

## CS8: HMP Long Lartin Basic (F Wing) Dialogues by Peter Garrett

### Context

Prison Dialogue (PD) had been running prisoner/staff dialogues open to the general population and staff for several years at HMP Long Lartin, a High Security Prison in the UK, at the time of a largely critical HMIP (Her Majesty's Inspector of Prisons) Inspection in 1999. HMIP is independent of the Prison Service and provides the public, parliament and government with an objective and authoritative assessment of prison conditions.

The report stated that by locking up prisoners on F Wing for 23 hours per day, the prison was not honouring its duty of care to those prisoners. The prison commissioned PD to intervene and turn around the unacceptable situation. The HMIP Report stated that: *"F Wing was regarded as a deterrent and was used to reduce the pressure on normal location by temporarily removing the subversive and disruptive elements. Although the wing contained some clearly aggressive prisoners, there was a high proportion who simply could not cope elsewhere, this placed responsibility on the management to look beyond a restrictive regime. There was no evidence of attempts to address the behaviour which had culminated in a move to this wing"*.

A member of staff described F wing as: *"too dangerous for me. I will take you to the gate but I won't go in. Prisoners are shut up there all the time and blink their eyes when they're let out"*.

### Aims and Objectives

The prison was required to address the HMIP report and didn't know how to change a situation that they had inadvertently created and which had challenged them for some time. Rather than coming through an induction process, fears about the disruptive behaviour of prisoners transferred into HMP Long Lartin from other prisons led to them being automatically housed on F Wing, where there was a basic regime and strained relations between staff and prisoners. Extreme behaviour by prisoners at the time included a number of fires being lit on the wing, and other dangerous conduct. At the time

prisoners had no access to education, gym, psychology or other activities, and the staff had a reputation for use of tough control and discipline.

The prison's objective was to return the prisoners and F Wing to normal location. PD saw an opportunity to develop the intervention skills to turn repression, frustration and anger into participatory and constructive relationships, and to address a serious need identified by the system, locally and nationally.

The aims of running Dialogues on F Wing were stated as:

- To increase the flow of 'basic' prisoners back onto normal location (basic, normal and enhanced were three categories of earned privilege applied to all prisoners)
- To foster a progressive attitude amongst wing staff
- To enhance the reputation and re-align the assumed purpose of F Wing in relation to the rest of the prison
- To address the Inspectorate's concerns about the duty of care to those prisoners who are housed on F Wing

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

PD established commitment from the most senior officer on the wing to use a wing-based Dialogue as the forum for change. Recruitment of prisoners, who were all locked up, involved a 2 or 3 minute access to speak with each of them separately at the door of their cell, to invite them to attend the upcoming Dialogue group. This was repeated a week later and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> week the group began with 8 prisoners, 2 wing staff managers and a psychologist along with 2 PD facilitators (Peter Garrett and Jane Ball).

The first Dialogue meeting was held on F Wing in November 1999 and thereafter it met weekly. The prison had asked that the numbers should be limited, and the average number of prisoners attending the groups during the first few months was 8. This was not a situation to include volunteers in the early stages. For the first meeting, the door to the meeting room had been removed for fear of hostage taking by the prisoners. It did prove to be a stormy first meeting discussing restraint and discipline, but it was surprisingly successful and led both staff and prisoners to realise an opportunity was at hand.

Facilitated Dialogues continued weekly on the wing for 18 months, during which time the average numbers increased to 11 prisoners. Participation throughout was voluntary and in the early stages some prisoners and some staff were sceptical. The dialogues proved an effective medium for staff and prisoners to engage, communicate and establish cordial relations whilst at the same time prison management redeployed some of the staff who were not willing to accept the new culture. Between May and August 2000 fifteen officers attended the dialogues, several attended two or three times

## **Outcomes**

The culture turned around on F Wing and the HMIP report of 2002 highlighted that the changes they had recommended in their earlier report on F Wing had been achieved.

As tensions eased, Education classes were made accessible to prisoners from F Wing, and psychologists began to work there with more confidence. Prisoners' behaviour improved and led them to step down from F Wing to relocate on general location. One curious factor was that some staff were concerned that prisoners may refuse to relocate given they enjoyed it more on F Wing because of the weekly Dialogues.

PD engaged management and retained sponsorship for the intervention. It became apparent that respect and listening are fundamental to the turnaround of individual suppressed emotion and collectively that amounts to changing the nature of the wing.

## **Learning**

PD learned that if you turn around the culture in one area of a system it starts to hi-light issues at the interface with other areas of the system. Prisoners were being prepared to step down from F Wing to general location, but the general location wings were not always ready to accept them. This intervention led PD to think about turning around a whole prison, which was later developed in HMP Dorchester (see CS14).

A prisoner's summary of the dialogues was: *"the first group I attended was full of verbal aggression but since then all groups have been productive and of benefit"*.

Another prisoner stated: *“This group has officers talking with inmates... it’s the way forward for the prison service”*.

A Prison officer commented that: *“If people are at war with themselves they are often at war with others too. It helps to break down barriers and see the person behind the mask.”*

WORK IN PROGRESS