

Medically they are interviewed by nonsigning psycho-therapists and doctors must guess at their physical symptoms.

In the whole of the country we have only three known probation officers with signing skills and a dozen or more signing prison officers.

The court diversionary scheme works spasmodically and there seems to be mixed opinions about whether or not offenders who are mentally ill, should face-up to their offending.

Communications outside prison via Minicom

The plight of the deaf without reading or writing skills worsens considerably and their contact with the 'outside' world is prevented by their limited access to telephone facilities. A minicom system is a necessity, then messages can be typed and sent via the type-talk service. I am sure a minicom could be hired and moved around the prisons with convicted deaf inmates.

Hopefully, I have raised an awareness of the

problems associated with deafness. From their education, cultural and language problems followed by their mental health difficulties and their lack of facilities in prison for counselling, communication and rehabilitation.

'Improving communications' in prison becomes a whole new problem compared with our deaf equals.

Below is a short story from Jo in Holloway.

Well, I am deaf and I am still in prison on remand, even though I am really afraid. I desperately need to talk via a minicom system to my boyfriend and parents but I could not hear with a phone card. I try to make people understand what to say but when they pass it on with 'speech' the phone card is used up very quickly.

Summary

Also bear in mind that when deaf people eat they can't sign, when they walk away they cannot be called back, they cannot hear in traffic neither can they ask directions or questions. Things we take for granted. ■

Letters

Dear Sir,

In your issue No. 93, it was quite understandable for Ivor Ward as the Prison Service's Equal opportunities officer to defend his department from his 'ivory' tower backed by some statistics.

The reality at grass roots level is another matter. You only need to read the vernacular press to judge the dilemma of ethnic minority staff, BOV members and other volunteers trapped and marginalised in the Service.

Could it be that the 99 per cent of Ethnic Minority that he claims to have retained is due to the fact that these people have no other alternative job prospects to turn to in the present employment climate?

Apart from paper commitments, I do not

believe that Ivor and others in his position have ventured to address the plight of these people or their quality of life in a racist and sexist culture. Only a victim is aware of the patronising and humiliating treatment one faces from so called colleagues and management.

Nevertheless, I absolutely agree with Ivor that unlike the judiciary and others, the Prison Service have made great strides to try to monitor their problem. We at least have some idea of our enormous shortcomings. All we now need to do is to spare some resources to forge ahead with racial awareness education amongst our population.

Under the charismatic leadership of Mandella and DeClerk, South Africa appears to be on the road to recovery from

the ills of apartheid. Quite frankly, it is about time Britain followed suit with some vigour instead of the usual pussyfooting.

Yours faithfully

Anver Jeevanjee
Board of Visitors and Prison
Service Race Relations Group.

Dear Sir,

I have recently read Journal Issue No 94, July 1994. On reading Page One's 'comment' headed 'Breathalysers before Urine Tests', I challenge the article. In my opinion it is drugs not alcohol that is the leading problem within prison establishments.

In my experience drunken inmates admittedly can be, but are not always, a problem. They are never as difficult to deal

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with as a drug addict whose craving exceeds all else. Many addicts in prison get into large debts to feed habits and then become victims of the violence the drug culture breeds or another Rule 43 statistic crying for sleeping pills, whilst in Segregation, to help them through their cravings.

Remembering alcohol is a depressant it follows that dealing with inmates 'under the influence' is a better bet than trying to deal with those who have taken stimulants and want to 'take on the world' or taken hallucinogenics and don't know what world they are on.

No inmate ever made a fortune out of brewing hooch. They do from drugs.

No inmate ever risked HIV infection from hooch. They do from drugs.

No inmate ever risked Hepatitis infection from hooch. They do from drugs.

Add to this the increased risks to staff and I question just how much out of touch and ill-informed the Author of this short comment is.

Admittedly drunkenness is a cause of crime in the community, but as it is sociably acceptable to drink, society must accept and deal with the consequences.

Possession and sale of drugs is a criminal offence as much in prison as out.

We must give more time to or take stronger action in approaching the problems caused by drugs in our prisons. Clearly, if we do not act now, the problem will get much worse.

Yours faithfully

PESO M Brown
Physical Education Department
HMP Everthorpe

Dear Sir,

I usually look through most issues of the 'Prison Service Journal' and find a lot of it interesting. However, I wish to make a plea through you to certain of your writers for brevity and, more importantly, for the use of

plain English if they want their material to make any impact, or even be read.

For example, the article entitled 'A Strategy for the Prison Service' in your September issue was totally bewildering. Admittedly the subject matter is not the most promising stuff for a rivetting read but although the authors say they have found their work 'enriching and liberating', this enthusiasm does not come out in the article.

Instead of a helpful and illuminating piece of work, the reader is presented with a hotchpotch of largely unintelligible material. The diagrams just add to the confusion. The article argues that the Prison Service is swamped with information', yet itself comprises 11 pages. I imagine few, if any, readers will have persisted long enough to reach the end. Instead of helping to explain and justify difficult concepts, all the article has achieved is to give proposed change a bad name.

The Prison Service's 'Better Jobs' newsletter recently won one of the Plain English Campaign's Inside Write awards for government department and agencies. In presenting the award the then Public Services Minister, William Waldegrave, said:

'Brevity takes time - it is hard work. But using plain language is being friendly to our readers'.

Ten years earlier another Minister, Lord Gowrie, in the foreword to a Cabinet Office booklet entitled 'The word is PLAIN ENGLISH', wrote:

'Using plain English is the best way to write. The audience will pay more attention to what you have to say if you can capture their interest and if they don't have to waste time unravelling the language.'

The Cabinet Office booklet urges caution in the use of jargon. Despite the 'Better Jobs' award, the use of confusing and unnecessary jargon words and phrases seems, if anything, to be growing in the Prison Service as a whole. This would not appear to comply with the wishes of Ministers.

There can be little objection to a limited use of such vocabulary where its meaning is clear. But if some jargon is unavoidable terms must be clearly defined. It is counter-productive to use jargon so extensively that the reader merely switches off. The 'Strategy for the Prison Service' article uses jargon so liberally that any sense of overall meaning is lost.

Examples are:

'external and internal environmental audits'
'organic reorganisation'
'Acquisition and Joint Alliances'
'synergy'
'Sub-Generic Strategies'
'Cost Leadership'

Yours faithfully

C.M. Willson
Construction Services
Room 216
Abell House

Dear Sir,

It was refreshing to read 'Some Are More Equal Than Others' in the July edition of Prison Service Journal. Equal opportunities (EO) in prison has for too long been the quiet recipient of expediency and lip service.

Our cardphones have no attachments for those who are hard of hearing, and our showers have no safety rails for those unsteady on their feet. Young offenders and female inmates are often marginalised en masse, while Multi-Faith rooms are often little more than an obvious afterthought in which numbers are made to fit the room, rather than vice versa. Sexual orientation is another sphere where the lack of qualitative research data points a lethargic finger at the flawed EO approach of the prison service - in which the issue has to become either fashionable or troublesome before senior management climb off the fence. The prison service happily pays UK-wide membership to Language Line for foreign nationals, yet inmates who have concerns about HIV/AIDS cannot even contact the National Aids Helpline - available free of

charge 24 hours a day - because prison telephones screen out 0800 numbers. The same policy denies us access to DSS benefit advice lines and a whole variety of other counselling services that do not cost a penny. Why?

Shortly I begin work on a book detailing the experiences of lesbian and gay inmates and staff, to be published in 1995 by Cassell. I am co-writing the book with a lesbian who was an officer for 16 years and whose partner is still a serving officer: their treatment and that of other staff who have

contacted us, shows that the homophobic 'Canteen Culture' of the police, is alive and well in the prison service.

As an openly gay prisoner with a partner outside, the prison service will not convince me it is serious about EO as long as it continues to practice such homophobic policies as that which disqualifies gay/lesbian partners from the ambit of both inter-prison visits and the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme. In January 1994 the Home Secretary said he 'did not think taxpayers would want their money spent on this sort of

thing'. Is it only heterosexuals who pay tax then?

The problem afflicting prison EO is to be found in the approach that tackles issues not because it is politically expedient at the time. The end result of such an approach is that the solutions put in place to address the problems, are often as transient, fragmented and disingenuous as the purported concerns which gave rise to them.

Yours faithfully

Mark Leech

Editor, The Prisoner's Handbook

Reviews

BOOKS

Parole in transition: evaluating the impact and effects of changes in the parole system.

Roger Hood and Stephen Shute. University of Oxford, CCR Occasional Paper No. 13. Published 1994. Price £10.00.

The book is the first of a three-part evaluation of the parole system prior to, and consequent on, the 1991 Criminal Justice Act.

This initial study is intended to show how the system operated before the Act, and to produce baselines against which to measure the changes. The authors suggest that the evaluation will also be useful in studying the problems of parole systems in general, and point out that there has been no previous full study which examined the whole system. One would have expected an in-depth study to have preceded the Carlisle Report.

The evaluation which forms the subject of this paper was carried out between April and September 1992, before the 1991 CJA took effect.

Hood and Shute attended between them 16 meetings of Parole Board panels, at which 383 long term determinate cases were considered. They also interviewed 201 prisoners serving determinate sentences of four years or more, at Parkhurst, Albany, The Verne, Featherstone and Wandsworth, together with 54 prison officers, 20 seconded probation officers and six wing governors at the same establishments.

The study examines the actual process of the panel meetings, and how decisions were made. For instance, the average time taken for discussion and decision on long term cases was only 4.7 minutes, though panel members were expected to be thoroughly familiar with the contents of the parole dossiers before attending the meeting. The researchers found no consensus within or between

panels regarding the weightings to be given to different factors in reaching a parole decision, and there was minimal use or mention of the Reconviction Prediction Score by the panels.

In general, the prisoners interviewed, knew little about the parole system. The staff interviewed had a wide range of views and interpretations, with marked differences in attitude towards the importance of different factors leading to a favourable parole result. This reflected the vagueness of the panels on the weightings to be given to different factors.

Both the staff and inmates involved in this study saw the system as a 'lottery' and the results of this evaluation seem to bear out this view. The booklet would make depressing reading for inmates and could only serve to reinforce their cynicism.

Hood and Shute estimate that 110 fewer prisoner years per annum should be served under the new system, compared to the old. Against this must be weighed the fact that in the past many cases seen as 'high risk' by panels were still released early on parole because it was considered safer for them to be released under supervision. Under the new system, these people would still receive supervision, even if released at the two-thirds point of their sentence, and therefore may be kept in prison longer (to their NPD) than they would have been under the old system.

Both prisoners and staff interviewed had generally high expectations of the system introduced with the 1991 CJA. There can only be increased cynicism and disillusionment if these expectations are not met.

P Midgley

Governor

HMP Kirklevington Grange