

Social Work in Prisons

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THERE ARE VARIOUS WAYS in which the question of social work in the prison setting can be judged. There are many aspects that are highly controversial, and there is much that remains unassessed and unexplored. This article is an endeavour to look at the whole subject in an objective style. The opinions expressed are essentially the author's own observations, and where they are critical it is hoped that they will be considered as constructive, and not destructive, and where they are complimentary they are meant to reveal the high opinion that the author has of the Prison Service and its personnel.

Before elaborating on the more detailed and specific work undertaken under the umbrella title of social work, the definitions of social work, welfare work and social case work all need to be considered and furthermore, considered in the wider meaning and acceptance of these definitions to other outside social agencies throughout the country. Do we all mean the same thing when we use these terms, and what do we mean by them anyway?

The Younghusband Report, published in 1959, attempted to classify different styles and degrees

of social work within the range of local authorities' health and welfare services and perhaps it might be convenient to consider these divisions of the three types of social workers. To a large extent these recommendations have been accepted by most social work agencies in the country, and perhaps it would be as well to itemise the three grades of workers as set out in the Younghusband Report.

The worker is of course related to the style of work and the needs of the service, and it must be emphasised that this report dealt specifically with social workers in the local authority health and welfare services. Nevertheless some general consideration of these classifications is useful, always presuming that there is a generic comparison possible in other social work fields.

Grade 1. "A welfare assistant to relieve trained social workers of straightforward visiting and simple welfare duties in order that their skill might be used to greater advantage."

This assistant is seen as somebody who takes interest in "people with straightforward or obvious needs who require material help of

various kinds, some simple service or a periodic visit to see whether any change has taken place or to provide evidence of the continuing support and interest of the authority."

Grade 2. "A social worker broadly corresponding to the existing area or district welfare officer, but with a wider range of functions which could include duties in the mental health and mental deficiency services and other aspects of the National Health Service Acts as well as under the National Assistance Act."

This worker is seen as somebody who works with "people with more complex problems who require systematic help from a trained social worker."

Grade 3. "A social casework adviser, consultant or supervisor to other staff in a range of services."

And again this worker is seen as a trained social worker, dealing with "people with problems of special difficulty requiring skilled help by professionally trained and experienced social workers."

Having looked briefly at these classifications, is it right and proper to try and see if there is any comparison that can be made when considering the social work content in prisons and the various personnel in prisons dealing with social problems? It seems possible to relate this fairly easily, but mention must be made of an area of consideration that affects all prison matters very acutely, and that is the emphasis one should place on the part that the Official Secrets

Act makes on all departments. Accepting this as an ever present consideration, let us look more closely into the prison scene and try to assess the type of social problems that arise; the assessment of the numbers and degree of these problems and the question of who is dealing with what and why. If this is looked at in any detail and also considered in this way, prison by prison, the chaotic mass of material that would be revealed would represent confusion of the first order.

When one looks at social work undertaken in the prison service there are various issues that could easily be resolved. One is reminded of the situation in 1946 in the field of Child Care before the Myra Curtis report. Before this report various unrelated social agencies were dealing with the many social problems connected with deprived children. The Curtis report brought into being Children's Departments and better directed design and planning in this whole field. In the Prison Service not only are there various social workers thus designated to deal with social problems, but there are even more people variously designated dealing with social problems, because of their allied and obvious interest and concern in these problems. And all this takes place in one service, in one agency, i.e. in the Prison Service.

Social workers are appointed to detention centres and allocation centres. Psychiatric Social Workers are appointed to psychiatric units

of the prison. Welfare Officers are appointed to prisons but not to borstals. Area Welfare Officers are appointed to the Central After-Care Association to visit various selected prisons. Here are four designated social worker groups appointed to various institutions, receiving slightly differing scales of salaries and slightly different conditions of service. Some are full civil servants, some are not, but all are connected, however loosely, with the Prison Service. Does it seem too unreasonable to suggest an overall acceptance of one title of Social Worker in a service as small as the Prison Service, with one all embracing system of salary structure, service conditions and status?

If one looks further at the situation one comes immediately to the long overdue problem of other members of the prison staffs who deal with social problems.

Inevitably it becomes necessary to generalise and equally inevitably the discussion must now be deeply influenced by observations derived from the Wakefield scene as the main place of review but the hope is that some of these generalities can be applicable to the Service as a whole.

The dilemma of the Assistant Governor role and the Welfare Officer role

Many Assistant Governors do not see their work in terms of social work considerations; many do. Many Welfare Officers deceive

themselves in thinking that headed notepaper, stating that they are representatives of the National Association of Discharged Prisoners' Aid Societies or the Central After-Care Association means that they have no staff discipline role in their appointments. We all of us want the simplest and the pleasantest working situation. Is it fair and right then to confuse issues by suggesting that, if there was a general and comprehensive amalgamation of all staffs who deal with social work in prisons, one could halve the staffing strengths? Is it fair or right to suggest that there is gross overlapping of functions? Is it fair or right to suggest that it may be a deception to think that the newly formed Welfare departments are contributing anything more than is already accomplished by the existing clerical staffs of discipline offices and by Assistant Governors' and Chaplains' departments? Is it fair or right to suggest that the time is long overdue when these issues should no longer be overlooked? New legislation and new reports are daily being produced and more extensive research is being undertaken. If the framework therefore is not good and sound then this extra knowledge is going to be wasted.

There is much woolly thinking about social work in prisons. All social work is a disciplined, demanding style of work. There is no real difference in social case-work aims and objectives to the prison rule 6. The concept is the

same. There can be no conflict between discipline and social work in prisons if both workers, the disciplinarian and the social worker, understand each other's functions. Welfare Departments should offer a service that is a constructive helping service to prisoners and which, with the other services in the prison, will create in prisoners their own understanding of their difficulties and how to face them.

The Maxwell report is ten years old. One criticism of that report could be that when the need for the increase of Welfare Officers in prisons was recommended, it was not emphasised that these appointments should be made as part of the Prison Service. This, to-day, would seem an unfortunate omission. If the Advisory Council on the Treatment of Offenders sub-committee on after-care see their recommendations purely in terms of interchangeability of probation officer staffs and prison welfare officers and the amalgamation of all the after-care agencies, this will be a pity because neither of these recommendations will go far enough. Rigidity is what the Prison Service has existed on for years; that and the ever present hope of staff promotion. Essentially there should be flexibility of all staffs but particularly of inside prison staffs. Welfare Officers and Assistant Governors should be as interchangeable in their appointments as any generic trained social case worker in the outside fields. If this is an acceptable principle the

real problem then lies in the application of this principle and brings us back again to considering the difficulties of social images and promotion. This idea of interchangeability of Assistant Governors and Welfare Officers takes place in Sweden and should not be difficult to implement in this country if the real and fundamental roles and duties of Assistant Governors is seen as essentially one of social work function.

The dilemma of the Chaplains' departments' functions and Assistant Governors' functions and Welfare departments' functions

Now what is the next consideration under this heading? Is it possible for interchangeability at this level? Is the spiritual advisor to remain only within a spiritual teaching field? Is the Welfare Officer threatened by the Chaplain departments' activities in dealing with social problems? Is the Chaplain's department threatened by the increase in Welfare Officer appointments? What are we doing about this situation? Does anybody know?

Present prison social work policy

If analysed, the old idea which still prevails, when considerations of definitions of functions as to who deals with social problems in prison, is this. Whilst the prisoner is in prison, the social problems that he faces are for the most part dealt with by whatever existing staffs an individual prison possesses. If there are extra staffs in the Chaplain's department and in the

Assistant Governor grades, or in the medical team, then these staffs tend to deal with the problems. In some prisons where this extra personnel does not exist, discipline staffs and clerical staffs deal with the problems.

When the question of a link and liason with outside agencies is considered and the whole question of pre-discharge arrangements are to be made, the case is passed to the Welfare department. In short, the existing prison staffs deal with internal difficulties and Welfare departments tend to deal with external and, more particularly, discharge problems. This division of work, arbitrarily expedient administratively but fundamentally wrong in terms of social work methods, may have had some justification as a procedure years ago, but it cannot be defended as a policy now. But it still continues. If the A.C.T.O. Sub-Committee's recommendations, which are to be published probably between the writing of this article and the publication of it, are going to eliminate the ridiculous arbitrary division of welfare work and after-care work at the four year sentence level, then surely it is time to put our internal systems in order. The social problems of prisoners must be referred to the personnel who have the skills to deal with these problems and not, as is the case to-day, be dealt with in the archaic concepts of "internal" and "external" needs. Internal considerations must be noted. Individual

staff availability and the individual choice of the prisoner for his case worker are obvious points. The first issue now is to throw away the false concept of division of work as "in prison" and "out of prison" problems, and use the skills of the various members of the staff according to their skills and not their titles.

If one accepts the need for this change, the next problem to face is who is to decide who shall undertake the individual cases. How in fact are you going to make this policy work? If the principle is accepted by all staffs then there should be no real problem here. Collectively at an induction board level it should be possible to allocate an individual worker to each individual case. If the collective information is sufficiently comprehensive it should not be difficult to decide which worker is best able to handle the individual social problem. Obviously it is possible to go on and on trying to decide which member of the staff should deal with which social problem and why. The tremendous issue of professional training and skills and levels of understanding of staffs becomes an open argument. It is possible that this whole issue of staff qualification could do with a great deal of tidying up but whether this is so or not, it is surely reasonable to grade the work and the worker along similar lines as envisaged in the Younghusband report.

What is the envisaged role of prison officers?

Is there a new look? Is this role different now from what it was? Do prison officers want to be social workers; or social work orientated? Are they in fact being social workers?

It is difficult to generalise, and perhaps unfair of the author to make too much comment on this huge issue of prison officer training and the application of this training to the existing scenes in prison. Perhaps it is unfair to question how far achievement in terms of "winds of change" and "new looks" really can be assessed. Immediately one is confronted with the tremendous differences and emphases that occur in the many different sorts of establishments. Eliminating local prisons and heavy security prisons, and taking open prisons, training prisons and some recidivist prisons as the main consideration and accepting that the fundamental principle of permissiveness in terms of prisoner participation is the underlying policy of the prison, can one then evaluate this complex situation that present prison officers face? Does this present situation mean that the emphasis of prison officers' work moves from the purely disciplinarian, paternalistic role to a more educative, human and demanding role of endeavouring to help prisoners to work through their difficulties. More particularly does this mean

that the working through of these initial difficulties of prisoners takes place in the first instance at an aggressive behaviour stage. This in itself, the beginning of an inmate-prison officer relationship in terms of a possible belligerent encounter, is a situation that few specialist staffs have had to experience, and it is perhaps little wonder that prison officers if they move from this stage of their relationship with prisoners find themselves in an even more demanding inmate-worker phase. It is perhaps at this level that difficulties arise if the prison officer staff are left to continue unhelpt. For it is at this stage that prison officers have had an involvement (that few specialist staffs face), and have now to bring into the relationship an objective and non-involved counsellor approach. Non-involved counsellor techniques are the basic training requirements for skilled social workers. Is it therefore fair to expect prison officer groups to initiate a style of rapport which may well be impossible for them to achieve? Without continued support, continued teaching mediums and continued encouragement from the specialist and senior staffs, it would seem not only unfair but also unrealistic to expect them to do this.

All staffs when dealing with human problems need the opportunity of discussion, reference to other staffs, supervision and encouragement. Do we place

sufficient emphasis on these issues in prisons and particularly in relation to the large group of staff, the prison officer group?

The problems of communication

Once specialist staffs increase; once issues concerning prisoners are looked at in greater detail and in greater depth, in terms of motives, behaviour patterns, previous criminality episodes, then interpretations to all staffs and lines of communications become of paramount importance. Then old-fashioned half-sheets and reporting procedures tend to lose much of their significance and if perpetual information, communication and interpretation from one branch of the staff to another is not constantly maintained, then the pressure and cohesion of the old system is lost, with nothing to hold on to in its place. And inevitably, the difficulties of this situation fall mostly on to the prison officer staff; on the ones who do the day to day duties. Likewise if the opinions and comments of all staffs are not transmitted up and down, back and forward, and sideways, the full use of all these comments and the teaching aspects to staffs is lost. All agencies that are expanding see the problem of internal communications as a vital issue. When one is dealing with private and personal matters, like all professional ethics, the standard and style of communication is heavily weighted with questions of confidentiality and

sub-cultural intrigues—at staff level; at inmate level.

Of all groups, social workers are notorious for thinking that not everyone “talks the same language” when looking at various human problems. The psychologists and psychiatrists can perhaps be thought to have a language of their own. These added artificial barriers only add to the general confusion, but then nobody doubts the importance of keeping all staffs well informed and one can only hope that sufficient machinery for the collection and dissemination of necessary information is gradually being put into operation in most prisons.

Is this “the wind of change”?

If prisons are to be considered as therapeutic communities, and the emphasis is on treatment rather than training and discipline roles and attitudes generally diminish and new roles are seen in terms of educative and permissive concepts, two things are vital. Correct diagnosis and classification of individual prisoners and stringent selection for the prison that operates at this level.

A third point worth mentioning is that the directorship of such an establishment then presumably has to be guided by a medically trained person or a trained social worker as distinct from a pure disciplinarian. (Grendon Underwood prison seems a real example of all this).

The prison service has always been extremely good in terms of classification and selection of prisoners, in terms of previous criminality; nature of offence; age of prisoner. It remains to be seen if the basis of classification moves to social needs, psychological make-up, psychiatric diagnosis of prisoners, with the accompanying acceptance and realisation of previous criminality, nature of offence, age of offender, whether the existing high standards of classification and selection will alter.

Obviously, as the situation exists to-day, with the pressure of high numbers and the tendency of the Courts to pass longer sentences, expansion of thought in these matters must be made in more than one direction. If the idea of the treatment situation is to exist, selection must be unyielding.

What should be the future role of the Welfare department?

- (1) Should Welfare departments be the central office where all information of a social nature be passed? Should they then exclusively deal with the social problems presented?
- (2) Should they merely be clearing houses for the flow of information about prisoners and their social problems?
- (3) Should they remain outside the main staff structure of the prisons?
- (4) Is there a real consultative role for Welfare Officers, and have they sufficient skills for this, and if they have are they using them?

Do any of us know the answers to these questions?

Is there an answer?

It is easy perhaps to describe the situation as it seems to exist. It is easy perhaps to be critical. It is easy perhaps to suggest who is to blame. And it is preferable to blame the policy makers, the people furthest away from the immediate scene.

There is no doubt in the author's mind that the whole field of social work in prisons should be put in order. The existence of ad hoc development is only permissible so long as it works and is not too expensive. There is only one section of the Prison Service that can start the examination. And examination is needed.

An overall appreciation of the various social work designated groups should be made. And some uniformity must be imposed on this group.

An overall appreciation of the various other staffs who deal with social problems of prisoners should be made. Role definitions and the detailing of specific duties to staffs is not acceptable nor fashionable these days. And flexibility of staffs is undoubtedly desirable. But some broad plans surely can be designed

that preserve the policy of never revealing what an Assistant Governor should be doing with his day's work, which will not embarrass everyone. The time for these naive considerations was the twenties and thirties but not the sixties. For too long has the policy of non-directive counselling in the employment directive been the main consideration. Let us be realistic (and let us be brave), and say that certain jobs can be done by certain people and if need be, at certain times.

Let us be honest about the role that the prison officer can play. Let us be encouraging, let us train and use that training in the prison scene but most of all let us be supportive to this group. For them the change and the tempo in prison institutions has been the greatest. If the desire is for the preservation of prison officer staffs, their needs must be demanding on all other senior staffs if they are doing their job as it is envisaged. So adequate support must be written into the continuing training programme for these staffs whilst in the Prison Service.

Let us be honest about staff situations and about the pay of staffs. Has the increase in Assistant Governor appointments meant the decrease in Welfare Officer appointments? Has the increase in Welfare Officers, and clerical staffs to Welfare departments meant the decrease of Assistant Governors,

Chaplain department staffs, or prison clerical staffs? Will the pay of Prison Officers deservedly be increased if they see their future roles more clearly linked to a treatment situation? Does the Prison Officer receive more pay than the Welfare Officer, and work less or more hours?

Is it unkind to look at all these questions? Does somebody already know the answers?

This article has posed many questions and answered few of them. The author sees a great future for social work in prisons but a great deal of tidying up needs to be done.

At the beginning it was suggested that a closer look should be taken of the types of social problems that exist in prison, with the numbers and the depths of these problems assessed. This has not been looked at at all. Further articles would be needed to cover these aspects, but the staff consideration seemed to the author the more pertinent consideration.

Perhaps this ending may make us all realise how limited is our coverage and how much still remains to be done.

Does anybody know how many divorces are instigated by wives against prisoners, and how many divorces are instigated by prisoners against their wives in any one year in any one prison.