

SECURE TRAINING CENTRES

Locking up more children

The Queen's Speech in November outlined the Government's intent to introduce secure training centres for 12 to 14 year old young offenders. The parliamentary bill authorising this measure will receive the Royal Assent at the end of the 1993/94 session and it is expected that the Centres will be up and running, at a cost of £75 million, sometime in 1995. Specification tenders have been sent out to bidders, including Group 4, and Lawes Montague. The latter is a private care consortium who are currently involved in the running of private nursing homes.

The background to the recent history of secure training centres emanates from the thinking of the former Home Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, as his 'solution' to the problem of persistent juvenile offending. The idea first surfaced in a Spectator article by Simon Heffer in May 1992. In the Summer of that year, the Home Office and Department of Health commissioned a rough and ready survey of persistent offending by juveniles, defining persistence as ten or more alleged offences over a three month period. The response from Local Authorities and the Police, bar the Metropolitan area, produced 106 such offenders fitting the criteria. No further in depth analysis was carried out before the, then, Home Secretary announced in March 1993 that he intended to set up five Centres in England and Wales catering for 40 offenders in each location.

In creating these new institutions, no cross referencing was made to the plans already set in motion by Mr Clarke's predecessor, Mr Baker, in increasing the Local Authority secure accommodation stock by an extra 65 places to be completed by 1995. The latter measure was originally intended to eliminate the Court's need to remand 15 and 16 year old boys to prisons and young offender institutions.

Questions to be answered

Following the Home Secretary's announcement, various penal lobby groups, including Action on Youth Crime, ADSS, ACOP, NACRO and the Prison Reform Trust condemned the proposals on two counts. First, they questioned why the Home Secretary did not build on the approach of his predecessor in strengthening the existing secure accommodation stock with its emphasis on small numbers of juveniles, main-

taining local links and family networks and playing to the established expertise of residential and field staff within the public sector. Second, they questioned why the Home Secretary had overlooked the advice of his research advisers in the Home Office and the longitudinal research studies by Professor Spencer Millham and his associates at the Dartington Social Research Unit over the past 25 years.



Peter Dailymple

The lessons of research

Millham et al have looked at the effectiveness of Approved Schools, Young Offender Institutions and Youth Treatment Centres over the stated period. Their findings, particularly in relation to Approved Schools, the nearest equivalent to Secure Training Centres, make for gloomy reading. Approved schools failed on three counts - training, education and reconviction rates - in respect of the latter running at 75% reconviction within a two year period of release. The Government abandoned these programmes for 12s to 15s in the late seventies and, through the Department of Health and Local Authorities, invested in a range of intermediate measures including supervision orders with specified activities, foster parenting, small group homes, bail support measures and secure accommodation.

Successes of the 80s

The lessons of the eighties in terms of the success of the Local Authority Social Service Departments and Probation areas in reducing the use of custody for juvenile offenders from over 8000 orders in 1981 to less than 2000 by 1991

appear to be out of kilter with present day ministerial policies. Instead Ministers and, indeed, members of the Home Affairs Select Committee have looked to Northern Ireland training schools for young offenders as a source of inspiration. The training school they visited, Lisnevin, is little more than an old style approved school. A recent BBC Panorama report suggested nothing has changed. Eighty per cent of the young offenders warehoused for up to two years in such an institution were reconvicted within two years of release.

Draft specifications

The current Home Secretary, Mr Howard, has stressed that the new secure training centres will provide high quality education and training. Yet, the draft specifications for the centres with their detailed security precautions tell us more about interior design that the purposefulness of the educational regimes. The programme design reads more like a proposal for a young adult offender institution with talk of offending behaviour courses, and HIV/AIDS awareness, than a tailor made educational curriculum addressing the needs of young people with poor learning skills, low educational attainment and, doubtless, in many cases, 'school exclusion' patterns of behaviour.

There is little reference within the document to the importance of maintaining family links or to the importance of independent visitor arrangements as laid down by the schedules of the Children Act 1989. The arrangements for the after care of trainees remain in limbo. Bidders from the private sector can tender for their after care arrangements or the work could be contracted to the Social Serv-

Approved schools failed on three counts - training, education and reconviction rates - in respect of the latter running at 75% reconviction within a two year period of release

ices Departments and Probation areas. The latter authorities can offer a national network maintaining close links to trainees' families and an infrastructure of support facilities carefully built up over the previous decade. The private sector can offer no such links at the local level: their lack of experience and expertise in this area could be detrimental to the quality of after care on a young person's

SECURE TRAINING CENTRES

release from the institution.

Distance and despair

Undoubtedly the strongest criticism to be levelled at the centres will be their distance from a young person's home. The decision to create five large centres around the country instead of smaller local units, will make it difficult to maintain an offender's family ties. Indeed, one of the regions to be covered stretches from Lincolnshire to the Scottish border. In this context, it should not be forgotten that geographical distance can heighten the risk of self harm or injury. The case of Geoffrey Horler, a fifteen year old from Norfolk on remand in Feltham, who took his life when in despair following the death of a grandparent in his County, serves to remind us of the perils of an expulsion policy which severs local links.

Magistrates' concerns

The new powers in relation to secure training centres will be at the disposal of Magistrates in the Youth Courts. The Magistrates' Association in conjunction with the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge conducted a survey from branches in England and Wales. In general terms, most Magistrates were not overtly against the proposed centres. Some Magistrates, however, had serious concerns or objections to the centres. Their views centred on concerns that the proposals may be a costly over-reaction to recent media attention to a series of serious offences committed by a few people and that the proposals seem to be in conflict with some of the aims of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. Clearly, the qualifying criteria of three offences on separate occasions will need to be matched by a rigorous definition of seriousness, if we are not to see another generation of young offenders sentenced to custody who could have been otherwise successfully contained by less intrusive community based penalties in their own home areas.

Practitioners, particularly those who recall the penal exclusion policies of the sixties and seventies, remain profoundly cynical about the new measures. They will need to demonstrate to sentencers over the months to come that a range of programmes, both residential and non-residential, short of secure training centres, can still offer Youth Court Magistrates the best available options for young offenders.

John Harding is Chief Probation Officer of the Inner London Probation Service

GEESE THEATRE COMPANY



Gordon Rainsford

GEESE THEATRE COMPANY

220 Moseley Road, Highgate

Birmingham B12

Telephone: 021 446 4370

Fax: 021 446 5806

Albatross Arts Project, Ltd

Violent Illusion Part II

Geese Theatre Company is a small independent company specialising in working in prison and probation settings. As well as organising workshops with inmates they create their own powerful productions which they take on tour to establishments. The *Violent Illusion Part II*, pictured here is a study in the evolution of abusive relationships. The company is in the middle of devising a new performance piece, as yet untitled, that concerns itself with the effects of drug and alcohol abuse. The show will be on tour to prisons and probation centres from the end of January 1994.

A television documentary about the company's work will be featured in the BBC's series 40 Minutes early in the New Year.



Compass Films

Drama Workshop with inmates