

A view from the inside

Mark Humphries is a life-sentenced prisoner on recall in one of our local prisons. A student with the Open University, he regularly comments on prison matters and here shares his views on the prison system.

What images do you see when you hear news of prisons? You might not have given it much thought in the past. This article aims to change that. I want to share with you issues of prison life and the rehabilitative work that goes on inside these closed communities.

There are people who have chosen to keep coming into prison. They have a job to do; looking after those sent to them by the courts. In essence, these employees work for you; charged with helping prisoners

become changed people. Every prison across the country will be made up of a similar staff group. Each of them have their own reasons for getting involved in these challenging roles.

Uniformed prison officers are the main body of the staff group. These are the people who unlock and lock up the prisoners every day; they have day-to-day contact with the inmates. It is these men and women who are on the landings and in the offices dealing with the mood of the prison; this mood can change very quickly yet the prison officers are there on the front line.

Front-line prison officers are supported in their task by a multi-disciplinary group that includes doctors, nurses, mental health workers, teachers, librarians, workshop instructors and chaplains. All of these also have daily contact with the prisoners and their needs. There are also teams of support and administrative staff; these people do not have daily contact with the prison inmate population, but their role is as vital as the prison officer.

The media have been known to malign prison staff; most of this has been unjustified. They have also tried to tell you about holiday-centre style prisons; these do not exist. I never found one in the 90s when I was serving my sentence; neither have I been in one since my recall.

The Prison Service does far more rehabilitative work than ever before. This is mainly carried out through Offending Behaviour Programmes (OBPs). There are many courses that come under this umbrella, and they are run as small groups. Facilitators lead discussions, and do role-play and one to one sessions with the groups; all of this is aimed at equipping the prisoner to return to life outside prison as a valued member of society.

In more recent progress within the Prison Service, units have been set up that allow the work learned on OBPs and other programmes to be put into practice. These units encourage prisoners to work at making changes in their lives that move towards leaving the past behind bars, as Michael Gove, the former Justice Secretary, suggested we should.

Her Majesty's Prison Norwich



Former Prime Minister, David Cameron, said in a recent interview that he wanted to treat “prisoner’s problems, educate them [and] put them to work”. You might have also seen other government ministers encouraging society to give ex-prisoners a chance. Let’s hope these political soundbites become a reality.

Education in prison is aimed at making the prisoners more employable. All prisoners will receive an educational assessment; this is to gauge the learning needs of the individual. This is where difficulties and issues arise. If you have learning difficulties, you will struggle in prison.

The contractors providing education do so up to Level 2 standard (O level/ GCSE pass). The courses go from Functional Skills (numeracy and literacy) through Information Technology and

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onto work-based skills. Training prisons will look at doing qualifications in most of the trades from bricklaying through to motor mechanics.

For prisoners who want to continue education above this level, it means enrolling with a distance-learning provider. Funding then has to be arranged, depending on the level of course you want to do. The Open University will provide learning from certificate through to degree level.

Getting prisoners to work will need prison reform – which has started. Most prisoners cannot work a nine-to-five shift because of the way the prison system works. The Prison Service needs to be a more joined-up organisation.

Prisoners need to work while in custody; this is to earn their income. It has also been reported widely that an ex-prisoner who finds work is less likely to reoffend.

Another link to not reoffending is that of the family and friends network. This makes visits, telephone calls and letters important. The Prison Service facilitates all of these. Prisoners can write one letter a week at no cost to themselves. Visits are held in a room away from the main prison environment; these give prisoners time with families, friends and children.

Keeping this link while in custody will help provide support on release. Coming out of prison can be a difficult time. Having people around who can help and offer advice is a bonus when the ex-prisoner has lots of official people to see.

I am a Christian, and have been since my mid-teens. I grew up in a non-Christian home, but went to a Pentecostal church in my youth. Now I’m happy to be in fellowship with Christians of all denominations. I’m currently studying for a Humanities degree and want to work as a freelance writer. We can all make a difference.

What can you do to make a difference? Pray. *The Magazine* publishes a Prayer Diary in each edition; prison work is mentioned so use this article to guide your prayers.

You can also befriend a prisoner through one of the official organisations such as Prison Fellowship, or New Bridge. If you do this please follow their advice on self-disclosure – not all prisoners come out of custody wanting to change.

Your church can also be ex-prisoner friendly. Contact the chaplaincy department, they will be able to advise your church leaders about a particular person that might want to come and fellowship with you.

