

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear CJM,

With reference to your recent edition on *Crime and the Media* I thought you might be interested in a view from Mediation UK. We receive many requests from the media - magazines, newspapers, radio and television. Although the majority are interested in neighbour problems - flavour of the month? - there is also considerable interest in victim/offender mediation and reparation.

Unfortunately several of the requests are ones that make one's heart sink. "We'd like to bring our cameras down tomorrow morning and film a rapist talking to his victim. Could you arrange it please?" I have to explain the nature of confidentiality and the time it takes to arrange from umbrella organisation to local scheme to volunteers to service users. Most victims and offenders are quite unwilling to be filmed during the process, but may be willing to talk about it afterward, or re-enact their meeting.

It is heartening to receive more thoughtful calls from journalists, looking to make programmes of substance, and willing to spend time and trouble getting to know the mediation and reparation service and its users. There are two victim/offender services involved in the making of such programmes at the moment.

There is something unique about a victim and offender meeting which cannot be achieved in any other way. The victim often has questions that no-one but the offender can answer, and the offender's apology, if he or she is truly sorry can only be rightfully given to the victim. Those who are involved in mediation know of the special quality of many of these meetings.

It is no wonder that the media want to capture this unique interaction, but we have to ensure the safety and well being of the participants. Mediation is a confidential process, and the victim and offender need to be approached with sensitivity to take part in making this public in some way. Where this is done, it can only be good news to let other people know about it.

Yours sincerely,
Marian Liebmann
Director of Mediation UK

Dear CJM,

May I through the journal draw your readers' attention to the major upheavals presently taking place within education departments in prisons and Young Offender Institutions.

Traditionally prison education has been provided by LEAs via staff from local colleges. Many of these staff, highly professional and competent, have dedicated their careers to developing relevant and purposeful programmes for men and women who 'on the out' would not have sought education. Education is one of the very few aspects of prison life with a proven impact on recidivism rates: it is also relatively cheap, absorbing less than 4% of the total prison budget.

Just a year ago, the Home Office announced that prison education was to be put out to tender. Its excuse for this was the ending of LEA control of colleges - its stated aim, to raise the quality and efficiency of education. Prospective tenderers were told they could offer existing staff whatever salary and terms and conditions of service they wished in order to be competitive.

In practice the exercise was clearly about saving money: an estimated £4 million pounds. Bids were received from an astonishing range of prospective providers including Group 4, the Corporation behind a well known fast food outlet, and other organisations many with no knowledge of either prisons or education. Very few of the existing providers won their bids - they were too expensive. They knew that quality does not come cheap and were not prepared to drop the salaries of existing staff, or lower staffing levels in what they already knew to be an overworked service. In practice, most prisons will still have education provided by colleges, but colleges who as yet have no knowledge of the special needs of the prison inmate.

Following a Judicial Review last March, the Home Office's advice to tenderers was proved incorrect: existing staff must be employed on existing salaries and conditions. This means that many bids were placed on a mis-presumption and must be renegotiated. Those already in place (some contracts started on 1st April) must be bolstered by

Home Office handouts, or existing staff 'bought out' to make the tender commercially viable.

The professionalism of most existing managers is being insulted by a system which must in many respects ignore them and now refers, for advice on prison education programmes, to inexperienced outsiders, and to prison governors who claim no expertise in educational matters.

Legally and financially the whole experiment has proved a fiasco. In terms of stress to existing staff and indeed to inmates, the cost is immeasurable. Over 10% of existing staff have already left if not out of disgust, than because their health has suffered or because they have been 'persuaded' to go. More will follow. Attempts to evaluate the process have been thwarted because staff are controlled by the Official Secrets Act.

Some prisons, but very few, will continue as before, with well established and committed staff and proven systems. The majority will now be facing total upheaval. May I make public the sadness and impotence which many of us now feel.

Yours sincerely,
A former Education Officer (resigned)
Name and address supplied

Birkbeck College University of London

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