

Justice Committee

Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons

Written submission from the Howard League Scotland

Firstly, thank you for giving Howard League Scotland (HLS) the opportunity to submit evidence to the Justice Committee's inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons. We hope you and your colleagues found the evidence provided by our committee member Pete White useful.

Most of the key points we wanted to highlight were raised during the evidence session but there were a few other points we wanted to convey to the Committee:

The problems of delivering adequate and meaningful activities when prisons are overcrowded. Brigadier Monro's written evidence noted that when numbers of women being held in Cornton Vale dropped, the numbers of activities increased. Dealing with the constant churn of new arrivals distracts staff from being able to facilitate the delivery of purposeful activities.

Inequitable access for different elements of the prison population. For instance, there is no obligation to provide activities for remand prisoners and those on short term sentences of less than 45 days, who make up a substantial proportion of the prison population. *This in turn highlights the need to increase and improve the facilities for bail supervision and the need to deal with convicted low tariff offenders in the community.*

Protected prisoners and women held in male-dominated prisons too are not always well catered for. For instance, a group of female prisoners in HMP Edinburgh told HLS and Positive Prisons that they had access to the education centre for just half a day per week. With more women dispersed across the prison estate, this is a critical issue. Again, it highlights why low tariff female offenders should be dealt with in the community, as advocated in the report by the Commission on Women Offenders published last year.

Life skills are also important. For instance, parenting skills can help to prevent current high levels of intergenerational imprisonment. Many prisoners themselves have endured traumatic childhoods, so programmes that address trauma and loss are also important.

Employability and securing a job on release is one of the strongest determinants of reducing reoffending. Employment training and work placements should be matched to opportunities in the community and SPS should engage partners from the community wherever possible.

However, discrimination against ex-offenders in the employment market is a widespread problem. We therefore welcome the Scottish Government's future review of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act and would ask that the Government

address itself to the disadvantage suffered by ex-offenders in the employment market.

Maintaining links with family members in the community also contributes to reduced reoffending. Allowing prisoners to maintain these connections whilst in prison is vitally important. The children of those held in HMP Low Moss are able to take part in regular homework clubs with their fathers and there are local Cubs and Scouts groups held within the prison. Making the rights of the child of the imprisoned parent the priority is an approach we endorse and wish to see throughout the whole prison estate.

The role of the creative arts must not be underestimated. The arts may not lend themselves as easily to measurable impacts and outcomes but they can nonetheless have a transformative and positive effect on prisoners who engage with them.

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