Justice Committee

Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons

Written submission from HMYOI Polmont Visiting Committee

The committee would respectfully make the following comments:

1. **What is meant by ‘purposeful activity’ and how can this be measured**

The committee would suggest that purposeful activity should include any structured and led out-of-cell activity that provides opportunities for prisoners to advance their skills or knowledge or improve their health and well-being.

It can be measured in the number of inputs (Opportunities offered in hours/activities) and through outputs (attendance, regularity etc) and more challengingly, and dependent on the nature of the activity, through outcomes achieved.

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

In Polmont there is a wide and varied range of activities delivered by both SPS staff and external agencies, both under contractual arrangements and through voluntary provision. The extent to which prisoners can and do engage in activities is however dependent on many factors that can influence an individual’s situation – e.g. personal motivation, the attractiveness / relevance of the activity being offered, the time of day that the activity is offered, the regularity/frequency of the activity, and the duration of the activity.

It can be influenced by the way in which the activity is promoted (if at all) by staff and importantly by the ease of access, or otherwise, to secure a place in the activity.

Access to purposeful activities may be limited by a prisoner’s lack of knowledge about what is on offer, or lack of accurate information about what they need to do to access that activity. It may be the case that they learned of activities and options at the start of their sentence, but have not inquired nor been reminded or encouraged at later stages.

The range of workshop activities may or may not suit the current interests of prisoners. Workshop activities that are vocational or training in nature should reflect activities that are useful and required in the ‘outside ‘world.

Workshops that rely entirely on monotonous unchallenging tasks may be better than no activity at all, but they do not generally contribute to prisoner advancement or learning.

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

With a prisoner, and especially a young offender population, the perceived benefits are considerable and range across the personal, organisational and societal.

At a personal level, the benefits can include increased learning, skills, knowledge. It can enhance personal well-being through encouraging positive achievements, developing
positive social interaction, and improving self-esteem and confidence. It can help establish good working habits and self-discipline through attendance and progression in tasks. The Independent Living Unit at Polmont is a good example of an integrated approach that encourages self-advancement and learning in albeit small numbers.

At an organisational level, purposeful activity is likely to assist in the provision of a safe and well-ordered prison and to contribute to both staff and prisoner satisfaction and increased motivation.

At a societal level, it is beneficial that a prisoner’s time in prison is seen to be productive and reformatory, and that opportunities are given to address offending behaviour alongside developing or enhancing skills that will reduce the likelihood of future re-offending.

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

Barriers exist at several levels

Providing enough meaningful and purposeful activity for a large prison population is the first barrier.

Prisoners may not have the personal confidence, skills or resourcefulness to overcome their personal barriers to accessing purposeful activities. These may have come about by way of developmental deficits in their past, or through a range of psychological and emotional problems, through learning difficulties – numeracy and literacy issues for example.

Prisoners may have had poor or negative experiences of education, training or work and they may perceive the opportunities on offer as repeating those.

Prisoners can feel intimidated by other prisoners, they may not feel safe moving to take part in an activity or they may feel that they will lose status/face with other prisoners if they pursue an opportunity.

Staff attitudes are important to encouraging a culture of purposeful activity. Movement of prisoners has to be safe and the structure of the working day has to be fitted to staff rosters etc. The logistics of making activities accessible and getting prisoners to and from those can pose considerable barriers.

The role of education and the recognition of life-long learning opportunities is crucial. Education timetabling needs to take account of many prisoners’ shorter attention spans and therefore the need for varied activities and shorter teaching times.

Staffing of specialist workshops can be difficult to ensure – both to recruit and to retain skilled and suitable staff.

The unavailability of workshops due to lack of staff or absence (and lack of suitably skilled cover during illness, holidays etc) is a frequent source of frustration and a massive waste of resources.
The lack of a ‘work habit’ can be a considerable barrier and this affects many young men who have grown up in situations where ‘worklessness’ is the norm. Prison life does not always help to break this cycle. The understandably difficult issue of how to provide sanctions for wilful non-participation in purposeful activity is one that requires to be addressed.

The unlimited access to television in cell viewing, is in our view detrimental to setting good work habits – especially with a young offender population who may choose all-night viewing – and then sleep during the day, or choose to remain in their cells during the day.

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

We do not have sufficient knowledge or experience of other parts of the prison estate to be able to comment on this aspect.

6. **Whether access to such activity can be improved**

In the case of Polmont, we believe access can be improved and increased and that better use can be made of the excellent facilities that exist.

We are of the view that this requires both a greater effort to provide regular, adequately staffed workshops / training opportunities, more emphasis on establishing a culture of work, activity and learning, a greater recognition of the role of residential staff in both providing and encouraging engagement in purposeful activity, flexibility in timetabling and a willingness to try new ways of providing purposeful activity.

Alastair M MacKinnon
Chairman
Visiting Committee
HMYOI Polmont
21 January 2013