

SUMMARY

The Prison Services' purpose statement indicates that it is part of its duty to help prisoners lead law abiding and useful lives after release. With the growing consensus that there is a link between unemployment and crime, the Prison Service, if it is to fulfil its duty of preventing prisoners re-offending, must do all it can to ensure prisoners have a job or further training on release. As a survey by the Association of Chief Officers of Probation shows that over 70 per cent of offenders prior to sentence were unemployed, helping offenders into employment and training is not an easy task given present levels of unemployment. This paper outlines a scheme in which an intensive and integrated multi agency approach can improve the chances of employment and training for prisoners on

release. The 'Options for Learning' (OFL) scheme at Channings Wood, funded by the local Training & Enterprise Council, provides money for prisoners whilst they are training in prison, bonuses for successful completion of NVQ's, staff to co-ordinate a training plan for each prisoner and close liaison with the prisoner's home employment service. The holistic approach adopted by OFL focuses not only on developing work competencies but on developing the individual to improve his employability. The first assessment of the scheme indicate that 26 per cent of the prisoners who took part in OFL were still in employment or training three months after their release from custody. This compares very favourably with the Employment Department (1994) figures which show that 90 per cent of the 100,000 prisoners released each year have no job or training to go to. ■

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES WELCOMING DIVERSITY

The Prison Service states that it is an equal opportunities employer. But is it entitled to do so? One article could not do justice to such a vast debate and so the following article by Gabrielle Garton Grimwood, Equal Opportunities Manager for the Service, picks out some of the live issues in this area. Gabrielle also responds to some of the issues raised in Comment in Prison Service Journal 94 about the way in which the Prison Service's equal opportunities strategy is being taken forward.

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Section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act places a duty on those engaged in the administration of criminal justice to avoid discrimination against any persons on the grounds of race, sex or any other improper grounds. In order to provide a good quality service within the criminal justice system, the Prison Service must reflect the society in which it is based. We are, after all, here to serve all members of the public and just as society is made up of a multiplicity of groups

and cultures, so the Prison Service should reflect that diversity. It would manifestly be unjust to recruit only from one section of society and it would also be misguided: in the search for talented people to work in the Service we must ensure that anyone with the skills, aptitudes and qualities we need in today's Prison Service has the chance to apply and be considered on their merits. The essence of equality of opportunity, then, is in accepting and welcoming diversity.

Equality of opportunity is therefore one of the core values in the Statement of Purpose, Vision, Goals and Values. We are committed to the fair and equal treatment of all staff, with equal access to employment, training, promotion and career development regardless of gender, race, nationality or ethnic origin, religion, marital status, sexual orientation, disability or any other irrelevant factor.

Policy into action

Having given a commitment to equality of opportunity, we have to translate that policy into action. This requires both awareness and support from staff at all levels. Again, the Statement of Purpose, Vision, Goals and Values places equality of opportunity at the centre of the Prison Service's business and the Corporate Plan 1994-97 identifies as a strategic priority the development of a well-trained staff with a shared commitment to the Service's goals and values. So the policy is in place. How successful are we in implementing it?

At a time of devolving personnel management responsibilities to establishments, groups and services, the lead in ensuring fairness and equality and delivering a good quality service is increasingly passing to Area Managers, governors and heads of groups and services. For some time Race Relations Management Teams (RRMT) have been working within establishments and, with Race Relations Liaison Officers, have acted as a focal point for driving forward the Service's race relations policy. We need now to consider what structures might be put in place to provide a similar focus for the equal opportunities strategy.

One option, which was suggested in the Equal Opportunities Annual Progress Report 1992-93, would be for an equal opportunities management team to act as an umbrella organisation within the establishment, with the Race Relations Management Team and other teams within it, dealing with such issues as gender (and particularly some of the issues arising out of the cross-postings policy) and disability. This would ensure that there would be no loss of momentum in the Service's work towards full implementation of its prisoner race relations policy - the RRMT would keep its distinct identity - and would still satisfy the need for monitoring locally the full range of equal opportunities issues.

But this is not the only option. Some Governors have already nominated a manager to act as equal opportunities co-ordinator for their establishment, again with the aim of ensuring the effective local implementation of the Service's equality strategy. Whichever option is chosen, guidance, support and advice on good practice will continue to be provided by the Equal Opportunities Team based in Personnel Planning Group at Headquarters.

Support groups?

Another topical issue is that of staff groups (sometimes referred to as support groups). In some organisations in the public and private sectors, support groups have been established to provide an informal source of guidance and support to staff. These groups have often proved to be very valuable to staff who are in a minority - such as staff from the ethnic minorities or women working in a male-dominated environment - as they offer a chance to network and share experiences with colleagues in a similar situation. At the end of last year, the gay press reported the setting up of a support group for gay and lesbian prison officers and auxiliaries.

In speaking to colleagues, I have found differing views on the need for staff support groups within the Prison Service. During our recent equal opportunities seminars for staff from the ethnic minorities and staff working in cross-postings, some participants doubted whether such groups would be helpful. Some (as they saw it) did not want to draw attention to or make an issue of their race or gender: for them, the priority was getting on with the job. But other participants believed that they and others would benefit from being able, through a support group or network, to make contact with colleagues, from whom they could seek informal advice if they were experiencing difficulties at work.

Recognising this, some establishments have already formed groups where members of staff can go to air problems - in some male establishments where the numbers of women staff are especially low, some women have little or no contact with other female colleagues during their work and they in particular might welcome the opportunity to meet informally. Some of the groups which have been set up are focused on women staff, others are open to all staff. It would not be appropriate for Personnel

Planning Group to prescribe from the centre whether support groups should be open to all or focused on women, men or members of the ethnic minorities. There are arguments for and against opening a support group to all staff. A group open to all staff can help in team-building - which is welcome at a time when we are seeking to promote team working - and in breaking down any barriers or divisions between groups of staff within the establishment. This, in itself, can help to further the Service's values not only of equality of opportunity but also of commitment to staff. But staff who are in a minority within the establishment may feel more comfortable in sharing experiences or voicing concerns in a closed group, which may be their best opportunity for talking freely about issues of concern to them. This, then, is a decision best taken locally.

Support groups can therefore be a constructive way to help staff to express their concerns and, from Personnel Planning Group, we recognise the value which such groups can have. This is an area where we would hope to support local initiatives. Heads of establishments, groups and services may therefore wish to seek staff's views on whether a local group would be helpful or even, perhaps, set up a preliminary meeting to gauge response.

It is sometimes argued that support groups can become 'cliques' and can even be counterproductive by marginalising staff. However, I sense that this is a risk only if the group is the only venue at which equal opportunities matters are discussed. Any support group should be an adjunct to, not a substitute for, management's formal - and legal - responsibility for ensuring that the Prison Service's commitment to equality is acted upon. One of the principles underpinning the Service's equal opportunities strategy is that this is a management issue and, as one of our values, something that managers must convey to all staff under their command.

Equality of opportunity is not, therefore, a peripheral issue, of interest only to women, members of the ethnic minorities or staff with disabilities and it should not be left to those groups of staff alone to monitor whether equal opportunities policies are being followed. So although support groups may be an opportunity for staff to discuss

their experiences, the responsibility for implementing the equal opportunities strategy rests with managers, who must take ownership of that strategy.

Harassment and discrimination

Amongst the problems which staff may want to air at a support group are harassment and discrimination and, again, a support group cannot and must not act as a substitute for managers' exercising their responsibilities. The staff survey - reported in Briefing 74 - has revealed the extent of harassment in the Service. More than a third of women staff reported difficulties at work because of their gender and half of those women describe those difficulties as sexual harassment. Just as disturbing is that 25 per cent of staff from the ethnic minorities have experienced difficulties because of their ethnic background. The survey therefore suggests that our commitment in the Statement of Purpose, Vision, Goals and Values to equality of opportunity is not being carried into the working environment and harassment is widespread.

Harassment and discrimination are inimical to our values. They are inexcusable and cannot be tolerated in a modern Prison Service. Staff must feel confident that they can bring their complaints into the open, that they will be investigated sensitively and thoroughly. The revised Code of Discipline and Standards of Conduct (published in July 1993) created specific disciplinary offences of racial or sexual harassment or discrimination towards inmates, colleagues or members of the public, which can attract the full range of penalties up to and including dismissal.

Notice to Staff 47/1992 set out our policy on sexual harassment (and it is worth reiterating that sexual harassment can include the harassment of those who are or are thought to be homosexual) and made it plain that such behaviour was entirely unacceptable. But it is clear that the problem persists and, as a Service, we need to take action to combat all forms of harassment. As part of the effort to stamp out harassment, Staff Care and Welfare Service has opened a help line for staff who are being sexually harassed or bullied. The next stage will be to add advice on racial harassment to the help line's services.

Staff appraisal

There are other developments within the Service which will impact on equality of opportunity which, through lack of space, cannot be explored at any length here. One of the most significant will be the Performance, Planning and Review System. In PPRS, each members of staff will be appraised according to how they have performed in their job and how far they have achieved their objectives. By relating appraisal to performance, we intend that each member of staff should be assessed fairly and objectively and this in itself should reinforce the principle of equality of opportunity.

Disability issues

So far, this article has referred primarily to the needs and interests of women and staff from the ethnic minorities. Comment in issue 94 noted that comparatively little attention was given in the annual progress report on equal opportunities for 1992/93 to disability. The Service currently employs very few people with disabilities - even if we allow for the prison officer grades and others where we must recruit people with a high level of physical fitness, we come nowhere near the three per cent quota of staff with disabilities which all employers are expected to fill. As foreseen in the annual progress report, we have reconvened the Joint Consultative Group on disability and are now looking to implement the Cabinet Office's programme of action on disabled staff in the Civil Service (which complements the existing programmes of action on women and members of the ethnic minorities).

The Prison Design Briefing System guidelines provide for access ramps, lifts, toilets and circulation routes to be made suitable for the passage of wheelchairs. New prisons which have opened in recent years have been provided with such facilities and the guidelines are taken into account where possible when existing establishments are refurbished. Yet Comment was entirely right to say that we must challenge the prevalent but erroneous assumption that the lack of wheelchair access in some establishments makes it impossible to employ people with disabilities. Only a minority of disabled people are wheelchair users and many need few or no special facilities or equipment in order to do their jobs.

Recognising diversity

That same Comment also pointed to a lack of activity within the Service on issues of sexual orientation and criticised the equal opportunities strategy for concentrating on discrete groups within the workforce. For lesbian and gay staff, we have already made a start by referring to sexual orientation both in our policies on sexual harassment and in the equal opportunities statement which appears on Notices to Staff and elsewhere but, no doubt, more needs to be done. Yes, it is true that only one paragraph was devoted specifically to sexual orientation in the annual progress report for 1992/93. But the report had already stressed that, although our equal opportunities strategy has to take account of specific issues and specific areas of need - to take just a few examples, we have to monitor recruitment and promotion, we have to recognise the particular issues which surround being a woman or a member of the ethnic minorities (or both) in a predominantly white, male Service - the success of that strategy will ultimately depend on creating a climate where all members of the Service feel comfortable, respected and valued. We have to recognise the diversity within our workforce. This is about cultural change, where change will be gradual rather than dramatic. ■

This one article can only hope to give a brief overview of a few aspects of the Prison Service's equal opportunities strategy. Further information about that strategy is available from John Thomas-Ferrand, Equal Opportunities Officer or Gabrielle Garton Greenwood, Equal Opportunities Manager within Personnel Planning Group, Cleland House, Page Street, London SW1P 4LN.