Justice Committee

Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons

Written submission from Glenochil Visiting Committee

The comments and observations below have been compiled from contributions from individual members of the Glenochil VC with wide and varied experience of work in the prison environment both in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. At the outset it is stressed that the approach to prisoner activities has not changed for many decades in Scotland’s prisons. It is an inherent problem in most prisons and yet it might be the key to a very significant improvement in reducing both the prison population and the rate of re-offending. The decision by the Justice Committee to devote time to the matter is therefore welcomed and applauded.

Our response to the Committee’s questions is as follows:

1. **Meaning and measurement of “Purposeful Activity”**

   We would include within the definition any activity which improves the prospect of a prisoner returning as a contributor to society and which reduces the incidence of re-offending. The definition should also include activities which result in a more harmonious culture within a prison. Initiatives which have as their sole purpose the reduction in cost to the taxpayer of operating a prison might not come within the definition.

   Measurement might occur at several points and could include a wide range of metrics. Ultimately one would be looking for a reduction in the prison population attributable to “purposeful activity” but at various stages in a prisoner’s development there are many other opportunities to log and measure improvements in attitude and behaviour.

2. **Opportunities to engage in “Purposeful Activity”**

   HMP Glenochil is able to offer a wide range of work activities and trade learning opportunities including Open University Courses, NVQ and other qualifications. The Staff are generally committed and enthusiastic – there are also professionals who come into the prison to train inmates in trades which should enhance their chances of employment once back in the workplace. However, there is room for significant improvements in staff attitudes and flexibility. The same applies to the availability and nature of the work.

3. **Benefits and examples of best practice**

   Even under the current regime the benefits of work related activities are, for the right individual, very significant. Many prisoners come from backgrounds where a basic work ethic is completely absent. For some this could be the first occasion when they have had to work under direction and in compliance with quality standards; where they have had to pay attention to Health and Safety and function as a team in producing products for external customers in competition with outside providers. If
the current regime was changed along the lines outlined in this paper it is thought that a step change would occur of huge benefit to the offender and to society.

Any of the Glenochil workshops could provide examples of best practice. The Speedy Hire repair facility where a third party organisation, operating in a highly competitive sector, has established an in-prison facility which consistently achieves quality standards and output figures which justify their investment. The hire tools which are repaired and serviced at Glenochil are the same to which the general public has access and the safety aspects must therefore be equal to Speedy Hire’s standards in all their other facilities. The work which is technical and challenging must be providing a superb insight to those who have never been exposed to an intricately costed exercise.

4. Barriers

There are many barriers which stand in the way of achieving change.

1. A situation specific to HMP Glenochil is the segregation which must be maintained between the main stream and protection prisoner communities. Although a modern establishment, Glenochil was not designed for segregated communities and limitations result in opportunities for education, training and work.

2. There is not enough fulltime work for all prisoners. If this cannot be improved it would be better to offer part time work to more prisoners.

3. Productivity bonuses paid for some work results in prisoners declining other less well remunerated work. It also results in refusals to take up education opportunities.

4. Prisoners are quite properly incentivised to improve productivity but the supply of materials in some of the workshop sometimes does not match the output resulting in under-employment on full pay.

5. Short term prisoners are virtually excluded from the work environment. This is difficult to solve but an attempt must be made to avoid the inevitable idleness.

6. Under the current regime prisoners are entitled to refuse work and yet still receive a basic cell wage. Taken alone this might be difficult to change but as part of a root and branch reform it could be done thereby bringing the prison community in line with the rest of society.

7. Illiteracy, language and a lack of basic education remain as very substantial barriers to improvement. Further problems exist with prisoners having psychological issues and histories of violence. While these factors may preclude some it should not be deterrent to reform elsewhere.

8. Availability of staff to underpin and deliver any new initiative will need to be addressed. Much could be achieved simply by a greater willingness to embrace change. As it is, a tendency towards entrenched attitudes on the part of SPS Staff could put at risk any opportunities that might be created.

5. Consistency across the prison estate

Glenochil, despite the limitations of a segregated community, is a modern establishment with much better opportunity than older prisons to provide "purposeful
activities”. This might suggest that Glenochil together with other recently built prisons would be a good place to pilot any new schemes.

6. Improvements [and changes]

Job opportunities are already limited among the outside community and one might anticipate that any significant expense on prisoners will come under acute public focus and scrutiny unless linked very clearly to improvements. As this will be difficult to demonstrate the emphasis should be on change that can occur without significant cost. In the opinion of the Glenochil VC the following are where real improvements could be achieved:

Education
1. Introduction of in depth assessment at the time of Induction to determine a prisoners needs. This should address not just health issues but also literacy, language skills, attitude and susceptibility to education.
2. Given generally low standards in the main stream community there should be more emphasis on basic education i.e. literacy and numeracy. At present the higher end is seen as more attractive but the vast majority of prisoners have learning difficulties and those who can benefit from Open University and similar courses should perhaps enjoy less support so that the main focus can be on those without the basic skills.
3. Any stigma associated with “education” should be eliminated. To help dispel any notion that those in education are “uneducated” those in full time education should receive a good wage coupled with “bonuses” for those who really achieve.
4. Life skills such as parenting, budgeting, cooking etc. should feature on the curriculum.
5. Introduction of peer groups to support all individuals in education.

Prison timetable and culture
1. A prisoner should be subjected to a structured regime which includes a daily timetable throughout each week. This would include work, education, programmes and PE. Such an approach would accustom more prisoners to the realities and discipline of a normal working day in the outside world. Emphasis should be on activity and engagement – not confinement.
2. Television could be turned off during the working day to encourage prisoners to participate and stay out of their cells. This might also have a beneficial effect on the stress created by doubling-up in cells.
3. Organised evening and weekend activities particularly in summer when prisoners could be outside. In winter craft work might feature making toys and other gifts for family and friends. All of this would serve to reduce boredom and a sedentary lifestyle.

Workshops
1. Efforts should be made to better align job training to outside opportunities and to match any existing skills to available work including prison maintenance.
2. Prisoners could be assessed during education for particular suitability for different jobs and tasks.
3. Achieve a measure of continuity and similarity across the SPS estate so that prisoners can continue their work and speciality even when moved to different prisons.

4. Workshops in Glenochil should operate on a 5 day basis – not the 4.5 day basis operated currently.

5. Engage more outside concerns in Speedy Hire type investments. Industry could be approached at government level on the basis of social responsibility and with incentives. Skills deficiencies in outside industry might also be targeted as a means of better alignment of training opportunities prior to release.

Post release
1. Encourage ex-offenders who have made a success of life to offer guidance to inmates.

2. Provide more support and training for organisations with the skills to mentor and “adopt” individuals post release.

In summary the Glenochil VC consider this review by the Justice Committee as a very significant opportunity to affect a step-change in the manner in which prisoners are handled in Scotland. It is hoped that the opportunity will not be lost and that a very meaningful improvement can be offered to society in the form of a reduced prison population and a lessened rate of re-offending.

Glenochil Visiting Committee
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