

Good evening

The last time I stood before a judge and lots of other professional people was at my Parole Board, hopefully tonight I can deliver my words a lot better than I did then.

The theme of my speech is to offer a former prisoner's viewpoint on how the work undertaken by PAS relates to rehabilitation.

My credentials for this include:

Over twenty years prison experience in a range of prisons dotted about the country, from High Security to open prison and working outside as a Community Service Volunteer.

Active involvement in a range of cultural and educational projects with fellow prisoners.

Experiencing first-hand, prisoners and staff reactions to a range of situations including deaths in cells, hostage situations and assaults.

As an ex prisoner I wish that I could say "Prison works".

- That there is no need, no demand for free legal advice and information on prison law which PAS offers adult prisoners in England and Wales.

And, there is no need for PAS to pursue prisoners' complaints about their treatment in prison and, sometimes take legal action.

However, time spent in prison means that I can't say that prison works.

I like most prisoners accept there are legitimate reasons why we can't have access to certain information.

Today, using the internet I can find out in a matter of minutes what should take place during a cell search and what procedures should be followed if staff remove property from a cell.

In prison, without the internet, it took me over 4 weeks to obtain the same information through official channels.

The most surreal example arose because I had an Open University assignment which required me to use an OS map of Snowdonia.

The prison library had no maps but even if they had, they were not allowed to provide me with a copy.

The education department was really sorry but they too could not help, nor could wing staff due to alleged security concerns.

I ended up contacting Westminster City Council libraries department who mailed me the information. It took over 4 weeks and cost me at least two weeks wages in phone calls and postage.

It's difficult to convey why such experiences take on a level of huge significance for prisoners.

When I hear people say that prisoners have so much free time, spend so much time doing nothing. I'm tempted to suggest they swap places with a prisoner for a week.

Each day prisoners have a window of opportunity in which to complete tasks set by others. Much of that time is taken up standing, waiting at locked gates.

The record for me was over two and a half hours of waiting, to consult a book, only to be told 15 minutes later that the prison library was closing. In hindsight I should have written to PAS and gotten the information without the hassle.

When a prisoner finds that the internal means of obtaining information is unreliable or non-existent, then being able to obtain it from PAS can literally be life saving and I don't use those words figuratively.

I am going to read the thank you letter sent to PAS this week, because it is so typical of the impact sometimes felt by prisoners when someone on the outside steps in and fights their corner, even just a little bit.

--LETTER--

Why does it matter if a prisoner's property is mislaid, lost or damaged whilst in transit from one prison to another?

Why does it matter that a prisoner can't hand in his university assignment on time?

As one-off events these issues may seem and be regarded as trivial matters that are soon forgotten. But not for the prisoner.

However, someone sifting through the correspondence and phone calls received by PAS soon realizes such issues occur time and time again for different prisoners, in different prisons, at different times.

For many prisoners it is the accumulation of these issues being unsatisfactorily resolved over time which can be so damaging possibly contributing to some prisoners disengaging from the rehabilitative process. It's what might be called a 'snowball effect'. And, the absence or lateness of information being provided to prisoners only serves to make the situation worse.

As does supplying information which is either out of date, misleading, contradictory or simply difficult or impossible to understand.

My understanding of the term REHABILITATION is that it's a process of restoring a person's ability to live and work as normally as possible after having spent time in prison

For me, part of my own rehabilitation is that I chose to volunteer for PAS.

Seeking a means by which I can hopefully put to good use time spent in prison.

As well as my recognizing the value of the work being undertaken by PAS and appreciating that in a time of budgetary cut backs and with the demise of legal aid access to such services can only become more important for a greater number of prisoners.

The thank you letter serves to illustrate that PAS's interventions may help restore to some degree an individual's faith in other people and hopefully motivate re-engagement.

I suggest that the rehabilitative process is not one way - it's not all up to the individual prisoner.

When prisoners mistrust, and lose confidence in the prison system, they become increasingly disillusioned and disaffected.

PAS can only address a fraction of the issues which beset prisoners. Ideally there needs to be a concerted unified approach to tackling such issues and a greater awareness of prisoners' sensibilities.

Thank you for listening.