

**Scottish Parliament Justice 1 Committee Meeting No 40, 26 November 2002.
Evidence from Colin Quinn – a former Apex Client**

I now call Colin Quinn, who has been involved in community programmes operated by the Apex Trust Scotland, both before and after release from prison. Mr Quinn, thank you for your patience.

Mr Quinn has said that it is appropriate that I ask about the offence for which he was in prison. I make it clear that that is not for the sake of pure curiosity, but to set his experience in a context. Mr Quinn, are you content with that?

Colin Quinn: Yes, that is fine.

The Convener: Can you tell us about your background and why you were in prison? I will then ask a supplementary question to set it in context.

Colin Quinn: It was under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977. I was charged with being in possession with intent to supply. I was sentenced to 18 months.

The Convener: How long did you serve?

Colin Quinn: I served a total of nine months—half the sentence.

The Convener: The committee is aware that prison can have a damaging effect on a person's life. Was that the first time you were in prison?

Colin Quinn: Yes, it was.

The Convener: First and last?

Colin Quinn: Yes, first and last.

The Convener: Can you tell us about your experience and the impact that prison had on you?

Colin Quinn: At the time I was sentenced, I had been on bail for a year. In that year, I turned my entire life around. When I was charged, I realised that much of my life had been falling apart. I had split up with a partner. I had been trying to deal with things from my childhood, which I will not really go into. There had been a few things. I lost my job due to a back injury. I went back to college to retrain and got myself involved in a lot of things that I probably should not have.

Once I was sentenced, I got myself right away from it all. I went back to college. The year that I was on bail, I sat a higher national certificate in computing. I got lots of help with counselling and whatnot to get my life back on track. I felt that I had managed to do all that. I passed my HNC in computing and had been accepted in an intake for the very next year to do a higher national diploma in computing. Unfortunately, I was sentenced during that summer.

The social workers who gave evidence earlier mentioned background reports. I had everything like that done at the time, which showed that I had turned

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things around and rehabilitated myself in many ways. I had taken it upon myself to get help from an organisation called Apex. As I said, I made sure that I was continuing with college, so being sentenced knocked me backwards.

The Convener: In a way, it must have been worse when you were incarcerated after having, as you think, redeemed yourself. How did you react to being put in prison?

Colin Quinn: I found it very difficult at first, but my family and friends found it more difficult than I did. I accepted that I had made mistakes and that I would be punished for them. My friends and family were disconsolate and upset because they felt that I had done everything possible to prove that I would not reoffend. They felt that I had dealt with the problems that had placed me in the situations that caused me to offend. I had removed myself from those circles and tried to better myself. I also have two children but, when I went to court, none of those factors was taken into account.

The Convener: May I play the hard man? Some people might suggest that you did those things only to prevent yourself from being sent to prison. I am sure that that was said to you at the time. Therefore, were you resentful when you were sent to prison?

Colin Quinn: At the beginning, I was not resentful. I felt slightly resentful after a while because although I tried to continue my education while in prison, that was not possible. Even though I had been accepted on an HND course, when I made the right moves to be placed in education in the prison system, it was not available. The prison did not have the hardware or the software to allow me to continue to study. I lost the ability to continue with my HND because the year in prison knocked me so far back that everything that I had learned in my HNC was no longer useful.

The Convener: You are not obliged to answer this question. Were you a drug user?

Colin Quinn: Yes.

The Convener: Therefore, that problem had to be dealt with in the prison system also. **Colin Quinn:** That problem had been dealt with before I entered the prison system.

Donald Gorrie: Were any aspects of your time in prison positive? Did it do you any good?

Colin Quinn: No.

Paul Martin: Are you employed now?

Colin Quinn: I had a few difficulties when I was released in April. I already had a curriculum vitae but, so that I would know where I stood when applying

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for jobs, I went back to Apex and was given a lot of advice on issues such as disclosure. I continued to apply for jobs and eventually got one, but after five weeks my employment was terminated because of my criminal record. I applied and was invited to attend an interview for a job in the new infirmary. I took my disclosure letter with me, but it did not become an issue at the interview. It turned out that an engineer, a manageress and I all had things in our past that became a difficulty once the hospital trust vetted us. I had worked for four to five weeks when my record became an issue. Once it became an issue, I gave my employer a copy of my record and a copy of my disclosure letter. Two days later, they came back to me, terminated my contract and demanded that I be escorted off the premises.

The Convener: What is a disclosure letter?

Colin Quinn: It discloses the nature of a person's offences, the amount of time served in prison, and what the person has done to rehabilitate him or herself. How much information there is in a disclosure letter will depend on the person.

The Convener: Is it a legal requirement for you to produce a disclosure letter for employers?

Colin Quinn: I think that it is. Many application forms ask about previous convictions. I was told that rather than put down the convictions, it was best to state in the application form that a confidential letter was attached—which is the disclosure letter.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: How did you become involved with the Apex project? Was Apex helpful?

Colin Quinn: I found it very helpful and still do. I continue to do a lot of work with Apex. I am in full employment—as a self-employed person—but I still do bits and pieces for Apex and keep in regular contact with it.

The Convener: Can you specify how you got in touch with Apex and what it did—just to put some flesh on that?

Colin Quinn: I was treated as unemployed when I left college. I began to apply for jobs, but I knew that I was likely to get a prison sentence and that that would be an issue for me. Therefore, I started early to delve for information on how I would deal with that and what would happen when I later applied for jobs. In the year that I was out on bail I did a lot of work to find out how things would affect me. I felt that I knew what I had done wrong. Obviously, I still had to deal with the repercussions of that. However, I wanted to go into that with an open mind because I was trying to change my life round. I wanted to get as much information as I could to better my life and get back into work.

Michael Matheson: My understanding is that Apex tries to help ex-offenders to gain employment. You mentioned that Apex gave you assistance with a

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disclosure letter. Was it able to give you any other directions or information, or recommend other projects in which you could participate to help you to obtain employment?

Colin Quinn: Apex is very helpful with information, but particularly with advice about whether the kind of work that people want to do is a good idea. Obviously, people who have committed particular offences will not be able to get certain jobs or take on certain roles. Apex gives lots of information on that, but it also tries to bring people out of themselves, lift their confidence and let them see that there are jobs available to them, which they would be capable of doing if they put their mind to it.

Apex gives a lot of support. Before I had a conviction, I always found it relatively easy applying for jobs because I am a confident person. However, when I applied for jobs after I had a conviction and a disclosure letter, I started to get rather a large pile of "Dear John" letters. However, Apex kept up its support for me. People in Apex kept pushing at me and telling me to keep trying because somebody would give me a chance eventually. That is all very helpful.

Michael Matheson: How long does Apex continue to give people such support?

Colin Quinn: I do not think that it has a time limit. My official relationship with Apex was through a 13-week course, but afterwards it was open for Apex to contact me regularly to see how I was doing. That is done on a friendly, open basis. I have continued with that because I get on well with the staff and like the support that they give me. I like a lot of the work that they do and would like to get involved with some of it. That is probably why I keep myself more involved with Apex than other people might do.

Michael Matheson: What was involved in the 13-week course?

Colin Quinn: It had a lot to do with building up a curriculum vitae and working on what to put into the disclosure letter, which obviously included the basic facts of what I had been charged with and what I felt had led up to that. It was very difficult for some of the lads on the course to deal with that and work through all those things.

Ms Alexander: There are obviously many young offenders in total in Scotland, particularly in the 18-to-24 age group. The committee has a dilemma. Organisations such as Apex probably provide a higher quality of service because they are distant or separate from the prison regime: offenders have a bit of independence, and they are relatively comfortable. On the other hand, there is a desire for throughcare to be provided for everybody, and there is an expectation for us to aspire to something that is part of core service provision, whereby anybody—particularly any young person—has opportunities, particularly at the end of their prison experience. Do you have any thoughts to guide us on this? How do we give the best experience that we can to any young offender caught in the system, both during and after prison?

15:30

Colin Quinn: It probably involves having a lot more involvement with throughcare staff, with Apex or with SACRO. I found their involvement to be of great benefit. However, the environment within the jail system does not suggest that they are working together; it is as if they are continually working against each other. I found that very difficult. We might be told in writing that support and help was there for us, but when we went to try and get that help or support, it was made very difficult.

Maureen Macmillan: That is a bit worrying.

We have been talking about how Apex helped you with employment. There must have been other things—perhaps housing issues or family contacts—that concerned you. Did Apex help with such matters, or did you use another agency? Did Apex direct you to another agency?

Colin Quinn: I did a lot of work with throughcare staff when I was in prison. Before I was imprisoned, I had a council house. After I was imprisoned, I was approached by a couple who told me that they would be buying a new house within a couple of weeks of my getting out of prison. As the rent for the rented apartment where they were living at the time was a lot dearer than mine was, they said that they would live in my house and pay full rent when I was in prison. That would mean that, once I came out of prison, I would still have somewhere to live, where I could get settled with my children again. I thought that that was a great idea. I approached the throughcare staff and at first was told that they had no problem with that arrangement. If full rent was going to be paid, they would be quite happy. Once I had been inside for a month and a half, they came back to me and told me that they had changed their minds. They said that either I would have to be evicted properly by them, or I would be taken to court while I was in prison and get evicted from the house in that way. I thought that that was a bit unfair; given that I was in prison, it would be very hard for me to go and empty all my goods and possessions out of the house.

Fortunately, I have a good family network. They managed to get things sorted out and emptied the house. I was also told that, if I gave up the house without being taken to court, I would get points, which would guarantee my being rehoused in a decent area on getting out of prison. To avoid reoffending, I did not want to move back into the old circles where I had been involved for a while. I stayed very much away from that. I got a lot of social work reports backing up that suggestion; the social workers felt strongly that as I had managed to rehabilitate myself and keep away from those circles, I should not be put on a backwards course.

That is not how it happened when I left prison, however. I was moved into an area where crime was predominantly the way of life. That was visible on a daily basis, with cars being stolen, people not working and so on. That is where I was housed on a waiting list, for seven months, after which I eventually got somewhere decent.

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Maureen Macmillan: There is obviously work to be done in that area. When we spoke to people in prison, one of their biggest concerns was housing when they left prison. It is extremely important to deal with that.

Colin Quinn: As I said, I was very lucky. I have a very supportive network of family and friends. However, I feel really hurt and saddened for some of the other lads. They had nothing and they were coming out to nothing. No wonder people get back into the swing of reoffending and go back in through the revolving door.

Maureen Macmillan: What happened with your children?

Colin Quinn: There was a large effect on them. While I was in prison, it was very difficult for me to have access to them as I had always had before. Luckily, through support from family and friends, the children managed to get to me. Because I kept myself totally drug free the whole time I was in prison, I was eventually moved to an open prison, which meant that I had much better contact with the children. Because of SACRO, monetary help was made available for the children to travel from Edinburgh to Dundee to visit me.

Maureen Macmillan: As regards housing and family issues, do you feel that you more or less had to do things for yourself, or was there a good input from organisations such as SACRO? **Colin Quinn:** I did get input and advice. It was really only because I pushed to get that input and advice that I got it but, even with that, it is still left very much to people's own devices as to how they sort things out.

The Convener: We have no further questions. Thank you very much, Colin.