Life in an approved premise – A personal account

I was released from HMP Usk, a South Wales prison in September 2007 with the minimum of fuss and no celebration. I had been in prison for 18 months for sexual offences against two boys which had occurred about 30 years previously. I am deeply ashamed of what I did and profoundly sorry for the harm I caused these children, their parents, brothers and sisters and friends. I am also sorry for the pain and distress this caused my own family, my wife and children. I am not writing this article to somehow justify my offences, nor to seek anyone’s sympathy, but to bring to highlight some of my experiences after being released from prison.

It had been decided whilst I was in prison that I should be sent to a hostel on release. Who exactly decided this I am uncertain. Decisions about people in prison are often made without their input, knowledge, or representation. I was merely informed that I was to go to an approved hostel on the south coast.

I was picked up from prison by a friend of long-standing and retired clergyman who had kindly offered to drive me to the approved premises, where I had been instructed to arrive no later than 4.00pm.

The first insight into the regime at this institution was when John was not allowed to drive me to the front door. At the gate I was told I could come in but not the driver; I had to get out at the main gate and carry my bits and pieces down the drive and into the entrance hall.

At the office I was given a room key, told do dump my stuff in the room and return immediately for an induction briefing. This consisted wholly of informing me of the various, and numerous, rules governing the hostel. I had to sign to say that I had listened, understood and inwardly digested more regulations than had been present in prison. I signed, but with no real understanding of anything. It was explained to me that my designated key worker was leaving and I would be allocated a new one shortly. I was then told I could go to my room – if I could find it!

No one ever welcomed me or showed me around the hostel. I had been processed in much the same way as I had in prison, so that was that. The other inmates (the staff hated us referring to each other as ‘inmates’ preferring the term residents, but we felt we were inmates in a sort of category E prison) helped me out and made sure I was aware of how important the signing times were.

I was obliged to sign-in at 1pm, 5pm, and 7pm daily. This entailed queuing up outside the office and signing a register at exactly the right time. Being late was not tolerated and could lead to being recalled which was the threatened penalty infringement of any of the hostel’s rules. I was not allowed out of the hostel during the day, except between 12.00 and 1.00 to get some lunch, until 7pm when I could be out until 10.30 – curfew hour. This signing and curfew regime was designed to keep us close to the hostel. We were also told to try and be invisible when entering and leaving the hostel. Any friends or family who may wish to visit us were not to wait outside the gate, but somewhere further up the road.

On one memorable occasion a friend who had been an assistant chief probation officer and was now working as a course facilitator in prisons had come to take me out. He was nearly the cause of the police being called for ‘lurking around the gate in a suspicious manner’. He was in fact waiting for me. The hostel manager blamed me for his position on the pavement outside, and when I
politely pointed out that as it was the public highway and Peter had not committed any offence I therefore felt that I was unable to ask him to ‘move along’, and perhaps she might care to have a word with him. She declined. The reasons for keeping a low profile was more to placate the local residents who were not overjoyed to have approved premises lowering the tone of the neighbourhood than it was in protecting inmates from journalists.

To make matters slightly more uncomfortable for us the public rooms – the dining room and lounge – were closed during the day so we had little alternative but to stay in our rooms. If you wanted a television you had to pay for the full licence as no communal licence was allowed.

Our time in the approved premises was supposed to reintegrate us back into society and the community. Sadly it failed on both accounts. We were never allowed to join anything in the local community and were expected to keep as low a profile as was humanly possible, even certain pubs were banned. The curfew imposed made doubly sure of this. The hostel saw its various programmes as our way back into society. However, many of us who had been in prison for relatively short periods did not feel that any ‘reintegration’ was actually necessary.

The official view of, and justification for, programmes differed somewhat from what actually went on. The following is a quote taken from Probation Report 2008 – The National Probation Service Newsletter for Sentencers in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

> The regime at the hostel is that residents should undertake hostel programmes to change their attitudes and behaviour mornings and afternoons from Monday to Thursday. If there are no programmes running and residents have no appointments or other interventions to attend, they are expected to use their time constructively and to undertake ‘personal study’. It was of concern to me when I came to the hostel that some residents seemed unable to use their time constructively and appeared to be bored and idle for much of the time. The only hostel programmes then running were for garden maintenance and DIY.

I’m sorry to say that ‘personal study’ was only undertaken by two of the inmates following OU courses which they had began in prison and as for any thing else it is perhaps best described as being honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

The programmes to ‘change attitudes and behaviour’ which were on offer were, in my opinion, ill-advised, poorly delivered and only existed to enable the approved premises to say that it offered appropriate programmes. The two I followed had no bearing whatsoever on my attitude or behaviour.

One was woodwork where I could saw pieces of wood, hammer nails into them, carve them to look like a duck or just sweep the workshop floor. This ‘course’ was preferable to the gardening course which mainly entailed sweeping up leaves as the use of any tools was prohibited.

The other programme I was obliged to attend was ‘back to work’. I was encouraged to complete my CV but nobody seemed to want to acknowledge the fact that at 63 years old with a prison record and barred from following both of the major areas of my previous employment, with unemployment generally rising, and my requirement to comply with curfew restrictions, my chances of actually getting a job lay some where between no chance and absolutely no chance!

I went along with the charade of attending programmes, the fear of recall being the driving force. However, it struck me that a number or slightly more useful and relevant course could have been...
offered in place of these tired unfocused ones: “How to manage on a budget” could have been one,
and “How to cook basic food” another, and perhaps more to the point “How to fill your time”, as
many would not get jobs and would remain on benefits. I did suggest these to my key-worker who,
to her credit, agreed with me, yet somehow I doubt if any significant change will occur as a result.

Another unnecessary aspect of hostel life was the nightly bed checks. At approximately 10.30, 2.30
and 6.00 am the night staff would open your door, shine a torch to see if you were still there!
(Where they thought you might otherwise have been was never discussed). The place was
festooned with CCTV cameras, the only places not covered were the bedrooms and toilets, and
floodlights equipped with motion sensors were in operation in the garden area.

The need for these checks was frequently questioned at the weekly joint meeting of staff and
inmates. The stock answers alternated between ‘it’s a health and safety issue’, which in some ways it
was – it certainly interfered with our health! And ‘it’s required by the Home Office’, the truth was
that it was left to the discretion of the hostel manager. Most people were of the opinion that they
were carried out to make sure that everyone was in their own beds and not someone else’s,
although I wonder what would have happened if that had been the case, it being neither illegal or in
breach of licence conditions.

The warden seldom spoke to inmates unless it was necessary. Mostly we only saw her on her way
to one of the innumerable multi agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) meetings held at
the hostel.

MAPPA meetings were a constant source of psychological stress to those about whom they were
called. The inmate could not attend, nor could he be independently represented. The outcome of
this meeting although it greatly affected him was seldom explained in any detail. To make matters
even more stressful you had no idea who it was that actually attended these meetings and made
such far reaching decisions. You might recognise your offender manager but the others often
remained a mystery.

Each inmate was assigned a key-worker. Some were better than others. Mine was excellent and I
was delighted to have been assigned to her. She was the one thing that worked in the flawed
approved premises system. She did her best to present my point of view at the MAPPA meeting and
helped me get a flat and on to lorry driving course.

I hope that she continues in the probation service and goes on to become an offender manager or
run her own approved premises as she was far more offender centred than others that I met. For
the most part they were only interested in self-preservation. If anything were to go wrong, if
anyone were to be recalled or re-offended, they made it crystal clear that they could not he held
responsible. It was a mindset that ensured that no initiative or original thinking could ever take
place, no thinking outside the all important box. If a key-worker could not be blamed if anything
went wrong, by the same token neither could they be praised for working independently and
making a meaningful contribution to helping an ex-offender to find a place in society. It is perhaps
little wonder that staff, judging by their occasional unguarded comments and expressions, found
working at these approved premises somewhat unrewarding.

I was eventually sent on a re-training course. All training courses offered were connected to the
building trade, nothing else. As I had in the past been a teacher and a sales director I had little
experience of the construction industry. I had asked if I could do a course of teaching English to
foreign adult students. This request went down like a lead balloon and may well have sent my
MAPPA board into a terminal decline at its next meeting! Needless to say my request was refused. I think it was generally held that the construction industry was happy to take those on the Sex Offenders Register without asking too many searching questions as the likelihood of coming into contact with young people was minimal. I was offered an HGV lorry drivers course and I was expected to take it.

One of the things you learn in prison and on licence is that what people read into a thing is often more important than the thing itself. I had already blotted my copy book by suggesting a TEFL course, had I declined the lorry driving course MAPPA might well have concluded that I was awkward or non-complaint or, worst of all, angry.

Likewise if I had decided not to attend the church they had chosen for me due to either the draconian contract I was required to sign, or simply that it was a different denomination to that which I usually attend, the result might well have been that MAPPA may conclude that I was trying to negotiate an ‘easier’ church where I might have access to children or young people. It became abundantly clear that both MAPPA and the Probation Service see church attendance as a very questionable activity for someone who has committed a sexual offence. They assume that it will be used as a cover to groom children. As prior to going to prison church had played a large part in both my life and my wife’s, both spiritually and socially and had not in any way figured in my offending, I was rather innocently hoping that I might pick up where I left off, especially as many in my church had been faithful in their support whilst I was in prison.

MAPPA would do well to consider what the Guardian reported in March 2009 that most senior judges now hold that the concept that having once offended being an indication of a further likelihood of offending is no longer sustainable. Similarly on the 25th March 2009 Richard Kemp of the Local Government Association talking about the fall out of the Baby P case stated, that the greatest risk to children are from immediate family and close friends not from stray paedophiles. On average every 7 days a child is killed by either a parent or a carer.

During my six month stay at this Home Office approved premises I underwent no particular social or psychological change. As in prison I quickly got the measure of what they wanted to hear, said it, and saw the results. In truth I could only stay for a maximum of 9 months as my licence period would be up and my offender manager had already indicated that she wanted to see me in the community before that occurred. So I guess my stay was pretty much decided when I arrived. Frankly I fail to see what positive role the hostel played in my return to society. Some 12 months after I had left the hostel Ian, my ‘Circles’ mentor let it drop that MAPPA had been concerned over my alleged anger, and somewhat confusedly felt that I might re-offend as a result of it! A labyrinthine logic I failed to follow. Clearly it did not occur to them that any anger I might have displayed may have been the result of a fruitless and frustrating stay in the wholly negative atmosphere of this approved premises.