

OPTIONS FOR LEARNING: TRAINING INMATES FOR WORK

An exciting example of inter-agency co-operation between the prison and the T.E.C. in developing an imaginative scheme to help prisoners find work.

BACKGROUND TO THE SCHEME

A general consensus existed amongst interested agencies that prisoners were a particularly difficult group to get into employment or further training after release. In addition to having a criminal record, other barriers exist which impede ex-prisoners from finding work. These barriers include low skill levels, 50 per cent of those in custody have less than functional literacy levels and surveys indicate that 70-80 per cent left school with no qualifications (recent CBI estimates indicate that 75 per cent of jobs will require at least NVQ Level 2 by 1996). In addition, many prisoners have a poor previous work record, unsettled accommodation, poor health, low self esteem, low motivation and a lack of self confidence (Employment Department 1994).

The Devon & Cornwall Training & Enterprise Council (TEC) took a particular interest in the employability of ex-prisoners. The Devon & Cornwall TEC is one of 82 TEC's founded in 1991 with responsibility for the allocation of central government funds to meet the training needs of the community by contracting with approved individuals and institutions. The TEC's are the responsibility of the Training, Enterprise & Education Directorate (TEED) which is part of the Department of Employment. TECs have identified prisoners as a 'special needs' group who required particular consideration when it came to training.

As the result of preliminary discussions between Tony Murphy (Head of Inmate Activities at Channings Wood) and the Devon & Cornwall TEC, the TEC agreed to Channings Wood acting as managing agent for an options for learning scheme to be

based at the prison, subject to a satisfactory tender being submitted. The intention was that the scheme would co-ordinate a range of skills training, personal development training and work experience to achieve a single aim - employment or further training on release. The scheme would be funded by Devon & Cornwall TEC with no additional cost to the prison.

The contents of the contract proposal had to meet the same criteria as any other private training organisation. The 60 page proposal document covered details on the background of the organisation; occupational coverage; staffing and premises to be used; equal opportunities policies; quality assurance policy and means of training delivery. The TEC made it clear that Channings Wood would be dealt with like any other training provider and that there would be an enforceable contract governing the relationship. Following prolonged and difficult negotiations successfully brought to a conclusion by the hard work of Tony Murphy, the TEC agreed to sign the contract and to provide £6,000 as a set up loan for the scheme. A pilot contract lasted from November 1992 to June 1993. Successful completion of the first full contract (June 1993 to March 1994) generated a potential £150,000 for Channings Wood, which was used to meet the overheads of the scheme and to develop the scheme further.

THE PERSONAL TRAINING PLAN

The Options for Learning (OFL) programme was set up as a voluntary scheme for a maximum of 100 prisoners (at any one time) who were within 18 months of a probable release date. The main objectives of the scheme were: to help

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prisoners gain competence in a specific range of occupational skills; to provide training which would lead to NVQ or equivalent qualifications; to provide opportunities for prisoners to develop their own personal skills (including training in how to apply for jobs, CV completion, interview techniques and reading and writing skills) and to provide a post release plan for further training or employment.

OFL aimed to meet these objectives by providing prisoners on the scheme with a Personal Training Plan (PTP). The PTP was drawn up by negotiation between a qualified member of OFL staff and the prisoner. The PTP outlined existing employment skills together with future aims, training needs and arrangements necessary to achieve a successful outcome. Prisoners were referred to OFL as part of the Sentence Planning System, by their personal officers.

The planned programme of training involves existing courses run within the prison coupled with access to guidance and support through the OFL team. The prisoners progress is regularly reviewed and assessed so that the PTP can be updated as they move through the programme. The formal bi-monthly reviews involve a visit at their place of work by a member of the OFL team and a discussion between the employer, the prisoner and the OFL team member.

In addition to developing work based competencies, the scheme also attempts to adopt an holistic approach to developing each prisoner. All prisoners on the scheme attend a variety of generic modules on a voluntary basis. The Development Training module focuses on assertiveness, stress management, working with others, negotiation skills, coping with change, time management, study skills and confidence building. The Employability Training module helps prisoners to obtain work by covering areas such as job search; agencies who can help; CV design; letters of application; telephone techniques; self presentation and interviewing skills. Where a prisoner is identified as needing Foundation Skills, day release or evening classes are arranged to assist with literacy, numeracy, problem solving, communication and computer literacy. The OFL scheme also funds individual counselling and drama therapy where the need is identified.

Prior to release all prisoners also undertake an Exit module. This module covers dealing with the Benefit Agency; interviews with the Employment Service and obtaining funding for self employment. The local Employment Service performs the key role in the Exit module by ensuring that each prisoner has a named Employment Service contact in the home area, is provided with information and suitable job vacancies, is given practical training in how to apply for jobs. Where possible job interviews can be arranged for prisoners about to be discharged.

In order to create a realistic working environment, various personal responsibilities are placed on the prisoner. These responsibilities are additional to the requirements of standard prison procedures. These additional responsibilities include each prisoner maintaining his own work time sheets (which have to be countersigned by the employer), completing self sick certification forms and agreeing to a code of conduct in the workplace. These personal responsibilities are included in the Personal Training Plan and form a 'contract' between the prisoner and the prison. If the contract is breached by the prisoner (for example by arriving late for work or not participating in the modules) the prisoner can be removed from the scheme with the loss of the associated benefits.

MANAGING THE SCHEME

The options for learning scheme is run on a day to day basis by an Options for Learning Manager, her role primarily involves managing the operations, staff, finance, information and public relations for OFL.

Penny Jefferies was appointed as the OFL Manager from the start of the pilot contract. She took on most of the pioneering and developmental work and the success of the scheme owes much to her drive, enthusiasm and dedication.

The OFL team consists of two co-ordinators who are responsible for prisoner recruitment on to OFL, Personal Training Plans, OFL induction, prisoner reviews, guidance and support, providing the development/employability training and for the post release plans. In addition, there is a full time administrator who completes the necessary documentation and statistics for the TEC and manages the OFL office.

The OFL manager is responsible to the Head of Inmate Activities for the management and operation of the scheme. In order to obtain a multi disciplinary perspective, an OFL Management Committee was created. The Committee acts in a supervisory and advisory role and also authorises expenditure. As all OFL staff are employed by the Governor on short term non civil service contracts, issues such as pay and conditions of service, form of employment contract and the mechanisms for recruitment and selection had to be developed and introduced.

FINANCING THE SCHEME

The scheme had to be self financing given the lack of spare resources within Channings Wood. The repayable loan and money generated from the TEC were used to pay the OFL team salaries, to provide office accommodation for the team and to meet all running costs.

The income from the TEC consisted of two elements, process funding and positive outcome funding. The 'process' funding element accounted for two-thirds of the potential contract worth and was dependent on the numbers of prisoners on the scheme. OFL generated £35 for each week each prisoner spent on the scheme. As an incentive to prisoners to take part in the scheme, £10 per week (of the £35) was kept for each prisoner until his release. The remaining £25 was used to fund the scheme. Prisoners were therefore able to accumulate a lump sum of money, half of which they could take with them on discharge. The 'positive' outcome element of the funding was related to prisoners successfully gaining NVQ's (or equivalent qualifications) and/or obtaining work or further training on release. For NVQ obtained, the prisoner had £50 added to his lump sum and OFL earned £260. For each prisoner in employment or further education at the three month post release point, OFL earned £260. Prisoners were required to contact OFL three months after release and provide evidence of their occupation or continuing training to receive the remaining half of their lump sum.

Any money remaining after operating costs (salaries, equipment, office accommodation) had been met, was used to fund special projects, supplement materials grants for

NVQ courses, pay for NVQ registration and purchase specialist NVQ equipment for which funds were not available in the prison's annual budget. The additional equipment and material grants were needed because of the advanced level of NVQ's which prisoners were keen to undertake whilst on the OFL scheme.

MEASURING THE BENEFITS

The main criterion used to assess whether OFL achieved its objectives was whether prisoners actually obtained employment or further education training on release. Until very recently, prisons did not receive post discharge feedback from prisoners and were therefore unaware of whether prisoners had been helped to 'lead law abiding useful lives' following their release. OFL was able to collect post discharge data and was able to assess whether an holistic approach to the development of prisoners had improved their employability. The data collected revealed that of the prisoners who have taken part in the scheme 26 per cent had gone into a positive outcome (21.7 per cent into full time employment and 4.7 per cent into further education - training). This 26 per cent figure compares favourably with the statistics produced by the Department of Employment which indicate that on average only 10 per cent of prisoners have a job or further education to go to on release. The OFL scheme not only improved the employability of prisoners, it also provided them with a lump sum of money to take with them on release. In some cases the lump sum was used to assist with starting their own small business.

THE WAY FORWARD

The options for learning scheme at Channings Wood provides a good statistically based model of where a cohesive and comprehensive multi agency approach can improve the employability of prisoners on release. A recently published guide for TEC's 'partnership initiatives - helping offenders into training and work' provides other evidence of good practice which exists around the Prison Service. The key point underlying the success of the various schemes is that the Prison Service cannot operate in isolation and only focus on a narrow work based approach if it is to achieve its statement of purpose and help prisoners lead law abiding and useful lives after release.

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.