Justice Committee

Inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons

Written submission from James Watson

I am writing this in a personal capacity having just been released from HMP Low Moss following an eight month sentence for embezzlement. Therefore my comments will relate in the main to the regime at Low Moss but I feel that certain generalisations can be extrapolated to the wider population. As a first time offender I was put into the “Positive Impact Programme” and I will address my comments from the perspective of this programme.

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

The Prisons and Young Offenders Institutions (Scotland) Rules 2011 defines what is regarded as purposeful activity and includes, inter alia: (a) work; (b) education of any kind, including physical education; (c) counselling and other rehabilitative programmes; (d) vocational training; and (e) work placements outside the prison.

The Positive Impact Programme (PIP) involved only education, physical education and access to rehabilitative programmes. Access to work, vocational training and work placements were not considered to be appropriate on the programme.

The rehabilitative programmes included “Offending Behaviour”; “Alcohol and Substance Misuse”; and “Violence Reduction”. This was meant to have been conducted on a rolling programme with a maximum of eight participants in a group work setting from a wing with 38 prisoners on it. The measurement of each of these can normally be determined from the extent of recidivism from participants. However, such statistics will only become apparent over a longer time period. In the short term, the group work programme made use of self evaluation sheets and a “tick box” approach by staff. The danger with this approach is that prisoners will tell staff what they expect them to hear with no real transformational change being effected by the individuals. The attitude, expressed by more than one prisoner, is that the programme was only a way to facilitate either the HDC tagging process or to gain access to the open estate at Castle Huntly.

There were a few other one session classes offered. I took part in a manual handling class and a CPR class. The CPR class was perhaps one of the most socially useful classes that could be given to prisoners. I also took part in a basic cooking skill programme in the training kitchen. This facility allows for six prisoners to be taught the basics necessary for cooking healthy and cheap meals. Ultimately it is intended to run cookery SVQ’s from the training kitchen over a 16 week period.

There was also a course of the Talk2 programme. This was run in conjunction with a facilitator from the Talk2 programme itself. It ran for eight two-hour sessions on a Monday morning. The programme is designed to support parents when they talk to their children about growing up, relationships and sexual health. An officer sat in with the session and he hopes to continue offering the programme to others within the prison, with himself acting as facilitator. This programme was challenging and
thought provoking and its success can only be measured upon returning to your family and actually implementing what you learned.

The education programme was initially for two sessions per week, but this was increased to three sessions per week. (NB the third session clashed with the Talk2 programme) Motherwell College were the providers and the classes offered included computing; art; Basic English; maths; social studies (modern Studies; history; sociology); creative writing; music.

The college uses its own KPIs to monitor performance. These included the usual “bums on seats” and the number of people being put forward for assessments. Whilst recognising that these can be important factors in education sectors, within the prison service there needs to be a more qualitative approach. I attended the modern studies class on a regular basis. This allowed the tutor to address important issues of the day such as minimum pricing on alcohol and Scottish Independence as well as informally challenging offending behaviour. I thought this class worked extremely well with a number of salient contributions from prisoners. However, during one session the tutor was a bit upset as he had been informed that his contract was not being extended due to his failure to meet KPIs. The subject matter did not lend itself well to putting people through written assessments but I would assert that it probably had more positive impact on individuals than could ever be measured using traditional educational KPIs. The other classes were better positioned for putting prisoners through small modules that could be assessed and marked.

The art class had a number of easily identifiable successes by the standard of art produced. A good measure for the output would be the revenue raised by selling the artwork to the general public but such a process is barred by policy. If this was relaxed then the revenue generated could act as a measurement for the success of art classes. I have already raised this point with my MSPs, the Convener of the Justice Committee and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice.

The PIP section was allowed access to the library once a fortnight. You could take out two books from a reasonably stocked library.

Physical education involved a maximum of 15 participants’ access to the gym facilities two or three times a week. There were also two sessions of five a side football on the small all weather pitch outside the block. Everyone was allowed out for an hours worth of walking around the exercise yard. This could be concluded after half an hours worth of rotational walking. I did not participate in the gym sessions but I am sure that there will be formal methods for recording any improvements in health for prisoners from a before and after analysis. Physical exercise also allowed for a release of pent up frustration caused by a lack of activity/being locked up and the mental health benefits cannot be accurately measured.
2. The extent to which prisoners have an opportunity to engage in purposeful activity

Attendance at the education centre was compulsory for PIP prisoners. The compulsion may have been resented from prisoners who generally did not have a productive time at school but the chance of getting out of your cell for an hour eliminated most of the potential resentment. However, it is questionable in some cases how “purposeful” the activity actually was – there was still an element of disengagement by some prisoners.

Attendance on the rehabilitative programme was dependent upon space becoming available and following a psychological assessment. This assessment was carried out by an officer and I would question how accurate a written submission would be for psychologists making a decision as to who would benefit from the programme. There are many non verbal communications and mannerisms that cannot possibly be picked up from a transcribed form. Equally, the short term nature of sentences did not allow for all prisoners to participate. The rehabilitative programmes in the PIP section were terminated without much explanation coming from the officers or management.

Physical education was restricted to 15 prisoners and on more than one occasion some prisoners were visibly disappointed at not getting to the gym since the limit had been reached. It was very much on a first come first served basis and those who were quickest to the gate were taken first. There were a number of on-going complaints regarding the equipment and set up within the gym but I cannot comment on this any further having never taken part in the gym.

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

There are many theoretical benefits that can accrue for both Prisoners and society as a whole. The prisoner gets a feeling of self worth, improves basic skills and engages in activities that could perhaps help them with a job search on the outside and can be the first step on the road to desistance. This applies to all aspects of purposeful activity as defined above. It also gives prisoners something to do. This should help eliminate pejorative comments about prisoners lounging about in their cell watching Sky TV!

Society should benefit from the release of offenders who realise that they have done wrong and that they are preparing to make a positive contribution to their community, if they are given a chance.

However, these benefits will only accrue if both prisoners and sps staff have a commitment to the processes involved. There can be an over reliance on activity to be used as a control mechanism with the withdrawal of privileges for non compliance. This can have an adverse effect on the potential benefits for certain individuals.
4. **What barriers may exist to prevent prisoners engaging in such activities**

There are many barriers put in the way of engagement. Firstly, the regime does not lend itself to a full working week. Moving prisoners en masse to the work shed and education takes time and effort. Equally returning them back for their lunch and dinner also eats into the available time for purposeful activity. The work programme needs to be real for it to have any benefit. There has to be realistic expectations on both sides as to the adequacy of on the job training. For example, you are unlikely to fully train someone on a short sentence to be a fully qualified plumber.

Resources are a problem. There seemed to be a lack of staff resource for short term prisoners in relation to the rehabilitative programmes. There would also be a problem with space even if the staffing issue could be addressed.

Prisoners may not see the need to get involved with purposeful activity. Many will have come from chaotic backgrounds and they are precisely the ones who could benefit from some routine in their lives. However, there is not enough work done at induction to explain the mutual benefits that can accrue.

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

I have no experience or information that will allow me to answer this question.

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

With an infinite budget and unlimited resource then the problem of access could be sorted. However, the SPS operates in the real world and the current age of austerity does not lend itself well to spending money to improve the rehabilitation rates. This could be construed as a short sighted position to adopt as any short term costs involved in achieving a reduction in recidivism should lead to savings in the long run for the SPS. Obviously more research would be needed to back up this assertion.

Better use could be made of the technology available within the prison. The TV system could become a delivery channel for educational output and this particular system can be controlled from the main console to manage the output. This would allow for a number of courses, educational material and information to be delivered directly to cells.

Incentives should be tied in to the purposeful activity programme both in the form of payments and access to the HDC system. If a reward was available then prisoners may be more motivated to participate.

**General Comments**

I welcome the Justice Committee’s investigation into this area. As someone who has come through the system I can see how soul destroying and demoralising it can be for individuals stuck within the system and any actions that can be taken to help them break out of the revolving door syndrome are to be welcomed. There have been a number of recent publications that cover this area and I would like to draw
the committee’s attention to them. They mainly refer to the work being completed in England and Wales but we should never shy away from “borrowing” good practice wherever it is found.

The Howard League for Penal Reform actually ran a fully functioning business within a prison. Detail can be found here: [http://www.howardleague.org/work/](http://www.howardleague.org/work/)

The House of Lords recently debated the issue and a copy of the debate transcript can be found here: [http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2013-01-15a.663.2](http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2013-01-15a.663.2)


A key point for successful education and training must be the buy-in of prospective employers. They should be engaged at an early stage in both the design and delivery of vocational training, education and workshops. This should provide assurance that prisoners leaving prison have been properly trained and can actually play a productive part in their organisation. Equally any schemes should be designed so that they are not robbing communities of job opportunities or taking advantage of prisoners by paying less than the going rate for work produced.

Education needs a follow up route. There has to be better liaison with prisons and local colleges so that any education that has started in prison can be articulated to the community setting. Motherwell College being the provider for education in seven prisons may well be a stumbling block to effective collegiate working. Time should be spent with prisoners exploring options for continuing education upon release. However, it should be noted that some institutions look for details of any convictions and this can be off putting to prisoners who are embarrassed by their time spent inside.

I would like to thank the committee for reading my contribution and I would make the point that asking prisoners directly about their experience would be perhaps very illuminating for the committee. Failing that option I am more than happy to provide evidence in person if required.

James Watson
22 January 2013