

Mark Day: There is real scope for taking responsibility even behind bars

The coalition government's plan for getting more prisoners to work is, in principle, absolutely right. We know that prisoners who do gain skills for work in prison and are released with a job to go to are far less likely to reoffend than people who go out homeless and jobless. According to a survey by the Ministry of Justice, prisoners who have problems with both employment and accommodation on release from prison had a reoffending rate of 74 per cent during the year after custody, compared to 43 per cent for those with no problems.

Providing work opportunities for prisoners and equipping them with skills for life on release should be central to the rehabilitative work of prisons; but is too often a neglected area. As the Justice Secretary Ken Clarke has highlighted, many people in prison are compelled to live a life of 'enforced, bored idleness'. Currently, under a third of the prison population is engaged in work activities at any one time, mostly in low grade and menial tasks. Between 2007/2008 and 2009/2010 the average hours per prisoner per week spent in work decreased from 12.6 to 11.8 hours.

Placing work at the heart of the prison regime, as the justice green paper proposes, could play an important part in the coalition's plans for a 'rehabilitation revolution'. It will be essential that employment options are meaningful and linked to opportunities for work on release. Clarke has stated that: 'We would need to ensure that, wherever possible, the hours spent in productive employment by prisoners reintroduced to the work habit were similar to those to which they would have to adapt if they obtained a job when they left prison.'

Companies such as Cisco, Travis Perkins and Network Rail already provide work places in prisons. The government will need to engage with employers and encourage them to follow their lead. It will also need to support companies in the recruitment and retention of ex-offenders. Reforming the outdated

Rehabilitation of Offenders Act will be essential to dismantling some of the barriers that prevent former offenders from gaining employment.

Proposals for prisoners to contribute part of the money they earn into a victims' fund make sense. Earnings will need to be sufficient to enable prisoners to pay into the fund, as well to contribute to their upkeep in prison, support families on the outside and save for resettlement. Employers should provide work at the national minimum wage so as to prevent exploitation and not to undercut local labour costs.

Provision will need to be made for older and disabled prisoners to enable them to work. Where this is not possible, arrangements for alternative meaningful activities will need to be in place. Opportunities for volunteering, for instance through Samaritan Listeners schemes, peer mentoring and prisoners' councils, should be extended alongside increasing the availability of work places. There is real scope for taking responsibility even behind bars.

The government can learn from one scheme that is already doing pioneering work in employing prisoners and former offenders. National Grid leads a partnership of over 80 companies engaged in the Young Offenders Programme, which offers training to young people in prison with the prospect of a job on release.

Over 1,500 offenders have now gone through the Young Offender Programme. The re-offending rate is only 7 per cent, compared with the national average of over 70 per cent. According to the National Grid website: 'As well as providing motivated, skilled gas network operatives, the programme is delivering shareholder value and increasing the positive perceptions of many stakeholders.'

Making prisons places of meaningful, purposeful activity would mean prisoners serving time rather than wasting time. ■

Mark Day is Head of Policy and Communications at the Prison Reform Trust.

Steve Gillan: There is the moral aspect of private firms laying off a workforce and then taking on prisoners for minimum wage

Kenneth Clarke announced at the Conservative Party Conference that he wanted prisoners working a 40-hour week in prisons in England and Wales. It has been intimated that they should be paid minimum wages and some of that wage should be given to victims.

In an ideal world I can understand why Mr Clarke would want this and why it might appeal to the British public rather than seeing prisoners playing pool, darts or cards.

However, it is not that simple; a Yes/No debate is extremely difficult. For a start the prospect of prisoners working a 40-hour week cannot be matched by prison staff presently working an average of 39 hours.

It would also be riddled with problems such as being

compliant with health and safety regulations, taxation and the Inland Revenue. There is the moral aspect of private firms laying off a workforce and then taking on prisoners for minimum wage. Space would also be a problem. Very few prisons have the space to have factories or warehouses.

Many jobs for prisoners exist in prisons, for example, cleaners, orderlies and kitchen workers: would they also be entitled to minimum wage? If so, where does that extra finance come from at a time when the coalition government is dramatically reducing spending in the Ministry of Justice?

This is nothing new; announcements like this have been made in the past by Michael Howard. They did not