

Process evaluation of the Restorative Prisons project

Executive Summary

The Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR) at Birkbeck, University of London, conducted a process evaluation of the Restorative Prisons pilot project developed by Restorative Solutions and funded by the Monument Trust. The project was launched in two prisons – HMP Buckley Hall and HMP Featherstone – in July 2016. It was subsequently discontinued at Featherstone and introduced to HMP Peterborough in February 2017. The evaluation period was from July 2016 to end November 2017.

The project

The Restorative Prisons pilot involves the use of ‘restorative approaches’ (RA) to address conflict in prisons, including conflict in the form of verbal altercations, physical violence, and bullying or intimidation. As defined by Restorative Solutions, restorative approaches:

bring people in conflict into a dialogue. Using a skilled and structured process, those who have been harmed have an opportunity to be heard and those that have caused the harm are held to account for what they have done.

The core components of the Restorative Prisons pilot are as follows:

- It encompasses conflict between prisoners, between prisoners and staff and (potentially) between staff;
- Both staff and prisoners are trained to deliver, facilitate and promote RA;
- RA are applied in formal meetings and in informal meetings and conversations;
- In RA meetings and conversations, the parties to the conflict are asked to respond to the key ‘restorative questions’:
 - What happened?
 - What were you thinking?
 - What were you feeling at the time? And now?
 - Who has been affected? How do you think they have been affected?
 - What needs to happen to put this right?
- RA complement internal prison disciplinary processes, including adjudications.

Use of RA is intended to ensure that individual incidents are resolved quickly and effectively and that escalation of conflict is thereby avoided. It is expected that staff and prisoners' exposure to skilled facilitation, and to restorative principles more generally, will help those involved in conflict to be better able to take **responsibility** for their actions, to **reflect** on how these actions impact others, to show **respect** for others' feelings, and to **reintegrate** themselves within the prison community. Over the longer term, the goal is to achieve organisational and cultural change: improved relations among staff and prisoners, reduced levels of violence and self-harm, and a better living and working environment for all. It is also hoped that trained prisoner facilitators will acquire skills to enhance their resettlement and employment prospects post-release.

Evaluation findings

As evaluators, we undertook interviews and group discussions with staff and prisoners involved in the pilot in different capacities: as trained facilitators, participants in restorative meetings, project managers/administrators and through senior management roles in the prisons. By these means, we sought to chart the RA in each of the pilot sites; to identify factors supporting or impeding implementation; to review the scope of project activities; and to draw learning for further development of RA in prisons.

Training and implementation in Buckley Hall and Peterborough

In Buckley Hall and Peterborough, training was delivered to both staff and prisoners who were interested in becoming facilitators. In Buckley Hall, 20 prisoners and 38 staff were trained, at least to 'foundation' level; in Peterborough, 21 prisoners and 75 staff received foundation level training. Feedback from trainees reveals that the training was extremely well-received across all groups: for example, *all* trainees who submitted feedback replied 'Yes' to the questions: 'Did the course meet your needs?' and 'Would you recommend the course to a colleague?'. Alongside the training, a range of activities aimed at raising awareness of and promoting RA among both staff and prisoners were undertaken in the pilot sites.

In Buckley Hall, the log of RA activities shows that 11 formal and 15 informal meetings were completed over the period January to 2017. (It should be noted that there is likely to be significant under-counting of informal work.) Prisoners facilitated or co-facilitated with staff seven of the formal and four of the informal meetings. Peterborough saw the completion of ten formal and 29 informal meetings, with prisoners having facilitated or co-facilitated five of each type of meeting.

Pilot launched and discontinued at Featherstone

Seven prisoners and nine staff received foundation level training at Featherstone. Feedback from the nine staff trainees was very positive, as in the other two prisons; prisoner feedback was not received. In Featherstone, the pilot did not continue in a meaningful way beyond the

training: we were told of only one intervention which took place here. The pilot was subsequently discontinued in this prison, which was grappling with severe staff shortages and a general problem of violence.

Challenges and opportunities

In the early stages of implementation of the pilot, its scope and parameters were deliberately left open, in order that the prisons could themselves determine how exactly they wished to put it into practice. This gave rise to differing and sometimes competing expectations about what the pilot was seeking to achieve. On the other hand, we have found there to be significant value in the fluidity of the concept of RA. This permits its application in a highly flexible manner to the wide-ranging types of conflict that can readily – and often very quickly – arise in the highly pressurised prison environment.

Like any restorative project, this one has encountered practical and logistical difficulties – relating, for example, to the identification and referral of cases, liaison between parties, and project monitoring. The highly structured and limiting prison setting poses its own challenges, particularly at a time when general staff shortages reduce the capacity of staff to engage fully with new initiatives.

The involvement of prisoners as trained facilitators is a critical component of the project, but is also challenging. While there are many established peer support initiatives in prisons, the active involvement of prisoners in the management of conflict – including conflict between prisoners and staff – amounts to a notable and unique extension of existing peer support work. The prisoner facilitators we talked to were highly enthusiastic about their role and optimistic about the effectiveness of RA; and also about the opportunities for personal and professional growth that involvement in the project offered to them. However, many were also frustrated that their opportunities to facilitate meetings had to date been limited. They were inclined to place at least part of the blame for this on staff lack of awareness or understanding of the project. On the other hand, among staff who spoke to us about their own involvement in the RA work, there was a clear recognition of the critical importance of the prisoner facilitator role, and a willingness to give a considerable level of responsibility and trust to prisoners who demonstrated their ability to fulfil this role. Within the limited scope of the evaluation, it was not possible to assess the extent of support for RA among prison staff more generally.

Conclusion

Introducing innovative practices in the prison context is fraught with difficulty. By virtue of their very purpose – that is, the secure detention of people who are convicted of, or are suspected of having committed, criminal offences – prisons are necessarily rule-bound, bureaucratic institutions, within which the maintenance of security and good order is a paramount aim. Given the risk averse culture of prisons, change tends to be a slow process,

and a core part of prison life is the unambiguous delineation of status and roles between staff and prisoner.

Thus, the scale of the ambition of the Restorative Prisons project – particularly, its requirement that staff and prisoners should work together in examining, addressing and seeking to resolve conflict – is considerable. And yet this process evaluation has found that none of the challenges encountered by the Buckley Hall or Peterborough in the implementation of the pilot has been insurmountable. From the outset, the senior leadership teams, staff and prisoners in both prisons displayed their willingness not only to commit time and resources to the project, but also to take the risks that its development and implementation entailed.

These prisons have proved that, with commitment, leadership and clear lines of accountability, it is possible to use RA to deal, both formally and informally, with a wide variety of conflicts. There is no doubt that this can only happen where prisoners and staff alike are willing to challenge some ingrained aspects of prison culture. It is striking that in both Buckley Hall and Peterborough, many individuals in diverse circumstances were prepared to do just this. The full evaluation report includes a number of case studies, most of which provide vivid examples of situations in which the RA has effectively brought ‘harmers’ and ‘harmed’ together, not only to explore how their conflict arose and what impact it had on them and others, but how to live or work together more peaceably in future.

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