

work in the early 1990s and they will not work now. However, I am not going to rubbish the view of Kenneth Clarke in respect of this. The Prison Officers Association will produce more on this during the consultation of the green paper titled *Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders*. This consultation ends on the 4 March 2011 and contained within the consultation is the issue appertaining to prisoners working.

My initial thoughts are it is ambitious; there are problems as I have identified. Rather than focussing on work, perhaps the focus should be more on training and education to ensure that offenders are given the skills so that they are employable when they leave prison. Consequently, perhaps they will be able to hold a full time job on release rather than assisting private companies to make profits from paying minimum wage whilst these prisoners are in prison.

Steve Gillan is general secretary of the Prison Officers Association.

There is not enough detail for me to support the views of Kenneth Clarke at this time in respect of this initiative so I would have to err on the side of caution and state I am not in favour of prisoners working a 40-hour week.

However I am in favour of rehabilitation of offenders and protecting the general public from crime and the effects of criminality. The POA have been clear that we will support any government to reduce crime but until the real issues such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, mental illness, social exclusion and education are tackled then politicians of all parties are not effectively dealing with the problems. Dealing effectively with these issues will see our prison population fall and perhaps there will be no need to debate whether prisoners should be working whilst incarcerated. ■

Gemma Lousley: If prisons remain overcrowded, how will there be enough staff to supervise prisoners working a 40-hour week?

There is, overall, a lot to recommend prisoners doing proper work for proper wages. Prisoners would get the opportunity to use their time constructively, developing skills and acquiring experience of real value in the outside world. They would also be able to save money for their release and give some of their earnings to their families. Deductions from prisoners' earnings would be paid into a victims' fund, so that those affected by crime could receive financial reparation. Communities, too, could feel positive effects; if prisoners work during their sentences, post-release employment may become a more achievable goal – and we know that employment plays a significant role in reducing reoffending.

The devil, however, is in the detail, and the government will need to address a number of issues if the plan is to bring the benefits it promises. For instance, a recent report by UNLOCK and the Prison Reform Trust has drawn attention to the obstacles prisoners face opening bank accounts: without access to these, how are they to be paid, and to save money for when they're released? On an even more fundamental level, at a time of spending cuts and job losses, where will the work come from?

There has also been little indication of what sort of work prisoners could be doing. If the opportunities available are limited to the repetitive, monotonous labour that often characterises work in prison – it was revealed in *The Guardian* last year that prisoners were cleaning and repackaging in-flight headsets for airlines and assembling empty patient case note folders for the NHS – prisoners are unlikely to develop skills that will enhance their job prospects for the future. Some excellent work schemes, have, however, been set up, which demonstrate real aspirations for those on them. These should be used as models if the government wants prison work to effect positive change.

Gemma Lousley is policy and campaigns officer, Criminal Justice Alliance.

Allowing prisoners to work not only in prisons but also in the community, and encouraging employers to offer job opportunities post-release, should be at the heart of the plan – both are vital to successful resettlement. The government also needs to look beyond the minimum wage: prisoners should be paid the going rate for the type of work they are doing. This would increase the amount of money available to victims and prisoners' families, ensure that local workers and industries are not undercut, and mean that prisoners are not exploited.

An emphasis on work in prisons should also not come at the expense of services such as education and drug and alcohol treatment. There are high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy among the prison population, and addressing basic skills needs is a crucial part of rehabilitation. A high proportion of prisoners also have drug and alcohol dependencies: for these, appropriate treatment programmes must be the priority. Prisoners are individuals, and each has a different set of needs. The use of prisoners' time, and the allocation of money within the prison estate, need to reflect this.

Finally, if the scheme is to be implemented, the problem of the prison population needs to be addressed. If prisons remain overcrowded, how will there be enough staff to supervise prisoners working a 40-hour week and provide support to employers, particularly when the Prison Service is facing a substantial reduction in frontline staff? How will prisons find the space for large numbers of prisoners to work full time? And what about the effect of prison 'churn' – how can prisoners develop skills and experience through meaningful work if they are frequently moved from one prison to another? If the government truly wants work in prisons to be a success, it must first reduce the prison population. ■