

**CS12: HMP BLAKENHURST, HMP BROCKHILL AND HMP HEWELL GRANGE
RESETTLEMENT CONFERENCE
by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball**

Context

At the time of the Resettlement Conference, Prison Dialogue (PD) was already well-established at HMP Blakenhurst running successful Dialogue programmes. (see CS9 and CS10). In addition, Jane Ball who had recently joined the organisation, had done other work previously at the adjacent prisons HMP Brockhill (a women's prison) and HMP Hewell Grange (an open prison). In 2000, it was announced that new Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) would be introduced by the Prison Service relating to resettlement. Building on its work to date, PD had been developing thinking around the issue of fragmentation within the Criminal Justice System, and the difficulties that the multiplicity of different participants and agencies caused for ex-prisoners on their release. The introduction of the new KPIs, together with the existing connections with the three adjacent prisons, provided an opportunity for the charity to explore this area more fully by organising a one-day workshop involving representatives of the local agencies involved in the resettlement process, as well as the prison staff and prisoners.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of the Conference was to enquire into what was working and what was problematic in the Criminal Justice System regarding reducing re-offending and supporting the resettlement of ex-prisoners on their release.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

The one-day conference was held on 28th February 2001 in the training centre located outside the gates of HMP Blakenhurst. Representatives were invited from all local agencies concerned with the Criminal Justice System. This was based on the premise that it is a single system in which all stages and parts of the system make a difference to resettlement - not only those working with pre-release and in the community. There were some 45 participants who attended the conference, including police officers, magistrates, victim support workers, drug workers specialising in criminal justice interventions, prison

officers, prison managers, resettlement workers from the voluntary sector, an employment service manager, a public health manager, a member of the Prison Service's Custody to Work Unit, a criminologist and a social policy lecturer, as well as serving prisoners, ex-prisoners, their family members and someone who had served time on remand but been found not guilty. It was unusual to have serving prisoners participate in a conference outside prison and they added authenticity and realism to the proceedings. All of the different parties involved were represented diagrammatically as sub-groups in a systemic 'map' of the system.

The meeting was divided into a sequence of four distinct Dialogues. The first three of these framed the journey from offence to resettlement by covering 'Arrest and Conviction', 'Imprisonment' and 'Release and Resettlement'. The final Dialogue was a Reflection on the journey (and the day) as a whole. Each session involved those most closely involved with the particular stage of the journey being seated in the inner circle to have an open dialogue among themselves, whilst other participants who were seated in the surrounding outer circle listening and reflecting. PD facilitated these Dialogues. All attendees were provided with personal journals to record their thoughts as the day evolved. The intention was to facilitate enquiry about the actual experience of those involved, rather than on assumption.

A report was produced of the main conclusions emerging from the session.

Outcomes

Key conclusions that emerged were:

- Police officers focus on arrest, conviction and sentencing, and not on resettlement and rehabilitation – but the manner in which they perform their activities has a significant impact on the attitude of those they arrest throughout the rest of their involvement with the system.
- Magistrates often sentence those convicted without fully appreciating the circumstances of the individual involved or the impact of the sentence on them. They may be provided with inadequate information for good sentencing and may (often) have never entered a prison and have little experience of what prison life is are like.
- In prisons, dedicated responsibility for resettlement is in the hands of a relatively small number of staff and resettlement is often marginalised from what is considered to be the main role of the prison – power and

authority rests with the disciplinary roles that have little to do with, and are often counter-productive to, resettlement.

- On release, ex-prisoners often feel bewildered and traumatised. Being released from a prison is a crisis for many prisoners. Supportive relationships are frequently eroded, and criminal ones strengthened.
- Individual agencies tend to focus on the particular suite of activities within their defined and targeted remit. There is a lack of appreciation of the full system, or the implications of the actions of one part of the system on this. This was, of course, most relevant to the new KPIs.

These conclusions pointed to a need to place resettlement and rehabilitation more centrally in the activities of all participants in the system, including the police, courts and prison service; increased participation by police and magistrates in dialogues inside prisons and with prisoners and ex-prisoners; and greater emphasis on threshold Dialogues, especially the prison/community threshold, and community Dialogues (involving agency and community members with ex-prisoners post their release).

Learning

This was the first occasion when PD had independently organised and invited participants to a Dialogic Conference. The excellent turnout, and the value the attendees obtained from the conference, provided increased confidence about the relevance of Dialogue throughout the Criminal Justice System and that the charity had something very significant to contribute. The session formed a direct precursor to the later Dorset Threshold Dialogues (see CS21). In particular, it pointed to the need for increased integration of the different components of the Criminal Justice System, with a greater emphasis on resettlement and rehabilitation at the core of this.