

# Groupwork as a Basis for Assessing Sex Offenders:

SHORT TERM GROUPS IN A LOCAL PRISON

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## Background

HMP Blakenhurst in Worcestershire opened in May 1993 and operates as a local prison with a capacity of 649 adult male prisoners. The management of Blakenhurst is contracted out to United Kingdom Detention Services and it was the first privately managed prison in England and Wales to hold sentenced prisoners.

It became apparent within the first few months of operation that the prison contained a number of unsentenced and sentenced sex offenders whose needs and dangerousness needed to be addressed. These prisoners were ultimately concentrated in one House Block which became a vulnerable prisoner wing; a facility which had not originally been built into the design of the prison. Although the numbers of men charged with sex offences has varied considerably since opening, there has been a steady population made up of both long term remand prisoners awaiting trial and also sentenced prisoners awaiting allocation to other establishments.

The nature of a local prison, with a population in constant transition, combined with opening a new establishment, meant that the area of 'programmes' was bound to be one that was difficult to develop at the rate required to ensure that the specific needs of this group could be accounted for. The implications of not introducing an initiative in this area, were that remand prisoners would be unable to discuss their offending in any meaningful way, even if they wanted to, and that convicted prisoners would be allocated without any judgement being made as to their current attitude towards their offences or dangerousness. Consequently there would be a lack of input into plans for sufficient oversight upon release.

In order to remedy this situation and introduce an effective throughcare system for this group of inmates, it was decided to introduce a group based programme to begin to address sex

offending, which would work alongside the statutory systems of sentence planning and child protection procedures. The focus for such a programme was to be assessment, as this would meet the criteria of the establishment operating as the first part of many individuals custody and the start of the process of treatment.

The most effective way to initiate such a programme was felt to be to use resources from both within the prison and the wider community; namely the Hereford and Worcester Probation Service. A pilot programme was run in the spring of 1994 using prison custody staff, seconded Probation Officers and specialist Probation Officers from the Hereford and Worcester Sex Offender Group as facilitators. The pilot programme demonstrated that the institution had both the resources and the commitment to run what was a fairly sophisticated and effective assessment programme, and following the success of the pilot programme it was decided that the prison should run further programmes on an in-house basis. That decision was based upon the desire to meet both prisoner and contractual needs, and was rapidly adopted as an important part of the overall regime. One of the components vital to the success of the programme was the combination of experienced Probation Officers from the community with staff in the prison who were open to new ideas working in a regime which enabled that collaboration to take place.

## Purpose and Structure of the Programme

The objectives of the programme are:

- a) To act as resource for supervising Probation Officers, both for clients serving a sentence or received on remand.
- b) To assist in the assessment of individual prisoners, with information being shared with receiving institutions upon transfer.

- c) To provide information to those social service departments who had an interest in prisoners in our custody in relation to child protection issues.
- d) To assist men in beginning to understand their own behaviour and the reasons for it.
- e) To provide training and experience to staff.
- f) To achieve contract compliance.

### **Selection**

Following the success of the pilot programme the group has continued to run with a collaborative leadership using both Probation and prison staff. Prisoner membership is determined firstly by identifying individuals for assessment using the local I.T. (LIDS) system and then completing an assessment/interview conducted by pairs of group workers. This selection process involves:

- a) Checking attitude to the offence and determining plea if unconvicted.
- b) Exploring the circumstances of the offence.
- c) Identifying the level of understanding individuals have about the nature of their offence and their attitude to treatment.
- d) Examining any available reports, including pre-sentence and psychiatric reports.

Following interview, men are either accepted or not and the allocations department notified in order that a retainer might be placed to prevent transfer during the period the group runs. The only criteria specifically barring prisoners from attending are:

- a) Clear indication that a not guilty plea is being entered.
- b) Denial of the offence post conviction.
- c) Indication of acute mental illness.

The group is held away from the vulnerable prisoners unit in order that a safe environment congenial to group work can be created. This has involved using both the education and chapel areas, and assistance from operational staff to allow movement from the vulnerable prisoners Unit to these areas. Each group runs for a period of six sessions, on a weekly basis each session being one and a half hours in duration.

### **Session Content**

The content of the group was derived in the main from the community based programme run by the Hereford and Worcester Probation Service. As the group has developed its format has become more tailor made to the needs of Blakenhurst, and this genesis can be attributed to the different perspectives provided by multi-disciplinary working within the staff and also the resource of a consultant (starting with the third group), allowing for improved reflection and planning.

The first session is used as an introduction to members and staff and to build up a picture of individual offences and reasons for attending the group. Cognitive behavioural offence cycles are also introduced as a means of understanding sex offences as representing purposeful behaviour rather than as random, uncontrolled acts.

During the following next four sessions each member of the group completes an individual offence cycle, giving information about the nature of offence(s), their life experiences and mood prior to offending, their belief and value systems which may have contributed to their offending, their emotional state following the offence(s) and individual cognitive distortions used to justify their actions. In addition to offence based work, a variety of tasks are used to enable men to begin to focus on victims. This has included asking members to write a letter to their victims (not to be posted!) containing messages felt appropriate for victims to hear. Also, men are asked to write an account of their offence from a victim's perspective, this being used to promote an awareness of the consequences for victims and to begin victim empathy work. This 'homework' is analysed in open sessions and proves to be both emotive and powerful.

The use of offence cycles provides a clear assessment of each individual and helps to build a picture of the contributing factors and specific behaviours involved in their offending in order that recommendations regarding transfer, release and potential risks can be made.

The last session is used to introduce an element of relapse prevention in the form of an exercise to explore possible cognitive and behavioural controls that members could use when placed in potentially risky situations. This involves identifying possible events (such as being left alone with a child) as being realistic and relevant to individuals probable lives upon release. Group members are asked to identify their thoughts and feelings about the situation and how they could cognitively challenge these, influence their behaviour and manage the situation.

It is acknowledged that this attempt to introduce a treatment element is only the

beginning of further work that needs to be done, but equally it is felt that this introduction is essential in helping men to begin to make sense of their offending and to start to focus on a way forward. This particularly applies to those prisoners serving short sentences who will not be eligible for either the Core Programme or supervision whilst on licence.

### **Supervision**

A system of supervision was adopted for this group using one of the Probation Officers as an external consultant to the staff group, the direction of the programme being shaped through an informal process whereby ideas and perspectives are shared and developed. The effect of this has been that the workers are able to use their own initiative, instincts and experience at the same time as having an external resource upon which to rely. Informal supervision sessions are held before and after meetings of the group, and formal sessions on other separate occasions. The informal sessions are designed to prepare the workers for the specific task at hand and to enable them to discuss immediate issues and feelings stemming from each session. The formal sessions are designed to focus attention on individual client assessment, problem solving, group process and direction and issues between staff. Both the consultant and the group leaders have expressed a high level of satisfaction with the structure of supervision, and it is felt that the model should be maintained for future groups.

### **Evaluation**

The assistance of a qualified psychologist was not available to us, despite attempts by the establishment to engage one, but it was possible for us to administer a number of questionnaires both before and after the group had been run in an attempt to measure motivation, level of change, honesty and sexual attitudes. These proved to be excellent measures of denial and cognitive distortion and enabled us to build up a fairly comprehensive picture of each man's belief system, denial mechanisms, motivation to change and general level of dangerousness.

One of the most significant implications of running the group was our enhanced ability to participate in multi-agency case conferences and decision making forums because of our increased level of knowledge about individuals, the way they function and their potential risk to children on their return to the community.

We felt that our role as a prison in child protection strategies should not be underestimated and we are happy to have a reputation with Social Services departments as an

establishment which puts time and energy into these issues.

In the future, it is proposed that we run a group for men charged with or convicted of sex offences against adult women, since previous assessment groups have concentrated on child molesters due to their being rather more amenable to treatment. In addition to this our experiences in working with men who commit sex offences has taught us that many of them have themselves been sexually victimised, and we intend to run a programme for men who are survivors of sexual abuse. This will initially concentrate on the main prison population, who research shows, experience a significant incidence of childhood abuse. Later we hope to adapt the same programme for use with perpetrators.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the effectiveness of collaborative group work to provide a snap shot of individual offenders and their potential future risk cannot be under-estimated. The Sex Offenders Assessment Programme has become an integral part a set of initiatives at Blakenhurst which seek to address both offending behaviour and the issues that surround it within the context of a local prison. There are many reasons why this group might not have happened, and, some would argue, should not have happened because of its brief duration and so questionable validity. However, it has been felt by all those involved, including prisoners, that it is better to do something than nothing when it is clearly possible to have an impact with individuals who have committed offences which are both devastating to their victims and which have such profound implications for themselves and their families ■