

## **CS5: CAMBRIDGE PROBATION PARTNERSHIP COMMUNITY DIALOGUE**

**by Peter Garrett**

### **Context**

In 1993 the first prison-based Dialogue Group was started in HMP Whitemoor in Cambridgeshire, England (see CS1). Dave Parsons, a Probation Officer working in the prison had proposed starting that group, and invited Peter Garrett to join him as a volunteer. When Dave Parsons left the following year, Peter took on the facilitation of the group and formalised Prison Dialogue (PD) as a not-for-profit charity. Dave Parsons, meanwhile, moved to work back in the Probation Department in the community, in the City of Cambridge, and proposed holding a Community Dialogue there. His hope was to link prison and community Dialogues together in a purposeful way, something which was not achieved until many years later (see CS21). The first Community Dialogue, in Cambridge, was a stand-alone group to actively support the resettlement of offenders under Probation supervision.

### **Aims and Objectives**

Recidivism figures were very high in England at that time, with 71% of men under the age of 21 and just under 50% of adult men lapsing into further crime within two years of release from prison. Although Cambridge Probation was a risk-averse organisation, they were benefiting from the success of the innovative Dialogue Groups running in HMP Whitemoor and were pleased to build on that success. Dave Parson proposed the original concept of a Community Dialogue, and PD partnered with the Cambridge Probation team to enable it to happen. The idea was to bring together ex- offenders in the process of attempting to resettle in the community with a similar number of settled members of the local community in a weekly Dialogue to enquire together into why and how so many in resettlement relapse into committing further crime. This meant that each grouping could learn from the other and potentially break the cycle. The assumption was that all the participants in such an enquiry hold different but necessary pieces of the 'jigsaw puzzle', and all the pieces are needed to reveal the whole picture.

Probation could benefit, potentially, from a very efficient way of handling their supervision workload, and perhaps reducing recidivism rates, whilst PD was

seeking to expand its range of impact by following the offender's journey back into the community.

### **Method: Activity, Participants and Duration**

The Cambridge Community Dialogue ran for 2 years, from Oct'96 to Nov'98. There was a steady membership of a dozen people out of a pool of around 20, and the mix was half ex-offenders (in resettlement) and half members of the local community, including a housewife, a retired professional woman, a fireman, a magistrate, a local employer and the wife of an ex-offender in resettlement.

The local Courts accepted the Probation request that attending a Community Dialogue session counted as a required supervision visit for those offenders who were under Probation supervision, provided a Probation Officer was present and recorded attendance. In fact there were several Probation Officers present at every Community Dialogue with several members of their case load, and those under supervision were required to sign a register (along with everyone else) to record their attendance. This was an efficient use of the Probation Officer's time because they saw several clients at one time. It gave them supervision information they did not previously have because instead of a one-to-one interview they now saw their clients' successes and failures in interacting with others. Interestingly, once the Dialogue was established, the offenders were generally better at challenging and supporting their colleagues in the Dialogue because they understood their colleagues' situations better.

### **Outcomes**

Those Probation Officers who participated for any length of time found the Dialogues to be a valuable addition to one-on-one interviews. They could see peer pressure being used to advantage in the way ex-offenders supported and challenged each other, and became more aware of the need to work in collaboration with other agencies.

The ex-offenders attempting to resettle in the community benefited in various ways given:

- They see fewer options than others: "What do you do when you have no money? I nick something from a shop and sell it down the pub."

- The huge demands made on them by their 'friends': "I can't tell the father of my daughter that I have a part-time job. If I did he would come and take the money."
- The difficult dilemmas they face: "They have offered me a job, but do I tell them I have just come out of prison? If I do they will withdraw the offer, if I don't I am being dishonest and will suffer when they find out."
- And their practical problems: "My shoes have holes in them - it doesn't help for interviews."

PD extended its range of understanding of the value of working with an interface between two different groups, and in particular in this case bringing ex-offenders together with upright members of the public. For example:

- Outrage helps! Whilst Social Workers and Probation Officers are professional and often jaded, members of the public helpfully express outrage: "You stole a car! You think stealing cars is OK! Well if you stole my car I couldn't pick my kids up after school! "
- Simple compassion runs deep - When the retired woman's cat died, several in resettlement (under supervision) were in tears.

## Learning

The Cambridge Community Dialogue revealed how different Corrections is in the community as against prisons. In prisons violence and violation are common means of achieving control, and staffing is hierarchical and often directive. In the community it is less feasible to tell staff, ex-offenders and other agencies what to do, so influence and alignment skills are essential. This led PD into an extended consideration over many years of the offender's journey from arrest through imprisonment to resettlement, and the different conditions and crises on that journey.