

HOPE, HEALTH AND HAPPINESS

The Changing Order in Holloway Prison

Times are changing in Holloway Prison and they are changing for the better. Over the last year or so a number of new initiatives have been developed to occupy the prisoners time more constructively, to address the problems of inmates, and to better prepare them for release.

Many of these changes are attributable to the new style of management introduced by the prison governor, Mr O'Sullivan, who has moved away from the warehousing policies which were prevalent in the early 1980s. A central feature of these initiatives has been the alcohol and drug rehabilitation project which is entitled 'Hope, Health and Happiness'. Providing happiness in prison is probably overly optimistic but the six week programme does make a serious attempt to improve the health of inmates and in some cases offer hope of a brighter future. This project provides information, counselling and knowledge of the available support agencies.

Given that some 40% of the women locked up in Holloway are there for drug-related crimes, a project of this kind is potentially very useful. There is however, no formal evaluation of the project as yet but some indication of the success of the project is given by the increasing number of inmates voluntarily participating.

Another initiative which began in September 1989 is the two week pre-release course which aims to prepare inmates for release. There are also a range of activity courses including hairdressing, painting and decorating, textiles, office skills and computer training. The swimming pool which a few years ago was unused due to 'staff shortages' is now fully operational and is used regularly by the elderly and the mentally handicapped as well as the inmates. Lorraine (one of the inmates who is planning to work with the elderly when she gets out next year) talked of greater freedom in association within the prison and seemed pleased that there were more things going on, although she did not participate in any of the available activities.

Many of these new projects are located in the Activity Centre run by Caroline Roope, Diane Melvin and Debbie Blackburn. They felt that there was now a better working relationship between the staff and the senior management on one hand and between inmates and the staff on the other. New initiatives were being actively encouraged, they told me, and they were being given more autonomy and support.

Against the background of these considerable successes Caroline and Diane freely admitted some failures. Of



Computer graphic by Charlotte Manchio

the 800 or so inmates who went out on licence last year two came back late and one did not come back at all. There was also, it was agreed, continuing problems with C.1. which caters for disturbed and difficult inmates. These inmates remain locked up for long periods of time and the low ceilings of this ground-level lock-

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up helps to reinforce the generally depressing atmosphere. There were plans, I was assured, to move C.1. to another floor of the prison.

Caroline and Diane have a number of suggestions about other changes they

would like to see taking place in the prison. More could be done for lifers. They need a more structured and interesting life inside, combined with regular supervised outside activities. An after-care service providing support and monitoring of ex-inmates would be useful, if it could be carried out in a non-obtrusive way. Also, more could be done to increase the staff's awareness and capacities for dealing with drugs and drug-related problems on a day to day basis. More alternatives to custody for women were needed, they felt, and some of these alternatives should be designed to cater specifically for drug users.

There may still be a long way to go but it would seem that Holloway has started to turn the corner. Nicki, who was on her third visit to Holloway recalled life in the prison in the mid 1980s when prisoners were often locked up 20 hours a day with a minimum access to educational and recreational activities. She is now on an access course two days a week and is hoping to do a degree in the History of Art when she gets out. The new regime she says has 'made me want to get my act together'. After a 10 year drug problem she has begun to sort her life out with the help of the 493 and Blenheim Projects. In the old days she says 'I would have walked out of the gate and straight away I would be using again'. With the help and advice she has received both inside Holloway and from drug agencies I think she has a good chance of making it this time.

Improving prison regimes is a difficult business. It takes time, vision and commitment. Change is often slow and uneven. But the initiatives which are currently underway in Holloway have the potential of significantly increasing the quality of life of people both during and after incarceration. The experience of Holloway shows that building new prisons is no panacea in itself. What is important is the organisation of the prison, the services it provides, and the level of rehabilitation which it offers.

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