PCS is the largest civil service union and it is the 5th largest trade union affiliated to the TUC and STUC.

We have around 7,000 members who are working in devolved areas.

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

Purposeful activity encompasses a very wide range of prisoner activities over a broad spectrum. These activities contribute to factors such as prisoners self esteem, tackling boredom, challenging inappropriate behaviour, attending reoffending programmes, education, general well being and so on.

The measurement of these activities tends to be primarily focused on "the numbers of prisoners attending" with great emphasis placed on individual establishments meeting associated targets. The difficulty with this approach is twofold:

- Because a prisoner attends an activity it does not necessarily follow that he/she will actually benefit from the activity.

- In striving to meet targets there can often be a temptation to use poetic language when defining purposeful activity. As such different types of purposeful activity are not in any real sense prioritised. When faced with a choice, there is a tendency to choose compliant / motivated prisoners to engage in prison activities as this is more likely to result in the targets being met. It could be argued that a group of motivated and compliant prisoners are less likely to benefit from purposeful activity which directly targets reduced reoffending than a group of non compliant or de-motivated prisoners who perhaps are in greater need and stand to benefit more from purposeful activity.

There are measurements in place for some activities but the approach is not consistent across the wide range of activities and they often tend to be short term measurements. A fundamental review is required to separate activities which could be classed as simply time out of cell and those activities which have the potential to significantly address reoffending and how they can be measured effectively whilst identifying the resources required to make it happen.

Reducing reoffending through purposeful activity will only achieve its full potential with sufficient investment in staff and other resources.
2. **The extent to which prisoners have the opportunity to engage in purposeful activity?**

This varies in relation to the type of activity offered. Currently there are insufficient opportunities for work, prisoner programmes and to an extent, education. There are prisoners wishing to engage but there are simply not enough spaces to cope with the high prisoner numbers. There are also prisoners who may have the opportunity but simply do not wish to engage. This could be down to a number of reasons such as personal motivation, lack of understanding of opportunities on offer or of the associated benefits. These activities are often seen by prisoners as a less attractive way to spend their time when compared to day time TV, playstations, etc.

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

The perceived benefits are wide ranging; addressing offending behaviour, improving general well being, establishing a sense of purpose, improving self esteem, learning positive behaviours, self discipline, and achieving educational/vocational qualifications. Purposeful activity can also help prisoners cope with their sentence and reduce the likelihood of general indiscipline which of course is beneficial for prisoners and staff alike. Engaging in purposeful activity can be particularly beneficial for those prisoners addressing substance misuse. But to establish the true benefits of purposeful activity we need to put in place sufficiently robust measurements.

There are examples of good practice across the organisation. We are aware of establishments which are revisiting their timetabled activities to ensure opportunities are offered to more prisoners. This is a positive measure but unless increased resources are allocated we may have more prisoners having access to activities but it will be for shorter periods of time.

4. **What barriers may exist to prisoners being engaged in such activities?**

Clearly attendance does not necessarily equate to engagement. To engage prisoners we sometimes need to sell the activity on offer to help provide the prisoner with a full understanding of what is involved and the disadvantages in not engaging. We need to provide ongoing support and encouragement coupled with honest regular feedback. The current barriers to this approach are predominantly insufficient staff resources. Many years ago the prison service introduced the "personal officer" a role which would encompass the type of things mentioned but unfortunately it was as a bolt on to the officers day to day activities without the additional resources required to fully undertake the enhanced role.

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

There is a consistency in relation to the broad themes such as work, education, PE, programmes but individual establishments have autonomy to develop localised activities. However we believe innovation can be constrained here in the drive to meet targets.
6. *Whether access to such activities can be improved?*

We are very firmly of the view that access can be improved but it will require more trained staff within residential halls, work parties and administrative support. Additionally there must be less emphasis on simple "attendance" targets, greater encouragement to innovate and to be less risk adverse.

PCS Scotland
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