

CS7: HMP LONG LARTIN PERRIE WING OPENING

by Peter Garrett

Context

Prison Dialogue (PD) had been working in Long Lartin (a high security prison in the UK) since 1994, facilitating the Dialogue Group which was convened by Probation. Late in 1998 PD had discussions with Senior Management about the opening of the new housing unit, called Perrie Wing, which was due to open in June 1999. Prison Management knew that the relocation of prisoners can be troublesome and sought help to manage the process. Prison Dialogue had an innovative proposal to manage the opening which was accepted and they were commissioned to lead the process.

Aims and Objectives

Staff selected to manage the Perrie Wing wanted:

- 'Dynamic security' on the wing (meaning a sound set of relationships between prisoners and staff)
- A safe, secure and stress-free environment allowing prisoners and staff to live and work without fear or threats of violence
- Clear communication, a sound ethos and the capacity amongst staff and prisoners to discuss and resolve difficult issues without confrontation

Uniformed staff detailed to work on the new wing wanted a more manageable relationship with prisoners. F wing, for example, was on 23 hour lock-down permanently.

The Prison wanted a trouble-free relocation into the new accommodation and to establish a culture with a therapeutic, participatory ethos, with access to the wing being an earned privilege.

PD was keen to design and deliver a dialogic intervention which centred on the social well-being of the whole housing unit, rather than just running a Dialogue Group for the benefit of the individuals in that group.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

By May 1999 all the staff who were going to work on the Perrie Wing were selected, and PD met with all of them for a day in the newly built (but as yet

unused) housing unit. The meeting took place in the same room where it was proposed that future Dialogues would occur. It was a participatory session for staff to consider the purpose, ethos, behaviours and relationships that they wanted to establish on the wing. This was the beginning of setting a container for Perrie Wing. The session included all grades of prison staff and a Senior Probation Officer.

A week later PD facilitated a meeting on the new house block with prisoners who were awaiting relocation to Perrie Wing. This was an opportunity for the prisoners to consider what kind of wing they would like to be living on, and what behaviours would be needed on their part to help to establish it. This set the container from the prisoners' point of view. Few of them had thought together in this way about a collective opportunity and they rose well to the occasion. They felt respected and used the day well.

A week later, the re-location occurred. Prisoners and Staff moved onto Perrie Wing and PD facilitated a session with both groups together. This was the first of an ongoing Dialogue which met regularly thereafter for some years. It established a common purpose of open engagement, communication and purposeful attempts to resolve different needs and interests without force or violence.

The Dialogues started as a day a fortnight with participation from prisoners on a voluntary basis, along with officers and a senior officer from the wing. Numbers ranged from 15 to 30 (averaging 16), and there was occasional participation from managers and staff from other parts of the prison. Volunteers from the public attended on a regular basis at PD's invitation.

By July 1999 Dialogues were seen to be making good progress on the original aims and objectives and there was healthy voluntary support for the fortnightly dialogue sessions from staff and prisoners. Also it was noted that some individuals had shown clear shifts in their patterns of behaviour and most participants were seen as contributing in a constructive way. Later the decision was taken to move to half-day weekly meetings.

Outcomes

There was a safe and trouble-free re-location of prisoners, despite teething problems with the building and facilities, and a group of prisoners with a history of difficult behaviour. Staff and prisoners worked out their individual

and collective power in the new situation and their expectations of each other, without significant incident.

The weekly dialogues established a purposeful and constructive pattern of relationships between staff and prisoners and an opportunity for everyone to be heard and explain their situation, in a prison where, by and large, that was not happening. A prisoner stated: *"We are all entitled to have our say here. Three months ago it was them and us."* Another said: *"Things have started settling now and officers are becoming involved. We no longer want us and them. We hardly even talk about the prison now."* A psychologist commented following the group: *"It was good to see people as people not just behavioural deficits."*

A different culture and ethos was established with good engagement and open communication. Perrie Wing advertised itself as: A Different Future, A Progressive Environment, A Good Living Community, Appropriate Social Behaviour, A Stress-free Wing, An Abuse-free wing, Zero tolerance re Anti-Social behaviour.

Regrettably this situation eroded over time as new management, who lacked understanding or respect for the ethos of the wing, began transferring offenders directly from the Segregation Block onto Perrie Wing. A secondary, but important factor was that Perrie Wing staff found that they were unable to effect reasonable requests from prisoners because of the bureaucratic and fragmented operation of the prison as a whole.

Learning

PD realised the power of a dialogic intervention and went on to develop these skills further (see CS8). The value of engagement, participation, open communication and an ongoing Dialogue Group can be applied effectively to a specific situation. Also, the impact of the larger system (in this case the fragmented prison management) was seen and raised serious questions about how to make an intervention sustainable.