

Scottish justice committee inquiry into purposeful activity

The Prison Reform Trust is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, Government and officials towards reform.

The Prison Reform Trust welcomes the inquiry by the Justice Committee into purposeful activity in prison. Purposeful activity is fundamental to what makes time in prison meaningful to society and to the person in custody. Time in prison should be used to ensure that prisoners emerge better able to cope with the responsibilities of citizenship than before. To serve the public, prisons must be more than warehouses.

“Prisons should not be about turning offenders into good prisoners, but about turning prisoners into good citizens.”

(Director of Offender Management, Prison Reform Trust: *Time Well Spent*)

Definition

Defining the purpose of any task or role should consider how this use of time is personally meaningful to the prisoner. Too often, purposeful activity is defined by what is provided rather than by what the person can contribute and their own assessment of their needs.

The Prison Reform Trust report, *Time Well Spent* (2011), suggested that volunteering by prisoners is an under-used and under-rated form of purposeful activity.

“Prisoners are active citizens when they exercise responsibility by making positive contributions to prison life or the wider community.”

Time Well Spent described five types of active citizenship:

- Peer support
- Work with or on behalf of people in the outside community
- Restorative justice, whereby prisoners are encouraged to acknowledge the harm they have caused and to make amends
- Representative functions on prisoner councils or other forums
- Arts and media projects

The common factor, the aspect that made their time meaningful, was the chance to do something positive. People who participated in active citizenship felt that they

were performing useful roles and that, through it, they had found a purpose to their time in prison. These activities encourage the motivation to turn away from crime. Shadd Maruna has written:

“To desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop a coherent pro-social identity for themselves.”

(Maruna, 2001:7)

A prisoner described his work as a race equality representative in these terms:

“Most of my life I’ve been doing bad things – like selling drugs and doing things like that; getting praise for the wrong things. This is doing something that helps the community, not hinders it. That doesn’t compensate, but I can make myself more valuable to society in the future.”

(Prison Reform Trust: *Time Well Spent*)

Measurement

It is vital to rehabilitation that prisoners are out of their cells as much as possible during the working day and that all but a few have association in the evening. However, problems arise if purposeful activity is measured by time out of cell alone.

The personal element – what the activity means to the person – should not be dismissed because it is difficult to measure. Prison Reform Trust recommends that purposeful activity be monitored through a basket of measures which encompasses:

- time spent in activities that reduce the risk of reoffending
- activities that give the prisoner a sense that their time in prison is meaningful (especially active citizenship)
- opportunities to exercise responsibility for their own resettlement
- restorative justice: chances to meet victims, making amends, and restorative approaches that benefit the prison community
- initiatives to enhance family relations and open dialogue with families; engaging families in sentence planning and resettlement

Benefits

Time Well Spent found that, through active citizenship, prisoners experience:

- a purpose to their time in prison
- a chance to acquire new skills
- earning the trust of others
- an increased capacity for responsibility
- a chance to give something back
- a route from passive recipient to a contributor to society

Shadd Maruna identified factors that lead to desistance:

“Compared to active offenders, successfully reintegrated ex-prisoners are significantly more care-oriented, other-centred and focused on promoting the next generation. . . . In short, they find a reason to live that is inconsistent with continued offending.”

(Maruna, 2007)

Active citizenship encourages desistance by developing the person’s caring, other-centred side, building up their self-confidence and sense of independence, and focussing their thoughts on the future. A woman explained why she became a Listener:

“When I came in, I found it really difficult...When I came here, I took on the role of Listener. I realised if I had known about this, and used Listeners, it would have been easier for me. Although my freedom has been taken away, I can give something back and help someone who is really desperate.”

(Prison Reform Trust: *Time Well Spent*)

Best practice

Out for Good (PRT, 2012) suggests that best practice in resettlement enables prisoners to take responsibility for decisions about their future: what they want to do with their lives and what support they will need. Prisons need to develop the skill of sharing responsibility with prisoners, ensuring that they have the support and the information they need to make decisions and act on them.

Models of good practice: enable prisoners to take on responsibilities; encourage their self-improvement; build links to the voluntary sector in the community; and facilitate activities prisoners themselves see as valuable and meaningful. Examples include:

St Giles Trust	Mentoring schemes
Alternatives to Violence Project	Parc Supporting Families, HMP Parc
Fair Shares Time Bank	Families Outside
The Tools Shed, HMP Saughton	Prison Radio
Sefton CVS, HMP Liverpool and Kennet	Business in the community, including Timpsons and National Grid

Barriers

A significant barrier to purposeful activity is a lack of safety. The two are inter-dependent. In an unsafe setting, people will be inhibited from taking part; threats to personal safety will undermine the purpose of the activity. Equally, purposeful activities make prisons safe. There is no safety in a ‘bang-up’ jail. Isolation and idleness contribute to self-harm and aggravate disputes between prisoners that result in violent incidents.

The Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland has written:

“The ethos and culture of the prison are important features of the rehabilitative environment. A culture that diffuses violence, aims to deal whenever possible with disputes by mediation, and with disciplinary infractions by problems-solving will be an environment that promotes in prisoners an understanding and reflective approach to life’s difficulties.”

(Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland: *Standards*, 2006)

A response from some prison managers, when urged to provide more purposeful activity, is that security must come first. It is true that purposeful activity depends on safety. Prisons are at their best when they manage risk in such a way that personal development is enabled. However, too often security stymies activity, thereby undermining rehabilitation. Social order requires a balance between security and more humane values of mutual respect, sharing resources, and developing the human potential (see Liebling, 2004). These conditions depend on meaningful activities.

Overcrowding also undermines the gains to be achieved through purposeful activity. The Prison Reform Trust’s 2012 *Prison Factfile* reported on SPS’ survey of prisoners in which 64% stated that high prisoner numbers had an impact on opportunities for training and education and 44%, on their safety. Sending fewer people to prison makes it possible to target rehabilitation and fulfil the potential of meaningful work in prison. The Prisons Inspectorate saw increased rates of activities at Cornton Vale when fewer women were held there (HMCIPS, 2012). Conversely, savings made by reducing staff will necessarily reduce opportunities for prisoners.

Equal access to meaningful activities highlights the structural barriers for people who have mental health needs or learning disabilities and difficulties. *No One Knows*, Prison Reform Trust’s programme on learning disabilities and learning difficulties, asked prison staff to assess how prisons in Scotland respond (PRT: 2007). Problems included the numbers of such prisoners whose needs were not identified; a lack of dedicated learning disability support; and the exclusion of learning disabled prisoners from activities to help them progress through their sentences. The recommendations by staff included developing better liaison with community-based support, more meaningful activities, greater access to sign language, and better continuity of support post-release.

Making it Happen

A prison governor stated:

“Prisoners are huge assets. Don’t just look at their needs; consider what they can do, what they can give. People who are outside the economic market can still be enormously valuable to their community.”

(Prison Reform Trust: *Time Well Spent*)

Time Well Spent presented practical guidance from prison staff to show how activity can be maximised, with specific advice about:

- setting up schemes
- partnership with voluntary sector organisations
- gaining the support of staff
- risk management
- working with prisoners
- outcomes, monitoring, equality of access.

For example, each activity should have a named staff member with responsibility for making it work. The plan should have explicit and agreed milestones and outputs. Where possible, the voluntary sector should be involved in delivery. Security considerations should be discussed and addressed. An organisational structure should be established which ensures the sustainability of the work beyond any changes of personnel.

Partnership working with the voluntary sector is still under-developed. The needs of prisoners include: debt advice, housing, mental health, family relations, employment, counselling, conflict resolution, and others – areas where prison staff need to rely on the expertise of others. Prisons should not wait for the voluntary sector to approach them, but be pro-active in seeking out resources in the community.

Prison Reform Trust recommends that the Scottish Prison Service:

- Expands opportunities for active citizenship
- Involves voluntary sector organisations more in delivering active citizenship and volunteering.
- Develops and implements standards of active citizenship
- Does more to engage uniformed staff and involve them in the development of volunteering and active citizenship.
- Analyses policies to identify ways in which they inhibit the exercise of responsibility by prisoners, and revise the policies as required.
- Implements systematically the sharing of positive information about prisoners – about their strengths, interests and skills.
- Builds on its work with Families Outside to improve relationships between prisoners and their families.

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