

Trustees Annual Report Nov 2001 to Oct 2002

Prison Dialogue has had an exciting and challenging year, closing doors on the past and opening new ones to the future. The organisation had been pulling in different directions for some time and with the decision to terminate our contract at HMP Whitemoor, the charity has been able to focus fully on a strategy and vision that has been developing for a number of years. Over the past year we have continued to develop our work in HMP

Blakenhurst, expanded our office premises, computerised our accounts and revamped the website (www.Prisondialogue.org.uk). Following successful fundraising, we've taken on new employees with the aim of establishing a formal partnership venture with a whole prison - engaging staff from every level as well as prisoners.

The Current Prison Climate:

As you are probably aware, the current climate within the prison system as a whole is difficult, with an increasing prison population and individual prisons simply trying to cope with overcrowding and survival. Something of a siege mentality exists, with management having little time for progressive new initiatives. This situation has had implications for ourselves.

HMP Blakenhurst:

We have maintained our contract with Blakenhurst - running at present until April 2003 - and expanded our involvement. This has been most satisfying as the prison has been under extreme pressure as its management has changed from the private to public sector and as it deals with an ever expanding population of inmates. Despite these demands managers and staff continue to see our relevance:

- "It's been good to hear from the lads, listen to their stories about what it's like for them. I'm new in the job and as an OSG I don't get much chance to talk to inmates. I've learned a lot."
- "This sort of thing could change the prison, if the whole prison could come together the way this group has come together."

Over the year we have continued the same rhythm of running monthly two-day dialogues, one for the main prison population and the other for vulnerable prisoners. Feedback from prisoners has been very positive:

- "I've really enjoyed it again. It's one thing I will miss when I'm out there. Dialogue has been like a milestone through my sentence. I've enjoyed the conversations. I've always felt welcomed. I've discovered things in my conversations with others. It's more intimate than most conversations. Dialogue has come a long way."
- "I appreciate a manager coming in and would like to see more. Like to see you officers who are not on this block come into the dialogue. Then they feel better about coming over to House Block 5. Don't write us all off. Officers are trying to do their jobs too fast and need time to slow down."

New arrangements:

In response to recent changes in the prison we are making a number of alterations to the structure of the dialogue sessions. Starting on Wednesday 13th November 2002 we will be holding two half-day sessions every week. One session will be for the Main House Blocks and one for vulnerable prisoners/health care staff and inmates. In addition we will be working more closely with staff, management and inmates to bring issues of concern in the prison into the dialogues and to draw relevant people into the sessions.

HMP Whitemoor:

We terminated our contract with Whitemoor in April, this was where Peter Garrett and Dave Parsons set up our first Dialogue group back in 1993 and where we have worked ever since. The decision was therefore taken with some regret. With Dave P and Ruth Wyner's decision to set up an alternative charitable organisation (Dialogue Trust), with the median group model as the foundation, the decision was taken to bring to an end our contract with HMP Whitemoor and Dave Parsons. In hindsight there are lessons to be learned and if we had acted more quickly when the signs arose we could have saved much heartache.

Dave Parsons' organisation, Dialogue Trust, is presently working in HMP Whitemoor and is seeking charitable status. We wish him and all those involved every success with the venture. We should also thank Dave for his initial involvement when PD began and his vision and commitment that has helped shape the charity since then. Thanks also should go to all the staff and volunteers involved over the last nine years with groups at Whitemoor.

New Initiatives:

As a result of our experience over the last nine years the charity has been developing the aim of providing dialogic interventions with the whole of an organisation. Three-year funding from the Tudor trust has been channelled in this direction; Lynda Calter joined the charity last October and she, Jane Ball our co-ordinator, and Peter Garrett our Director, have been working closely with a number of prisons to create such a programme. Lynda has been particularly involved with creating an officer development programme and though this has not been finalised at present we are much clearer about what would be helpful and how to fit in with the training structures that already exist. Major interventions in HMP Brockhill and HMP Blakenhurst have now been put on hold - this can be linked to the current climate in the prison system and staff changes - a disappointment after the amount of work PD staff have put in. However, as with the prison officer development programme, many lessons have been learnt, programmes developed and relationships built. We are confident that a new major PD initiative will be started in the near future. Lynda has recently decided to move on. She has made a valuable contribution to PD and we wish her every success in the future. As a member Lynda continues to support and be involved in the work, particularly at HMP Blakenhurst where she is currently a drug counsellor. Sarah Hill joined the organisation in October, she is working three days a week primarily on creating a community dialogue programme. Ben Evans joined us in June and is working on administration and accounts part time for the charity.

Membership:

We have 21 individual members and 2 corporate members. This year Chris Lindley produced a newsletter in March and this will continue bi-annually. We have also had one membership meeting organised by Chris Lindley and Liz Keate in Cambridge. This was well attended and was a valuable day, though the subsequent developments at Whitemoor over shadowed it for some. We still hope that members will play an active part within the charity and that members meetings will address the work of the charity directly.

Trustees:

We have 4 trustees and there have been no changes over the year. We have continued to support the work of the management group, giving perspective to their decisions, as well as taking care of our legal responsibilities. We were closely involved in discussions and decisions as the situation at Whitemoor unfolded. The trustees give their full backing to the management group and anticipate significant and exciting developments in the year ahead.

Finally, this has been a difficult year for PD both organisationally and in our work in prisons. However, we have chosen to work in a challenging environment and feel we now have a much clearer focus on what we are trying to achieve than we have had for a number of years. Thanks to all those staff and volunteers past and present who have helped bring us to our current position.

Chris Marks 26.10.02