

A PRISON 50+ FORUM FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Whilst being detained 'at Her Majesty's pleasure' it is not long before you feel cut off from the outside world. You may be able to see television programmes and keep up to date with news stories but you are not experiencing real life and the problems that go with it. It is like the difference between seeing a sporting event on television and actually being there. You see the event but you do not get the atmosphere and adrenaline that goes with it. You see what they want you to see not the actual picture.

If a problem arises within your personal life whether of a personal, financial or emotional nature you can usually find lying around somewhere a pamphlet with a telephone number to call or sometimes a representative from some outside organisation visits the prison for a personal consultation. This may seem very good on the surface. Unfortunately at times there could be in excess of 500 people about, a lot of which are trying to get a 10 minute slot in a monthly visit of 4 hours. There is not a lot that you can sort out in 10 minutes and sometimes you have to wait three or four weeks for that slot. Similarly with the telephone your weekly allowance of call time is invariably taken up with one call hanging on waiting to be transferred from one department to another or listening to some recorded preamble.

This situation can be frustrating and infuriating enough when at home but at least there are ways of overcoming the problem. When you are confined as a prisoner and sometimes have nothing else to worry about it is not long before impatience sets in and a molehill quickly turns into a mountain., sometimes resulting in giving up altogether.

In April of 2008 whilst being resident at HMP Leyhill we were advised that representatives from Age Concern and Help the Aged were coming along to discuss with those over the age of 50 the possibility of forming a Forum. This would be specifically to deal with their problems both of an internal and external nature and on any subject.

The idea sounds like a good one to me on the surface but I am a total cynic, a 'doubting Thomas', somebody who in real life sees things in black or white. Are these some more 'do-gooders' with an idea that sounds good on the surface but will fizzle out like most other things you experience as a 'captive audience'?

Lets see what happens.

We are visited by Liz Davis (ACOOP) and Dick Stokes (Help the Aged) who duly explain to a large and eagerly awaiting audience the purpose of a 50+ Forum and how with the approval of the Governor it will be 'run by the prisoners for the prisoners'. A new concept indeed and one worth taking a lot more interest in to see if it will really work.

Over the course of the next few weeks an acting Committee of eight prisoners get together with Dick Stokes to put together a Constitution and decide in more detail what could be achieved by having such a Forum. To be led by such a knowledgeable person as Dick in these matters and to have a team of such enthusiastic members it was possible to have formulated a Constitution and be able to hold an AGM by July

of that year. According to Dick this was an all time record but can be explained quite easily by the fact that all its eligible members lived within an area of 100 acres and had nothing much else to do to occupy their minds or distract them from the tasks in hand.

Over the next few weeks after a proper working Committee had been elected it became more and more apparent that this WAS going to work. Prisoners were encouraged to see people actually trying to do something for them especially as they, through their Committee, could make decisions as to who they would like to come and speak to them and on which subjects they wanted help from the outside world. Speakers almost queued up to come and speak at monthly meetings perhaps because it was a unique audience.

Prisoners, Speakers, Liz Davis, and Dick Stokes alike were having their eyes opened to the diversity of problems that were being raised and existed within a prison community.

During the course of the six months that I was involved with this Forum we had speakers with a wide range of interests. Magistrates came to explain their work and detail their private lives, representatives from the Pension Service and other voluntary organisations came to give advice and explain their purpose and even a renowned expert on the subject of Dementia came to give a talk and conduct a survey on the subject.

Where were we able to get these interesting speakers from? Liz Davis and Dick Stokes of course.

Other such Forums have of course existed for some time within the general public and it was therefore my pleasure to actually have the chance to meet representatives from these Forums at an Annual Conference. It was interesting to learn also how diverse their problems were and what they were able to be able to achieve. Meeting these people and getting their support was even more encouragement for ourselves.

In such a short space of time it has therefore become apparent to a cynic like myself just how important and worthwhile such Forums can be and the thanks that we owe to people like Liz and Dick for their visions and endeavour in making it all worth while.

The 50+ Forum for a prison community is a concept that does and will work as long as the membership is prepared to also put some effort into it. It is a vehicle that is being presented to them and should be driven like a Rolls Royce not a Robin Reliant.