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Special Edition
Rehabilitative Culture

Rehabilitative culture in a closed prison

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This interview was conducted in a large, Category C prison holding men who have more than four years left to serve. Some have been approved for transfer to an open prison and awaiting transfer, but the vast majority are Category C men serving determinate and indeterminate sentences.

AB was 39 at the time of interview (end of 2018) and had served 13 years of his sentence — six months of which had been in the current Category C prison. He was three-and-a-half years away from recategorisation to a Category D prison at the time of interview.

GBP: What for you are the key features of a rehabilitative culture?

AB: The key features of a rehabilitative culture are definitely going to be safety — that is the first thing. If you're not safe, you won't go to education or you won't go to work because you're scared. If you don't feel safe, you can't do what you need to do. Then I would say two things that go together: opportunity and hope. Those two things go together. You can't have hope if you've got no opportunities. If you've got no opportunities, you've got no hope. If people feel safe and then they have opportunities, they are going to have hope. If you have hope, that's the best and you can't get anything more than hope.

GBP: How have you been involved in creating a more rehabilitative culture?

AB: All of this rehabilitative stuff that's going on now, this all really started three to four years ago. It was in my last prison [HMP Frankland], I was at the start of it when all the rehabilitative culture kicked off. It was one of the first places to get involved and get it up and running. We were heavily involved in it. We brought a lot of ideas to the table. The prison was behind us on everything and introduced a lot of new processes in the prison which they still use to this day now. Some of the ideas I brought with me here. I don't know whether you've seen anyone giving a positive entry form? It's like a form that you can use to get positive entries on C-NOMIS. All of the prison's history, everyone has complained that reporting on C-NOMIS is always biased to the negative, so if you do something wrong, they are quick to put it on the computer. If you do something right, they don't put it on. They've got no time. They've got to do stuff. If it's

negative, it's on there straight away. So basically, we made a form, designed the form, wrote the form, and sent it to the Governor so if you do something that's positive, you can fill in a form. The officer would verify that it's right and then put it on C-NOMIS. It was working really well, and we have tried to introduce it here.

You might have heard of the spice epidemic. Well, what we did up there, we wrote a programme to teach the staff about spice and taught it to some officers. Once we had taught them, one of the officers and the drugs team, we went around doing sessions for all the staff in the prison. So obviously the drug worker would do it from the drug worker point of view, the officer would do it from their point of view, and we said how we were treated and what they could be doing better. From a prisoner's point of view, we could see that a lot of people were getting hooked on this thing and we could see a lot of them needed help more than anything. Locking them behind their door, giving them nothing to do, leaving them there — all they were doing was buying drugs from behind their door because now they've got nothing to do 24 hours a day. It's making them worse. It was just a rubbish way to deal with it. That was one of the things we got changed and got them to start dealing with in a better way. Anyone we believed to be on spice, we had a little box where you could put a note in there for them but it was only to the drug team, it didn't go to security or any other officers on the wing. What they would do then is speak to the person first and then they would decide whether or not to call security or an officer.

GBP: Are basic services such as food and clothing important?

AB: Yes, those basic things have to be stable. The underlying things have to be stable. Normal things are not stable in this place. If you want to be helping people and giving them the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves, you need to get them stable. People don't handle frustration well. You need a stable environment to work with someone who is not that stable. If you mess around with the basics, you put everyone in jeopardy, including the staff. If people are frustrated, pissed off and stressed, it's not safe.

GBP: Do prisoners have the chance to be involved in the running of the prison or shaping

the community such as peer support or representative bodies?

AB: You see, menial tasks like a mentor to deliver the hospital appointments every day... obviously that's a simple task that doesn't require much, anyone can do that. But if you're talking about the prisoners being involved in properly running the prison, for instance getting processes done and things like that, the reason why it won't work right now is because the staff in this prison do not have enough experience to accept it. To get a set of prisoners and say, 'Alright then, we are going to look at sorting out these processes and we are going to look at doing this and that,' the senior managers, managers, and staff have to be willing to come down to a certain level and work with people. They have to be willing to listen, understand, and learn things they don't know. Listen to prisoners, take it on board. You have to be a strong person, a confident person, a confident manager to be able to do that.

GBP: Do families have a role in building a more rehabilitative culture? How are they involved in your establishment?

AB: Yes, definitely. 100 per cent. Families as a whole, they are always going to be a stabilising factor. People might say your family is a bad influence because they are criminal, but it doesn't matter.

You love your family anyway. They are always going to be a stabilising influence even if it's only for that little piece of it. That's all you've got. This prison doesn't do enough to involve families. We are going to have a family day in a couple of weeks and I'm hoping it will turn out well.

GBP: What opportunities are there to address problems such as health and substance misuse?

AB: To tell you the honest truth, really and truly, I don't know. I can tell you what every prisoner will tell you — if you go to health care there's a drugs team that will try and help you as best they can. I'm not being involved here really. At the last prison, as I said, we set up the process so you could submit a form to go straight to the drugs team but I haven't tried to do that here.

GBP: Do punishments, adjudication, incentives, and privileges have a useful role in shaping the behaviour of people in prison?

AB: Yes, but not when the people using them are not experienced. They are all tools to incentivise

or punish. If they are used properly, they are tools that can work. If you've got no experience, you are not using them properly and then they just become weapons to bully people. When you have just got power, that's what happens.

GBP: Do prisoners have the chance to develop their talents and interests, for example through education, training, or employment?

AB: I work for activities, I'm an activities mentor. One of my roles is I get a list of all the people who are unemployed and get them jobs. I go around the prison and I offer them jobs. There have been many times when I go around and people know that the jobs don't exist. Some of the guys don't want to know, so they just sign up for things but they know they won't go.

When I moved from Category A, I had just finished my degree and I wanted to do my Masters. I was moving to Category B so my whole thing was about coming here to do my Masters. My whole sentence plan was built around coming to a Category C prison to access research materials to do my Masters. That's the main reason why you can't do your Masters in High Security is because you can't access the research papers. When I finished my degree, I did a Business A-Level to fill the gap until I came here. It's taken three weeks for library, learning and skills, and security

to agree that I can have the research papers printed off. It turned into a mad who-ha. I'm just waiting to get it. I still haven't started my Masters yet. I wrote to OMU saying that I came in a studying frame of mind and thinking I would start my Masters. This jail has held me back. I'm scared of being in this jail, I'm scared this jail could stop me getting parole. It frightens me.

It's back to those same things, opportunity, hope, and safety. Once there are opportunities for you to learn stuff and do stuff, you will gain hope. If you've got an opportunity to do a plumbing course say, and if you do that plumbing course and you do well, it creates a thousand different hopes in your mind because you've just done something you know that I can take this outside and I can actually do this. You've given yourself something to work towards, look at, even to dream about and aspire to. But without giving people those opportunities to do something like that, they can't have that dream if they've not done anything that can provide a dream.

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GBP: What is the best way to prepare prisoners for a successful life after release?

AB: Show them how to do it, and you can't show them in prison. That's the best way to teach anyone anything, is to show them. Give them examples of it, so they see it all the time. That's the reason why most people are in prison anyway, because the behaviour they are demonstrating is the behaviour that they've seen all their lives so that's the normal behaviour. If you constantly give examples of good behaviour, sooner or later, that should become their behaviour because that's the best way that we learn.

GBP: Is there anything that is done at your establishment that you feel is a particularly powerful way to foster a more rehabilitative culture?

AB: It sounds simple but the cells are clean. It might not last for long, but it's important, it's hygiene. If your surroundings are clean. Generally, if you're living in an

environment that's clean as opposed to an environment where there's rats and cockroaches everywhere, your frame of mind is going to be different.

GBP: What are the barriers to achieving success? What gets in the way? How can these challenges be overcome?

AB: No safety. If there isn't proper safety, that's going to be a barrier. If the processes aren't fit for purpose, that's going to be a barrier. If you're trying to do stuff, but you are butting your head all the time, it's not going to work. When I say processes, I mean everything from filling out canteen forms to booking a visit.

GBP: How would you know that a more rehabilitative culture was being successfully developed? How would you measure this?

AB: Safety is a good measure. Stability also, and processes. If all the processes are running right, a lot of tension is going to come down.