

SFCP/PPA/GSP 6th International Conference

Living Together in our Modern World: Reason and the Role of Dialogue

Presentation by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball (Prison Dialogue), Des Persse (BCHA) and Stuart Grant (Dorset Police)

THRESHOLD DIALOGUE

A front-line partnership underwriting the journey from imprisonment to resettlement

This session, introduced by Jane Ball and Peter Garrett of Prison Dialogue, will be a participatory enquiry into the methods and challenges of working at the front-line of a partnership to reduce re-offending. Agency workers and Prison Dialogue staff with direct experience of Threshold Dialogue will relate first-hand stories of changes in offenders and themselves, facilitation, partnership, policy changes and the relevance of Threshold Dialogue to their day jobs!

Prison Dialogue is a highly specialised not-for-profit organisation established in 1993. The charity is the pioneer of using dialogue in the criminal justice sector to reduce re-offending, and has extensive experience in humanising prisons, reducing fragmentation between the many criminal justice agencies and focussing attention on the offender's life journey.

Threshold Dialogue is a powerful example of that body of work. First piloted in Cambridgeshire (1993-6), it is now most evolved in Bournemouth and Dorset, where four sessions are run every week in and out of prison. These Threshold Dialogue sessions bring together offenders, agency representatives and members of the public in facilitated weekly dialogues to discuss the issues that matter most to those participating. They are currently held in two prisons and two community locations and provide continuous support to the offender across the threshold (of the prison gates) before and after release. Immediately following release, the offender is most vulnerable to a major crisis of confidence, identity and belonging, which can result in a rapid return to offending and imprisonment.

At the dialogues, issues of concern are raised and considered in depth to achieve better understanding for the offenders and the agency workers. These include housing, drug and alcohol addiction, money and job prospects, family relationships, attitudes, offending behaviour. Participants gradually develop the quality of relationship that allows advice, support, feedback and challenge to be given and heard. They create a community that is aware of and interested in each of its members. Individual offenders begin to change their outlook, engage more positively with services and realise that they are not so different from other people. Their sense of exclusion from 'normal' society is reduced and their lives start to change. Practitioners are impacted too, changing how they think about their role, offenders and other agencies. This leads to better engagement with offenders and better partnership work. As more senior managers get involved, feedback from their staff leads to policy changes to support the offender journey and partnership working.

Bournemouth Threshold Dialogue was piloted in 2005-6 with a grant from Dorset Criminal Justice Board. Bournemouth Borough Council and Bournemouth and Poole Police reacted very positively to the pilot and took on the project for offenders released into their community from HMP Dorchester and HMP Guy's Marsh. Other key partners are Dorset Probation, Bournemouth Churches Housing Association and the Crime Reduction Initiative, Drug Intervention Project. Prison Dialogue provides facilitation training and supervision and is transferring overall ownership to Bournemouth agencies that already run all the sessions (see www.prisondialogue.org).