



Rehabilitation courses denied to prisoners with learning disabilities

Prisoners with learning disabilities are spending more time in jail than necessary because they cannot take part in education designed to help them reduce their offending behaviour.

Prisoners with an IQ below 80 are currently excluded from many programmes in prison because the courses demand certain levels of reading, writing and cognitive abilities.

"We know that these prisoners don't receive the support they need to adapt to life in prison, and much of the help offered to prevent reoffending is not adapted for people with learning disabilities," said Alison Giraud-Saunders.

Positive relationships

Giraud-Saunders was the project manager for a pilot scheme recently carried out in UK prisons to help reduce these inequalities.

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities

(FPLD) received funding from the Department of Health to test the feasibility of adapting the Thinking Skills Programme to suit the needs of prisoners with IQs below 80.

The Thinking Skills Programme helps people in prison to understand the reasons for their behaviour, manage their emotions and develop positive relationships.

Trouble in prison

The programme is used by the National Offender Management Service to support prisoners and those on probation to address their self-control and problem-solving skills.

According to FPLD many people in the prison population have a learning disability, and 60 per cent of inmates have problems with communication. The Thinking Skills Programme is known to be effective, but until now the course was not suitable for people with learning disabilities.

Giraud-Saunders ran pilot

programmes in prisons to tackle this issue and adapted the courses to make them more accessible.

Saunders said it is important for prisoners to complete programmes like this because it shows that they are motivated to change their behaviour, which means that they may become eligible for parole.

"Learning to change your behaviour in prison can mean that you are less likely to get into trouble in prison and sustained change in behaviour after release means that offenders are less likely to re-offend," she said.

Life sentence

The need for prisoners to be able to take part in rehabilitation programmes was highlighted by a High Court judge ruling in the case of Dennis Gill, who was serving a life sentence, with a tariff set at four years, when he assaulted a prison officer.

At the time of the case Gill had already served more than

double his tariff because he was unable to access the required rehabilitation programmes on account of his intellectual disability. This meant that he was no nearer release after eight years of his sentence and he had no real prospect of release without the availability of an accessible programme.

Justice Cranston ruled that steps should have been taken to provide Gill with "some type of offending behaviour work to give him the opportunity to demonstrate, eventually, his safety for release... It is clear to me that this failure cannot be justified."

Giraud-Saunders said that the pilot project results are now being assessed by a NOMS panel.

"The panel were very supportive of the aims and they have asked for further development and piloting, which the NOMS are undertaking this year," she said.

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