

Thank you for your assistance in sorting out my problem with the Borough Council, although I have not had a reply after my housing benefit form was filled in and sent by your good self, I find that it has been a problem taken off my back. It's nice to know that people like yourself and your staff are there to help.

- ☐ prisoners who are homeless on release are more than twice as likely to commit further crimes than those who have a home.

Providing prisoners with housing and employment advice therefore plays a vital role in preventing them from re-offending on release. The special events and our service have been highly successful in encouraging the community to work with prisons to help reduce crime. I believe that even if one person benefits from my effort it would be a big achievement. That is one less person who will go back to crime, one less victim. I remain determined and optimistic.



As good as you want it to be

John Spedding, Principal Officer, Oswald Unit, HMYOI Castington. Butler Trust Award Winners for Working with Young Offenders.

The Oswald Unit houses 40, 15-17 year olds serving long sentences, many with a history of serious behavioural problems. The success of the Unit lies in meticulous planning and an inspiring vision, which has engendered a vibrant, purposeful atmosphere and remarkable sense of community between staff and trainees who eat and participate in classes together. Staff use leisure time constructively and enhance already above average GCSE results by bringing their own hobbies into the Unit. There have been no positive drug tests since the Unit opened and a comparatively tiny number of assaults. Families say they cannot compare the boys with the day they arrived at the Unit.

In August 2000, Oswald Unit opened at Castington. It is a purpose-built unit to hold 15-18 year olds serving section 53/91 sentences. These trainees are serving sentences up to and including life. Staff were volunteers for the unit. They came fully committed and excited at the prospect of being part of a new vision of what can be achieved with young people, given good staffing levels, and located on a unit ideally designed for holding a maximum of 40 trainees.

The unit ethos is all about building up a good relationship between trainees and staff through

the staff's interaction with them, breaking down barriers. The staff were taking up the role of a responsible adult and earned respect through their caring, honest attitudes.

Over the months a community has been built on the unit and mutual respect has been gained. Staff who had outside interests, brought them onto the unit and quickly got the lads involved. Hobby classes became more and more popular. The landscape of the unit, which had started bare, soon became colourful with plants and flowers. As the weather warmed up, the staff were on the sports field playing football and softball with the lads.

Academically, good results were starting to happen. One trainee who had arrived on Oswald Unit, barely able to read or write, won a prestigious 'Koestler' award for his book '*Alec the caterpillar*'.

When I came to Oswald I was only 15 years old and I am now 17 years old. Now what did Oswald do for me? It gave me the belief to do things like read and write. I wrote a book about a caterpillar, which won a Koestler Puffin Award and I was given £60. It gave me the chance to control my temper and I

have done it so far. Sometimes you get good and bad staff, but in Oswald they are all good. You are treated like a human being and an adult, which is a good thing. I am currently on the server and that is good. All I can say is that Oswald is as good as you want it to be.

Tony

The GCSE results were excellent and more than compared with any secondary school results. Two lads are already well on their way with their A Levels.

One particular trainee, Mark, who had been to nearly 50 different locations, including many foster care homes and other prison establishments, eventually arrived at the Oswald Unit. He is a lad who needed great amounts of one to one work done with him, and proved to be extremely demanding. However, through the great work of the staff, his commitment and much patience we started to make progress. Eighteen months later, Mark, now 18, had to move to a Young Offender Institution (YOI). He left a different lad and capable of making the transition that months earlier would have been impossible.

The Butler Trust Award that the unit won was for 'working with young people', an award fully deserved.

It culminated in four of the unit staff attending Buckingham Palace to accept the award on behalf of the whole unit, staff and lads. A fantastic day, it will live long in the memory of all concerned. This was probably a once in a lifetime event that was enjoyed and appreciated by all of us. There is no doubt, Oswald Unit is a model of how all juvenile units should be built and staffed. A unit that holds a maximum of 40 boys is both manageable and allows staff to get to know the lads and for the lads to know each other and the staff so that it is possible to do the purposeful work with them.

However this is only part of the story, the building is as important as the numbers. The design is open and all are able to keep in touch with what is happening. It is the commitment and ability of the staff that has made the unit what it is today and the fact that young men have used the opportunities open to them in order to risk themselves. It is due to all these personal stories that Oswald is the early success it has proved to be. As good as we all want it to be.