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Education and Rehabilitation in a Category A Prison

Interview with Ed Cornmell, Governor of HMP Full Sutton

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Ed Cornmell is the Governor of HMP Full Sutton. Ed joined the Prison Service in 2000 as a direct entry administrator and then the Accelerated Promotion Scheme. He has worked in a number of different establishments commencing as a Prison Officer at HMP Leeds. He has previously worked in Private Office and was the Governor of HMP Everthorpe overseeing the merger with HMP Wolds to form HMP Humber. Ed became the Governor of HMP Full Sutton in October 2014, having previously been the prison's Deputy Governor in 2007.

HN: What do you see as being the most important rehabilitative programmes at HMP Full Sutton and in what ways do these programmes help prisoners in the rehabilitation journey?

EC: The most important rehabilitative work at Full Sutton is the overarching culture of the prison. As a High Security prison there is rightly a focus on maintaining a safe and secure environment. Full Sutton has an excellent security record and nationally leads the way. However security cannot override the good rehabilitation work that takes place within the prison and nor does it. We have some excellent offending behaviour programmes that address risk and are a key component of progression and change. We additionally provide a good range of work within as normal a working day regime as we can. Most importantly though, Full Sutton has joined with our High Security Estate colleagues to take forward our work on Rehabilitative Culture. Key within this are the 'conditions of success' which emphasise the need for effective communication, respectful relationships and the opportunity for constructive active participation from prisoners. Staff work hard to foster positive relationships and with the increased opportunities for prisoners to participate in the environment they live in through our new Prisoner Council and peer worker opportunities, this is proving to be an important foundation stone to helping prisoners find a new non-criminal identity and for progression. The environment is therefore the most important thing that we can provide for the prisoner and supports everything else

that we try to do to make a change and to deliver on rehabilitation.

HN: To what extent is education differentiated at a Category A prison compared to training prisons?

EC: The challenge of education in a dispersal prison and for long term prisoners in general relates to the time left to serve and the staging of the education. A great deal of focus around education in prisons is towards learning and skills that prepare the prisoner for release. As a former Governor of a Category C training / resettlement prison I wholeheartedly see the value of ensuring those that are nearing release are on the right pathway to employment and have the skills to move into further training or employment. Clearly when dealing with sentences of significant length, typically life sentence prisoners with 20 years plus to serve in custody the distance from release is considerable. There is therefore a need for a different focus and a different approach. The thing that unites all prisoners in all types of prisons is the need for basic skills and it is my expectation that we do all to ensure that all of our prisoners achieve these educational foundations. For us at Full Sutton, as opposed to the resettlement prison, this is often as much about starting the academic and learning journey and settlement of the man into his sentence as it is focused on resettlement which is too distant for many to comprehend. However additionally and most importantly education to me plays a very different role for those with a long time to serve. Education can be that medium for personal growth, renewal and reinvention. I see many prisoners in the prison now who have started from very different levels of education who are now wholeheartedly pursuing formal academic study as well as those learning and developing skills that give them a new focus in their life. This can create hope and can be a catalyst for change and personal growth.

HN: Is there a need to further differentiate education at prisons of different categories?

EC: I don't think categories are much of a reason to differentiate education whereas sentence length and time to study until discharge really is. Equally, in setting the curriculum for a prison we need to consider personalization and the individual much more. There is

no standard entrance exam or basic set of education qualifications that a school, college or university would require (other than a criminal conviction) to be admitted as a student in our secure learning environment. We therefore have to try and provide a broad range of educational qualifications at different levels and in different subjects to meet the need and the potential of those in our custody. Typically funding and practical considerations are a strain on providing a diverse range of subjects and we do not have the funding for higher education that many crave.

BD: Are there specific activities at HMP Full Sutton that prisoners are particularly keen to engage in?

EC: Considering the individual starting point and motivation of my prisoners there is no one size fits all. Many are focused on pursuing further higher education qualifications and seek funding and support for degrees and post-graduate qualifications. I find this really encouraging and for those engaged in serious study their cells seem to become mini libraries with text books and folders of work proudly on display, reflecting their commitment to personal advancement. It is equally rewarding (and a bit surreal) to talk to a prisoner within a High Security prison about their studies in International Development and their desire to progress from their current Masters degree to a Doctoral programme. It goes to show that education does allow the person to mentally progress from the cell to the wider world even on a long sentence.

BD: What is your vision for the future of education at HMP Full Sutton?

EC: It is really pleasing that there is a review underway of education in prisons commissioned by the Secretary of State and along with colleagues I await the findings. I am hopeful that from this there will be the opportunity for greater consideration of the needs of the long sentence prisoner and creation of opportunity for the individual person to be more central to the curriculum and qualifications rather than having to fit the person to the curriculum. The funding for support to study beyond level 2 and attain higher qualifications is a particular hope.

My vision for education at Full Sutton is that we use the Rehabilitative Culture we are developing to encourage engagement with education, be it basic skills or higher qualifications. That we create a learning environment that is supportive and can be allowed to work more with the individual to give them the space

to delivering those subjects that stimulate personal growth. Through this will come settlement, prior to the time when resettlement is more tangible. Through this will be the value of the time that the person is away, discovering potential and personally progressing during the sentence.

I would also add to this that my vision is that we look differently at what we can do. I am really motivated by the 'inside out' schemes that have run in America and a small number of UK prisons to allow external students and prisoner students to share tuition and tutorials.

HN: How would you describe the current media on prison education?

EC: There hasn't been much to my recollection in the past, which probably reflects that lack of appreciation of what can and does happen to someone serving a prison sentence. However, the one area that does stand out currently is the coverage of the Secretary of States speech at the Prisoner Learning Alliance event a few months ago. I was really heartened to read the coverage of the speech and the rightful focus on making the most of the opportunity that is present within our prisons- both with the time that prisoners have as well as the potential within the individual that must be unlocked.

HN: How do you see the future of education in prisons in England and Wales?

EC: That's a tough one to answer. I would hope that we can deliver on making more of the potential and opportunity we have. We have some excellent teaching staff within our prisons who are committed to our unique environment and I would hope that any coming changes will release their potential and free them to work more flexibly with their students. I see that we can better tailor the provision to the prisoner group and the person if we relook at the scale of our commissioning and our funding model. Looking longer into the future the one nut we need to crack is technology. The ever increasing access to online tuition, distance learning and even MOOCs (massive open online courses) and remote access to tutors is definitely the key to broadening the range of qualifications on offer that can be more tailored to the individual without breaking the bank. As legitimate in cell technology increases over the next few years, I hope this could provide ready in cell access to the learner and a real opportunity to use the time they have got to serve to their advantage.