

VOX POPULI

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On 1 November 1987, HM Youth Custody Centre, Northallerton in North Yorkshire, began its 'Fresh Start'. Accommodating some 185 YC trainees, the majority serving over 18 month sentences, the Centre is located in a traditional Victorian prison. At the commencement of 'Fresh Start' three working groups were brought into operation, all fully complemented. During the first three months of its new 'life' comments from the trainees and staff included:

Trainees

'Fresh Start has meant longer visits.'

'We only get visits three days a week now, but we can get two hours if our visitors get here on time.'

'We get the same officers on the wing every day now. In some ways this is better, we get to know them, and the Group Officer system works now, on the other hand, they get to know what's going on, we don't get away with as much.'

'There seem to be fewer nickings, the officers are more consistent, we know what's expected of us.'

'I was here two years ago, it doesn't seem as strict now, the officers are more friendly.'

'We get evening classes on a Thursday now, as well as the other days, also I can go to the library more often. If that's due to Fresh Start it must be better.'

'The officers get more time off, I think, and much more money, I can't see its made any difference to us.'

Trainees, Parents and Friends

'We like the longer visits, only being able to come on Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday makes no difference to us, there's more room in the visiting area.'

'My son hasn't even mentioned it, so it cannot have made much difference to him.'

'Everything seems much the same. It still seems an awful long way to come from the other side of the country.'

'I hate coming to this place, it's just the same, no difference.'

The Officers

'I like the time off, but I worry about getting my contracted hours used up.'

'Under the Vee Scheme, I did not work as many evening duties, I could get other people to do them for me.'

'It seems to be working too well, this honeymoon period must end soon.'

'I like working in a small group, there is great rivalry between the groups here. We have separate bases and compete to get the best facilities.'

'One of our group came in from being sick half-way through the morning, he had felt better and knew that one of us would have had to do an extra evening duty to cover him. That would never have happened before Fresh Start.'

'It is more predictable, and will be smashing once the contracted hours have gone.'

'I've never done so many different jobs in one day. Time just flies by.'

'I've certainly lost money through Fresh Start but I am getting to like the time off.'

'Why am I smiling? I finish at lunch-time for four days off, and on this regular salary, it can't be bad.'

'Look this is what Fresh Start has done for me.' (Officer shopping with his wife on a Thursday morning).

'We get more time on inmate casework, that's what most of us have been after for some time.'

'I feel that my status in the community will go up, particularly now that I am salaried.'

'I have found the financial management difficult, but it is more predictable, you know how much you are going to get, even when you are coming back from leave. We all tend to forget the 'flat weeks' under the old system, some of us couldn't afford to take leave.'

'I like the group concept, in our group we have all learned to do each other's jobs, I have even been trained to do the Group Manager's paperwork, that means I understand what is going on.'

Intermediate Managers

'When I lost my old office and uniform I felt as though I had been castrated. I can see lots of things wrong in the establishment, but it is no longer my area of management, I find that frustrating.'

'I felt I had been shunted into a siding, just out of the way, but I find my new job is challenging and interesting. It has given me more insight into what we should be doing.'

'I have never worked so hard in my life, Some days I just don't know which way to turn next.'

'I like being involved in areas which previously were not my province. I think I often bring fresh eyes to what is happening.'

'The management structure as laid out in the charts has meant many changes, there have been mistakes made and accountability is still being resisted by some. It will come right eventually.'

The Group Managers

'Under the old system we worked very long hours and were paid accordingly. Fresh Start has meant a considerable

cut in pay, but we now get the time off and have a real job to do.'

'I thought it would never work, and a lot could still go wrong, but if the group work together, it's a good system.'

'I have worked hard at getting my group to work together. They see themselves as the best and they probably are.'

'It has been difficult to forget the old systems and the task list. Some officers still don't seem to realise that their absence for sick or casual leave means inconvenience to the other officers in the group. A few are still very selfish.'

'I think that the Grade 7s have a real management job to do in my group. That's an improvement on the old system.'

'The recording of hours and the SPAR form system is very time-consuming, I hope it will be simplified; I do not get enough time to go out and about.'

The Governor

'The most difficult thing has been to let go, to really delegate, to lose some of the power.'

'I do now have the time to plan, to work

on those things stuffed in the top right hand drawer.'

'Right down the line staff are managing—in the proper sense of that word. The latent talent has been there all along, We must find further ways of bringing it out.'

'I think the planning and preparation for the introduction of Fresh Start here has paid off. We've got most things right, it's our own attitude and thinking that is lagging behind.'

And the Others

'I think I feel very much one of the others, left rather out on a limb, not really involved in what has happened and more out of touch now than prior to Fresh Start.'

'Everyone else seems to have benefited. All we've got is more time with the trainees, we feel bitter and left out.'

'We've just been used by management. The discipline officers have been bought off. All we've got is more work, worse conditions and no improvements at all.'

'I've found Fresh Start a real challenge, I've lost some areas of responsibility and gained others. I was involved in

the planning and feel part of the team. It would be nice to be given the same financial rewards as well.'

'Under Fresh Start I feel part of the team, I can see where my bit of the operation fits in. For me it has meant more job satisfaction and more involvement.'

'Of course we are worried. Some jobs have gone from our department, people won't be replaced.'

'I only hope that Fresh Start will mean that silly disputes will no longer affect the operation of my department.'

'There have been so many changes. Staff are still uncertain of the future. We feel less involved and less consulted.'

'It's a big con. The prison officers and governors have been bought off. We'll end up with nothing.'

These comments are of course selective. I have tried to give a balanced representation of the views of all groups. Phrases and swear-words have been modified to protect the innocent, or not so innocent. If any member of the staff at Northallerton has a further comment he or she would wish to make to complete the picture, I am sure the Editor would like to hear from them. ■

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and out of Prison Department Headquarters may be good for their career prospects but contributes to a lack of credibility in Headquarters. Political changes are a necessary part of our democratic system but Management changes are controllable. The moves at the top of the Personnel Directorate in the Spring of 1987 illustrate the point. The May Committee recommendations of 5 to 7 years duration for the Director General post should apply to other senior Prison Department jobs since it would improve the chances of difficult issues being seen through to a conclusion.

Second, we need the staff in post to maintain reasonable manning levels. For at least 20 years there has been a serious unresolved issue over providing sufficient staff to cover sick, leave and training absences. This issue has not been properly addressed under Fresh Start and I believe the clear failure to provide adequate resources for covering absences is now seriously delaying progress. For example, I am unable to carry out staff training as required by the Prison Board because my present resources will barely cover sickness absences.

Third, the change taking place

across the Service is so huge that it needs special managing. Thrusting the work onto existing structures has meant that it has been addressed inadequately and, moreover, that other important work has been neglected. Large organisations involved in such radical change have generally created an extra and special structure to handle the necessary work. There is a link here with my first point; moves of senior personnel and lack of a special structure will, at the best, slow down Fresh Start and, at the worst, could wreck it entirely.

Fourth, briefing and training for Fresh Start at Senior Governor level has been entirely inadequate. Most Governors have had a 3-day seminar and some part-day conferences. Achievement and criticism of Governors in delivering Fresh Start should be seen against that background and the amount and quality of training for Governors to take on and progress Fresh Start must be considerably improved.

Finally, structures above establishment level, at both Region and Headquarters, need to change to take proper account of Fresh Start. We now have Grade Integration starting

to establish itself within establishments but what about the Headquarters and Regional structure? That, too, is a large and difficult task but if Fresh Start is a real Prison Service initiative it needs to involve the top. The 1970 reorganisation of Headquarters was meant to open the way for Prison Service professionals to compete for the Director General post; eighteen years on, this remains the exclusive preserve of others.

Conclusion

The staff and management of Strangeways Prison have played their part in taking Fresh Start into one of the largest prisons in the country. I have no doubt that we will continue to work to get the best out of the opportunity Fresh Start has offered us. But if the Service, including Strangeways, is to benefit fully from the window of opportunity for change presently on offer, I believe that Headquarters also have very much more to do. The issues listed above for Headquarters attention need to be addressed. If that were to happen, I believe the Prison Service under the Fresh Start initiative could look with confidence to an exciting and encouraging future. ■