



Running prisons with purpose

We have the youngest son of William Gladstone to thank for a shift in prison policy that recognised the potential for prison to reform offenders as well as punish them.

“We start from the principle,” said Herbert Gladstone’s Committee report into the prison system in 1895, “that prison treatment should have as its primary and concurrent objects, deterrence and reformation.”

The aim to reform has been a mainstay of prison policy ever since and was reiterated more than a century and a quarter later in the foreword to last December’s White Paper where Justice Secretary, Dominic Raab wrote:

‘Prisons keep people safe by taking dangerous criminals off our streets, but they can only bring down crime and keep the public safer in the longer-term if they properly reform and rehabilitate offenders.’

Yet recent independent inspections raise serious questions about the degree to which our prison system is giving sufficient priority to providing prisoners with genuinely purposeful ways to spend their time. We have found what seems to be an inertia from leaders that is preventing them from getting prisoners back into education, training and work, and a comfort with maintaining a limited regime that has supposedly had kept violence low. This lack of purposeful activity is particularly concerning for prisoners in category C training and resettlement prisons.

Category C jails hold prisoners considered a low risk of escape but who cannot yet be trusted in open conditions. Containing more than a third of the overall prison population, they should, according to the Prison Service, be providing prisoners with “the opportunity to develop their own skills so they can find work and resettlement back into the community on release”.

Our inspections of four category C prisons in the last few months suggest that few are fulfilling this essential role. At Rochester, The Mount and Brixton, inspectors found that, apart from the few who were working, most prisoners were locked in their cells for at least 22 hours a day. The picture was even worse at weekends and, with our colleagues at Ofsted, we awarded these prisons our lowest rating – poor – for purposeful activity.



Prisoners at Rochester, The Mount and Brixton told us they spent 22 hours or more a day locked up in their cells.



Between 48% and 80% of the prisoners we surveyed told us they spent less than two hours a day out of their rooms on weekdays.



Around 80% or more of the prisoners we surveyed told us they spent less than two hours a day out of their rooms at weekends.

In these jails we found delays in getting prisoners back into education, training and work, often caused by too few activity spaces, poor allocation processes, staff shortages and a tentative approach to reopening the regime.

It was particularly depressing to see workshops and classrooms that should have been thriving, either empty or with just a handful of prisoners taking part in activities.

“The rest of world is back to normal so why do we suffer. Some days we are in our cells 23 hours or more. More activities should be offered. More hours out [of] our cells is needed. It’s making people mentally drained. They are taking advantage of Covid to make it easier for staff.”

Prisoner at HMP Rochester

Release on temporary licence had almost entirely stalled and the best-behaved prisoners were losing out on the chance to start going to work in meaningful jobs outside the prison wall. A jail like Brixton, on a small, inner-London site, can only really be successful as a resettlement prison if a sizeable proportion of its prisoners are working out in the community every day.

“They need to change the regime in this prison. This place is run like a remand prison or a B-Cat. Prisoners need more time out of cells. The OMU or offender management unit don’t do anything in this prison... it’s like they don’t exist here. There are also no courses for prisoners to engage in... There is no thing for a prisoner to focus on or use as a qualification on the out.”

Prisoner at HMP Brixton

It would be tempting to blame COVID-19 restrictions for this situation. But what we found in the fourth category C prison – Coldingley, a similar sized jail to the other three that also serves London and the south east – shows this would be a flimsy excuse.

Here, despite it being a designated a COVID-19 ‘outbreak’ site during our inspection, we found prisoners out of their cells for an average of seven hours a day. The atmosphere was calm, prisoners spoke positively about the jail, and violence was around average for a category C prison.



Prisoners at Coldingley spent 17 hours a day locked up in their cells.



Just 4% of prisoners we surveyed there told us they spent less than two hours a day out of their rooms on weekdays.



13% of prisoners we surveyed there told us they spent less than two hours a day out of their rooms at weekends.

There appeared to be two reasons why Coldingley was able to run a regime that none of the other three prisons had managed for nearly two years. The first was the culture of the jail, where there had long been the presumption that, providing they behaved, prisoners could be trusted to spend most of their day unlocked. This was supported by a strong staff team that had high expectations of prisoners’ behaviour.

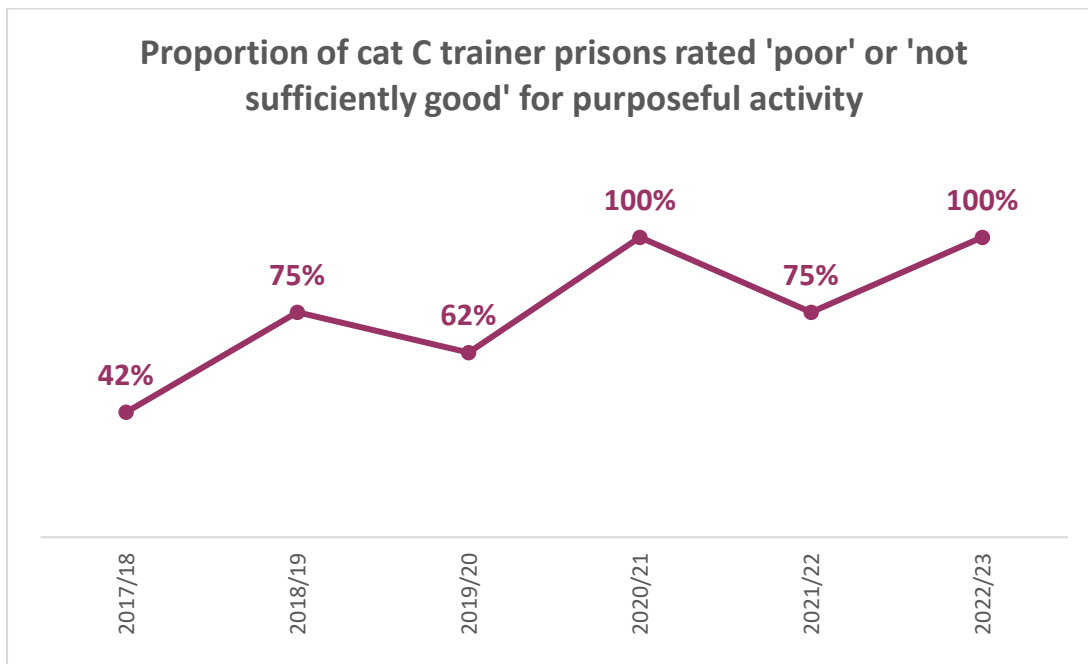
The second was that the leaders at Coldingley were much more ambitious than at the other prisons. The governor was prepared to take a more proportionate approach to the pandemic and recognised that the risk to prisoners’ well-being from being locked up was becoming greater than that posed by the virus.

‘Leaders had prioritised prisoner time out of cell despite the COVID-19 restrictions and had been creative with cohorting arrangements to maximise this. Prisoners on the older units were secured on to their landing in cohorts, which allowed them all to be unlocked for most of the day. Risk-assessed prisoners located on G wing were unlocked all day and during our roll checks we found just 4% of prisoners locked up. Most were unlocked for at least seven hours, which was better than we have found in most closed prisons.’

HMP Coldingley inspection report

That is not to say things were perfect at Coldingley, which we rated 'not sufficiently good' for purposeful activity. The education provider was poor and too many prisoners were hanging round on the wings rather than getting to work or education. But if nothing else, the mental health of these men was likely to be improved by being out of their cells for longer.

The lack of purposeful activity in prisons pre-dates the pandemic, but recent inspections have shown that the problem is getting worse.



Prisoners are leaving jail without the training and support to help them return to their communities and stop offending. As one man at HMP Rochester put it:

“... this is a resettlement prison. It should be a priority to reduce the risk of reoffending. I don't see any encouragement for this.”

We know that almost six in 10 adults released from prison reoffend within a year. The value of providing work, education or training is not simply a way of keeping prisoners occupied. It is an essential anti-crime measure that pays significant dividends for society too.

It costs taxpayers approximately £45,000 to keep someone in prison for a year. It is in all our interests that our prisons, particularly category C jails, invest more effort in giving prisoners the skills to resettle successfully when they are released.