

Article for The Herald Society

In his introduction to a recent Inspection Report on HMP Barlinnie, Scotland's Chief Inspector of Prison's commented that Barlinnie is a hugely overcrowded prison. Among other problems this creates, overcrowding compromises the time that prison staff can spend with those in jail to build constructive relationships and provide opportunities to reduce offending on release.

The prison currently holds around one-sixth of the total Scottish prison population, with each of its old style halls holding around the same number of prisoners as the total population of Peterhead, Cornton Vale and Greenock – i.e. around 300 people, although there are recreation and other facilities for only around 100.

It has around 8000 admissions per annum and most of its population – 93.5% in fact – are not serving first sentences. Taking a snapshot of one month last year, it admitted 471 remand prisoners and 130 convicted prisoners. The profile of its population in that month was 17 people serving sentences of up to 2 months; 409 serving between two months and two years; 75 serving between two and 4 years and 390 on remand.

In addition, 10% of its population were there for non-payment of fines, with 100 imprisoned for fines of less than £300. Given that it costs around £80 per day per individual to keep them in prison, this hardly makes sense.

In the same Inspection Report, however, the Chief Inspector described an initiative involving a partnership between the prison, the construction industry and Apex Scotland as a “unique and exciting development”.

This initiative aims to assist suitable prisoners to gain a SVQ Level 2 with the prospect of a job on release in the construction industry. Apex's role, through a dedicated key worker, funded by Scottish Enterprise, is to provide pre-release work as well as post-release support, not only to those who participate, but also to their employers. It is this support, particularly after release, which is critical to the success of the initiative.

In the pre-release phase, our service addresses core and basic skills and prepares those on the SVQ course for the world of work. Each person is assessed to identify their employability skills and needs and an action plan is agreed and reviewed regularly.

Group sessions also cover wider relevant issues such as alcohol and drug misuse at work, dealing with authority and conflict, negotiation, problem solving, self-esteem, teamwork, opening a bank account and managing money.

At the pre-release stage, the Apex key worker also arranges for prospective employers to visit the prison. This allows them to meet the participants, have a look at their CV's and interview them as well as meeting the key worker who can keep them informed about release dates so that a suitable place of work can be found.

After release, we continue to support the participants, depending on their individual needs. This has involved things like contacting solicitors to provide a letter of introduction so that bank accounts can be opened, accompanying people to Jobcentre

Plus appointments and tenancy agreement meetings, approaching banks and arranging travel to the site. We also keep in contact with the employer, so that we can help to resolve any issues arising as early as possible. If the job opportunity does not work out, we will still help the person with finding another job and refer them to appropriate agencies for further assistance.

Results so far are encouraging: There have been 3 courses to date, with 10 prisoners in each. Eight people completed the first and second courses and the third is still running. At the time of writing, 4 people from the first course have sustained employment since early July last year: 2 in the construction industry and 2 with other employers.

Four participants from the second course have also sustained employment since January of this year, three of them within the construction industry.

In the past, the training and employment opportunities available in prison have not matched current needs in the labour market or realistic employment opportunities available in the community. This initiative aims to do just that.

Problems of rising numbers and overcrowding will no doubt persist in Barlinnie. The prison has no control over who is sent there. The initiative will not impact on these issues but, in a small way, it can address the “revolving door syndrome” of those who come back there time and time again and end up spending much of their lives in prison.

By helping those who participate to realise their potential for employment and by providing them and their employers with ongoing support to ensure that the job is sustained in the longer term, we can reduce crime. This is simply because being in meaningful employment will provide a structure to their daily lives and take away opportunities for offending.

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