Justice Committee

Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons

Written submission from a prisoner representative group, HMP Castle Huntly, Scottish Prison Service Open Estate

We were approached by members of the Visiting Committee (VC) and asked out views on purposeful activity in prisons, they having been asked to submit representations to the Justice Committee and wished to hear from the people on the gallery floor. We were surprised that there had been no announcement to the prisoner community of the Justice Committee’s interest in that subject, seeking input through a survey or consultation with representative groups.

We quickly gathered views from a variety of prisoners reflecting something of the spectrum of experience of prisoners passing through this, the last remnant of the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) Open Estate. First offenders, short termers, long termers and lifers offered comment and the resultant document was passed to the VC.

The feedback we got from the VC urged that we forward our views to the Chief Executive of the SPS and to the Justice Committee. Unfortunately, even though we are in the Open Estate and are judged of sufficiently low risk to be put out to live in society for one week a month, we do not have access to the internet, so cannot check the parliamentary web-page for information about the inquiry nor e-mail the text to you. Hopefully this will reach you in time to contribute to considerations of the challenges facing those wrestling with the management of the criminal justice system.

Offenders are the problem Should we not be part of the solution?

Secretary to the prisoner group
20 January 2013

What is purposeful activity? From many prisoners’ perspectives it is merely the statistic generated to evidence prisoners leave their cells for a period of time. Recording information for statistics sake, not recording meaningful information allowing independent assessors to actually judge how the prison system is challenging, developing and training its charges. The system should be providing prisoners with the skill-set to maximise the chance that this stay in prison is their last. The worrying thing is that many (most?) officials seem to think that is what they are already doing.

It was reported in the press of 2 February 2011 that the Chief Executive of the SPS, Mr John Ewing, had announced that ninety seven per cent of prisoners at Castle Huntly and Noranside open jails were given work. This compares very favourably with closed prisons. However, being given a work title is a very different thing from having purposeful activity; especially so when the work is ‘token’, there being a job title, but little real work associated with it (a problem for some at Castle Huntly)
1. Purposeful activity

Purposeful activity should not be, in this context, primarily occupational time fillers (sweeping floors, washing pots and pans), but activity that is transformative, that engages consciousness, challenges experience and perceptions, motivates and empowers. It may be thought the attitudinally challenging programme work of the SPS would fall into that bracket. Sadly they rarely do. These non-compulsory courses prisoners now must have completed to progress through the prison system are, too often, just additional statistic generators evidencing ‘bums on seats’, not consciousness engaged and transformed.

Sadly, the outsider will, due to the impressive seeming paperwork of the SPS, be led to believe there are great things being done. We are in the land of the Emperor’s New Clothes! This is a land where appearances matter more that fact, where illusion is the goal of the statistical engineer. Such a sweeping statement will no doubt offend many, but will hopefully not alienate them, merely spur them to prove us wrong. In short, other than the success of keeping people in custody, what marked changes have there been in the profiles of offenders upon their release in the last 20 years?

These are fundamentals it is difficult to measure for the benefit of statistical purposes but which are essential foundations for any ‘purpose’.

- How have manners improved (bad manners being ‘high risk’ behaviour inside and outside – a fundamental foundation for social success)?
- How has cultural (moral?) consciousness developed?
- Attitudinally and behaviourally, what have been the advances?
- How improved is literacy and numeracy?
- What has changed in the overall skill-set profile of offenders during their incarceration?
- What is the picture of recidivism across the achievement spectrum (how different is it for those who used their time purposefully)?

What are the comparisons across the decades? How much has been spent per annum incarcerating those people, achieving these results? Is the product value for money?

“Meeting someone who has overcome huge difficulties can leave you feeling inspired and encouraged”.

Thus declared Gallery (issue 58, Autumn 2012) when reporting on the visit of (the sadly now deceased) disabled athlete Ron McIntosh to Castle Huntly where he supported inmates trying to identify with the disabled by simulating and competing in Paralympic events. A great event and a tremendous experience for the competitors and Six Circle spectators.

This initiative was regarded as a great success by all, so much so that it is to be repeated annually. If we use that event as an example of role model visitations, where are the ex-inmates who have overcome the hurdles in building responsible lives? Why are they no back telling those of us still making the journey how they did
it? Why are they not involved in the system and in the development of prisoners perspectives – using the Paralympic model (motivating by example)?

In that same edition of the Gallery a celebrity ex-offender was featured returning to Polmont, the star of The Angel’s Share, a hit film of 2012. Again, great! But where are the ordinary success stories? Few can expect to become celebrities (other than of the notorious variety). We need to prepare for ‘real’ life. What is laid out to inspire us? Where are the role models to fuel aspiration and demonstrate the achievable? It is all too easy for staff to tell us of prisoners who have passed through the system, but in all honesty our experience is that they rarely do unless it is to gloat that yet another has fallen on the hurdle of recidivism. The ‘better’ the person had done in advancing their educational and vocational achievements while in prison the sweeter seems the gloat of the officer. A sorry spectacle!

There is an old saying “The SPS is more embarrassed by its success than by its failures”. To those of us with long experience of the system it certainly seems that way.

That all sounds so negative, as though the entire efforts of many positive staff down the ages is being dismissed. It is not so, however the positive work is just people doing their jobs! That they and their efforts stand out so markedly is what condemns the generality of activity in the prison system – work conducted by men and women dispirited, de-motivated, professionally alienated who feel they have seen it all and nothing works (or rather, they know what would work – but namby-pamby do-gooders won’t let them do it!). Those are the staff too often heard uttering that excuse for failure, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink!” Marketing men and propagandists would seek to differ – they daily prove the fallacy of that statement.

The Gallery, the SPS Special, the Prison Service Journal, the pages of the Butler Trust Awards publications and numerous other sources have recorded ‘best practice’ schemes that engage and empower inmates. However, sadly, too many of these examples occur in isolation, they are not at the heart on institutional regimes, they do not form the foundations of community focussed lives for the inmates fortunate enough to encounter staff with developmental commitment whose efforts shine inspiring lights in the general gloom of incarcerated experience.

The halls of academe are lined by bookshelves bowed under the weight of research into the human condition in all its manifestations. Learned academics award plaudits to their peers in journals and at conferences (national and international) where the insights gleaned from studies are shared. Where is that learning evidenced on the gallery floor? What part does it play in the training of staff wrestling with the challenges of the socially dysfunctional, the mentally damaged, the alienated, wicked and downright evil? Sadly, little!

Which is why we advocate the use of training programmes that should be compulsory, that prisoners must complete in order to progress through the system. Whether these are solely educationally (academically) based for some, or for others are vocational courses in trades (that naturally require the application of basic numeracy and literacy skills) would be an issue of identified need within a sentence
in closed prisons and offered in part in the open estate. Until someone can read and count confidently academic education should be their ‘work’.

Academic achievement is the most purposeful of activities, fundamentally empowering, enabling benefit to be taken from all other opportunities opened up by the SPS and the wider community.

How can anyone address a problem as complex re-offending without offering worthwhile practical tools to give offenders options enabling the establishment of pro-social lives? Current programme work allows people to reflect on their past (who they were at the time they committed their offence) but they do little more than that. The practical deployment of programme work is little integrated in the general regime of institutions. In fact staff too often seem to resent prisoners deploying problem solving formulas on the gallery or workshop floor.

We believe it is crucial that prisoners are given the tools to leave prison with the chance of gainful employment through skills training (and if waiting for employment, skills that can be put to use in support of their communities). That is something that has been highlighted and officially deployed in prisons since the 1800s (going back to the good old reform school model, the borstals, the training prisons) so why hasn’t it worked in the past? What was wrong with the models of training given? What, out in society, inhibited/prevented the released offender turning those chances into rehabilitated life models?

One of the contributors to this document summed it up as a need to: “address the immediate issue, the NEETs, creating an infrastructure providing long-term solutions with integrated opportunities for reintegration on release. That is what ‘purposeful activity’ must mean, teaching prisoners a meaningful trade, enabling them to make a productive use of their time in prison by giving each prisoner the tools to become a productive member of society”.

On paper it appears most things have been tried, but clearly, at the gallery floor level it is not what too many prisoners experienced staff delivering.

So having established that purposeful activity should be something that can result in someone gaining some form of employment upon leaving prison, it makes quantifying and measuring the success of these vocational courses relatively straightforward. From a prisoner’s perspective, reports and the recording of ‘facts’ about prisoners have too often been manipulated to suit the author, rendering the outcomes of anything currently offered difficult to accurately measure.

Too many prisoners find themselves even more marginalised and overlooked in a system that fails to provide any tangible opportunity for them (while still having to play the Emperor’s New Clothes Game to progress). For example, the institution of Noranside, open till October 2011, delivered 93% of all certified activity in the open estate. Little of that has now been transferred to Castle Huntly, but the prisoners still have to support the contention that the regime of Castle Huntly has done a good job of preparing them for release – their parole depends on it!
Many prisoners can argue they leave prison after X-amount of years with a better understanding of the skills of crime (with more anti-social outlooks) having lost many of the pro-social skills they had before incarceration. Does the SPS seek to occupationally deploy skilled prisoners in the fields of their skills? Rarely! Where prisoners once built the Victorian prison system and worked on prison building up till the 1970s (Cornton Vale is an example) and prison maintenance up till 1993, today a prisoner can’t hammer a nail in a wall! Health and safety given as an excuse.

Many prisoners, upon release, are left to move back to a family unit and friends that have either moved on or got used to operating in their absence. All the while having to face the stigma of being an ex-con when trying to get a job. For most, too many organisations decline to employ ex-prisoners because of their past offending. Government bodies refuse to regulate ex-prisoners for various employments, blocking them from making money through full disclosure or ‘fit and proper persons’ tests (such as refusing to let ex-prisoners act as landlords or the council’s refusal to employ ex-prisoners). These barriers further alienate ex-prisoners tagged for evermore with the mark of Cain, the only people the ex-con can relate to being the criminal peer group of old and other ex-prisoners.

With few prospects, limited opportunity and a minimal skill set, what chance do ex-prisoners really have? There is little by way of positive peer influence and a great deal of negativity from mainstream society (much of it informed by sensational media coverage of the subject).

2. Access to purposeful activity

It is very easy for those who have not walked in another man’s shoes to state their beliefs on the role of purposeful activity’s impact on rehabilitation, but everyone can surely see that there are fundamental foundations necessary to the attainment of the goal. Linking the need to attain certain levels of numeracy and literacy with compulsory vocational courses provided offenders with options when leaving prison that may result in a permanent change of mindset.

There is access to maths and English classes in prison, however prisoners’ access to education can be time-limited in many prisons – two sessions a week (one day), ‘work’ being judged more important (participation in education being viewed as a dodging of ‘work’).

Sadly it is clear the SPS do not consider ‘education’ a particular purposeful activity as wages were recently cut for those wishing to pursue full time education. The bureaucrats responsible for that staggering decision would rather a man brushed and washed a corridor floor each day (his job!) than engage in education, an undertaking among the hardest, most challenging of commitments.

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

The benefits of real purposeful activity should be two-fold, in that it will constructively manage the time of incarcerated individuals, focussing it, giving the individual a real sense of achievement while allowing them hope for the future. Secondly, it should
offer alternative opportunities in the future to those who are being released from prison, allowing ex-convicts to attain gainful employment and afford ex-prisoners the right to mix in positive peer groups both at work and socially. In theory this should be reflected in a lower number returning to prison and more families staying together through using time in prison more constructively. This will allow those previously in prison to possibly work legally for the first time in their lives. These steps should be taken to ensure that when ex-prisoners look back at their time in prison it is not a purposeful void, but a pivotal point at which they got the tools to succeed and where they turned their life around.

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

To change someone you have to engage with the human spirit. So how do we do this while battling with the realities identified by Goffman when he explored the institutional ‘mortification process’, and all the barriers that creates. We are faced with the damaged mind-sets of staff and prisoners about what the penal system should be and what ‘time in jail’ should experientially mean to the individual. Those beliefs, that level of resentment or objection to change, the idea that personal development of a prisoner is wrong, that offering any vocation or educational opportunity to a prisoner is not what prison is about, is a massive hurdle. That negativity is a reality denied in all manner of reports, but from prisoners’ experience it is a set of values witnessed all too often in prison, demonstrated by prisoner and staff alike. Any proposed changes on the shop floor have many internal hurdles to overcome. The culture needs changing!

Where training is delivered in prisons, establishments offer different training at varying levels for different skill-sets, so a lot of prisoners know a little about a lot. We would argue that few of the skills taught are at a level that would genuinely assist the future employment and none link literacy and numeracy. That is a barrier requiring the adoption of a consistent approach, focussed on the building, as a foundation, of a sense of self-worth and self-respect in offenders before tackling the challenges of imparting skills training to individuals who have little of any of that.

There may be public resistance (generated in the media) to rolling out academic and vocation training to criminals. The cry of “Why should this be on offer in prison when it is not available to law-abiding citizens?” is a valid complaint, however, many of those in prison missed out on the opportunities society had to offer when growing up, so is it not better to empower them with the tools to succeed, easing the long term financial burden on the state that they could otherwise represent as recidivists?

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

As stated above, many long-term prisoners spend years in the system during which they could be enabled with academic and vocational achievement, but most, if achieving anything, end up with a handful of SVQ modules that don’t add up to anything, for as they moved around the system each transfer terminated their study, and the next prison didn’t offer that course!
6. Whether access to such activity can be improved

It is our view that ‘meaningful purposeful activity’ should be established throughout the system, built on a foundation of literacy and numeracy, rolled out to all as they progress through the penal estate, but that only cultural change will make that significant in transforming the lives of any great numbers of offenders.

How do we help prison staff believe in the ideals of the system? If they cannot be convinced, what hope for convincing prisoners? Vision statements, mission statements and value declarations are meaningless, as Goal 5 requires, people live the values.

Do staff and prisoners experience management living the values of:

- Integrity, frankness and honesty in dealing with people;
- Fairness and justice, respecting the needs and rights of prisoners and staff;
- Mutual support, encouraging teamwork and commitment;
- Caring for the safety and wellbeing of prisoners and staff; and
- Openness about our aspirations, our successes and our failures, coupled with the willingness to learn.

All down the ages, leading by example has proven a winning model. What has gone wrong in the SPS? Or has it, as seen in one example, the Westminster parliamentary expenses scandals, just become the norm for leaders in modern society to duck, dive, dodge, distort, obfuscate and downright lie; always blaming someone else for the mess we are in with the cry ….. ‘you can lead a horse to water by you can’t make it drink ….’.