

The Housewife's Choice

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I am sure many prison officers wives were delighted with the introduction of Fresh Start. Husbands working an average 39 or 48 hours with the certainty that the latter would reduce year by year, instead of the 55-60 hours or more they had been working; increased predictability of time off duty; rest days almost guaranteed; and a good, regular income against which to balance the family budget. For a small part of the Prison Service, however, Fresh Start meant a more direct change for women—the female prisons and Youth Custody Centres.

As Governor of HM Prison and Youth Custody Centre, Drake Hall I soon realised that Fresh Start could have been individually tailored for that establishment. The majority of the staff were married with family responsibilities and the single ones, moreover, had homes to run with no one doing the cooking, washing, ironing, cleaning and shopping whilst they got on with earning the money. Overtime averaged 9 hours per week because the Manpower Team which fixed the authorised staffing level did not understand that the majority of female uniformed staff preferred time off to income enhanced through overtime. Most staff were overtime optants and limited alerts were used, with management and staff collusion, as a device for equalising the burden of overtime.

I should make it clear at this stage that I am the Prison Service's biggest fan of female prison officers. Drake Hall may, or may not, be typical but I found the staff there hardworking and extremely caring. They were generally helpful and positive in their response to new initiatives, which I must admit had not been my previous experience of most male staff. The only problem was the rigidity of the Task List which, through a loyalty to their union, sometimes created inefficiency which, I believe, was recognised by most and welcomed by few.

What benefits, therefore, did Fresh Start bring? First, those staff who wished could opt for the 39 hour week and approximately 25% did so. The remainder, having seen the proposed

shift systems, decided they could work their domestic requirements around them when contracted to work the additional 9 hours. Secondly, the Management Structure agreed presented Principal Officers with an opportunity to demonstrate their managerial ability and they responded magnificently. I had been advised when taking command of Drake Hall that female Principal Officers didn't have the experience or ability of their male counterparts. I reflected on this when I sat at conferences and listened to Governors of male establishments recounting the problems some of their male Principal Officers were having in adjusting to group management. It was the Principal Officers at Drake Hall who grasped the initiative and moved into their new role with enthusiasm. That is not to say it was easy: the workload was heavy and the strain sometimes showed but they were fortunate in having the support from above and below in the form of an excellent intermediate manager (who was an ex Chief Officer) and an able and supportive group of Senior Officers.

In the build-up to Fresh Start there was a considerable amount of apprehension but it was the Principal and Senior Officers who made flexibility a 'buzz' word in the establishment. The review was carried out locally, with Regional Office staff acting as consultants and advisers, and every avenue was explored in the pursuit of a functional line management structure, realistic but taut staffing levels, and shift systems which provided for the operation of an enhanced regime with a reduced authorised staffing level. The team which worked on the review consisted of representatives of all grades plus a POA Committee member. The decision to include a representative of the POA from the very beginning was criticised by some of my colleagues but I believe the innate reasonableness of people is usually augmented by involvement in discussion and understanding of all facets of a problem. The Task List was openly and critically analysed, systems which were steeped in the history and

tradition of the establishment were reviewed without constraint, and the appropriateness of staffing levels for each job was addressed without restraint. Discourse was long and often lively but by the time the review and implementation documents were ready to be written, it was agreed (with some POA reservations) that, whilst it was tight, we could successfully implement Fresh Start with less staff than our previous authorised staffing level. The number of staff supervising some work parties had been reduced, can-teening had been re-organised and re-scheduled to a half week task, and Unit staffing levels had been increased to allow for the enhancement of the Personal Officer role and the introduction of Shared Working.

Having completed the review, the staff did not sit back and wait but quickly started to institute dummy runs of Fresh Start working. Work schedules were produced and all the varieties of the 'What if' question were tested out. With, as I remember, only one dedicated exception, staff waited with impatience for our starting date. Although it was hard work, the actual implementation went successfully and smoothly. Of course there were problems and these were brought to my attention but solutions were normally quickly discovered by the Principal Officers and Senior Officers who were relishing their new roles. Flexibility really did come into its own during these early days. Spar Forms caused headaches but, such was the growth in confidence, that even this imposition was not allowed to dampen the spirits.

I have now moved on from Drake Hall but I carry with me an unshakable admiration for the Drake Hall staff who restored my faith in the ability of prison staff to not only cope with change but respond positively to it. I imagine Henry Ford when inspecting the first cars to come off his production line found many imperfect versions of his Model T. Perhaps one had emerged exactly as he had envisaged it. Drake Hall was that perfect Model T and those who envisaged Fresh Start should give themselves a boost by visiting it. ■