

## **CS14: HMP DORCHESTER PRISON TURNAROUND**

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### **Context**

HMP Dorchester is a Victorian prison, built around 1880, that accommodates up to 250 male prisoners. It is a local prison serving the courts in Dorset and South Somerset, in the South of England. In 2002, the Governor of HMP Dorchester, Steve Holland, articulated his vision for the prison as a Centre of Excellence of Resettlement, with a healthy and happy staff group surpassing expectations for local prison work. Progress in this regard was hampered, however, by the attitudes and perceptions of staff combined with a lack of a shared vision of what the prison could be. Staff were not involved in the decisions affecting the establishment, and there was some resistance to change. Prison Dialogue (PD) had worked with the Governor previously, when he was governing HMP Long Lartin and HMP Blakenhurst, and PD contracted to work with him again following his transfer to HMP Dorchester.

During 2003/2004, HMP Dorchester was ranked as 135<sup>th</sup> out of 136 prisons in England and Wales, almost the lowest ranked prison in the country in terms of performance. This resulted in the prison being placed on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) to address these poor results. At this time the future of PD was precarious due to a lack of funding.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The Governor contacted PD to help him achieve his vision. Soon after his appointment he had identified four areas of special focus to turn around HMP Dorchester, namely performance, labour relations and staff culture, the resettlement agenda and his Senior Management Team (SMT).

PD wanted to build on its experience of intervention into discrete areas of a prison (see CS7 and CS8) and to address the turnaround of a whole prison through Dialogue. PD developed a cascade model that involved working with all staff, from the Governor and SMT down, and went right through to prisoner and Community Agency engagement, in order to address the Resettlement needs of prisoners.

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

It was recognised that achieving whole-prison change was a long term project. Throughout the period 2003 to 2006, PD was present at HMP Dorchester for at least two days each month and worked with staff and managers continually at a distance by phone and email. The first phase was assessment, and for six months (from October 2003) PD worked with the Governor and a steering group of 12 staff representing all areas of the prison. They focussed on how staff communicate, their experience of working in the prison and what they would like to change about the prison. One prison staff member said: *“Communication in Dorchester isn’t all good. It’s only brilliant because we deal with prisoners without challenging them; good can mean complacent”*. PD interviewed and shadowed 35 staff, and held regular discussions with groups of staff. They also met regularly with the Resettlement Team and worked with them to draft the new Resettlement Plan. This led to the development of a long term strategy which ran until 2006 focussed on the Staff Development Journey, along with leadership and support. Alongside this was the Prisoner Resettlement Journey focusing on reducing re-offending. Fundamental to the cultural change in the prison was the development of a shared vision that could be achieved through jointly agreed strategies and plans, and a series of dialogic forums where all and any aspect of the change could be talked about.

## **Outcomes**

In April 2004 Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prison’s echoed the need that PD had identified for an integrated prison approach to resettlement of offenders, stating: *“There was not yet a whole prison approach to resettlement. The Governor recognised the major challenge of trying to introduce new ideas to the reluctant staff group. However he had developed a strategy to achieve the aim of a whole prison approach to resettlement. This involved working with PD, a small group with experience in improving communication”*.

Significant performance Improvements were achieved and the prison moved from being ranked 135<sup>th</sup> of 136 prisons in 2004 to being ranked 35<sup>th</sup> in 2006, the highest ranking it could achieve as a local prison. Also, in 2006 the prison achieved outstanding outcomes in the independent survey: the Measure of the Quality of Prisoners Life (MQPL). HMP Dorchester was ranked either first or second in the country across all the 12 areas measured. Audit success rates across Standards were up to 93% from 69%, and Security from 68% to 86% in 2006.

Acknowledging this enormous improvement, in 2006 the prison Governor said: *“The Director General called me to pass on his personal congratulations for what was seen as an extraordinary shift in the prisoners’ custodial experience. Staff satisfaction, with their working lives, as measured by the National Survey has also improved dramatically. Only two other prisons [out of 136] returned more questionnaires and the levels of satisfaction were so high that I was contacted by the survey team to find out on behalf of the Prison’s Board what had been happening at Dorchester”.*

## **Learning**

A member of staff stated: *“It finally feels like we’re getting somewhere at last. Dorchester was in a time warp and needed a shaking. Some staff had been here a very long time and it’s harder to change the longer you are in the service. Attitudes have changed, no longer is the prison so dominated and owned by the few”.*

For the first time, PD started working closely with staff and managers from across the prison to address needs that they believed were important. Also, PD recognised that to achieve culture change there was a need for a review of the ways the Senior Management Team worked, and a requirement to coach them in their engagement and communication skills, and to review their roles and responsibilities.