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Seeing Beyond the Uniform: Prisoners' Positive Views of HMP Grendon

This article¹ by Michelle Newberry, Research Officer at HMP Grendon, is based on an article by Elizabeth Sullivan, Former Research Officer at Grendon, which was published in the Prison Service Journal September 2007.

HMP Grendon is a Category B therapeutic community (TC) prison, where men choose to come if they want to change their offending behaviour and reduce their risk of further offending. Thus, spending time at Grendon is voluntary within the constraints of the individual's sentence. Men must meet Grendon's admission criteria and express a willingness to change. At Grendon, the men live together and regulate each other's behaviour, as well as taking part in regular intensive group therapy and complementary therapies such as art therapy and psychodrama (Sullivan, 2006). Men are expected to stay at Grendon for the duration of their therapy, which usually lasts between eighteen months and two years, before returning to the 'normal' prison system to finish their sentence.

In a study entitled 'Moving on: Exit Interviews in a Therapeutic Community Prison', Sullivan (2006) conducted a series of interviews to ascertain why men might leave HMP Grendon early. It was found that many men had positive opinions of Grendon, including those who had chosen to leave or who had been sent back to their previous prison. One man claimed that: "You have to see beyond the uniform and see the person" (p.27). This comment implies that the barriers between inmates and staff are stripped away so that good quality contact can flourish (Sullivan, 2006). The 'Moving on' study found that there are a number of complex reasons why men choose to leave before they have finished therapy or why they might be returned to their sending establishment or voted out of their community. This article provides a synopsis of an article written by Sullivan (2007), entitled 'Seeing beyond the Uniform: Positive Views of Prison through Prisoners' Eyes', which analyses the remaining data of the 'Moving on' study and shows that prisoners tend to value and make good use of the opportunities given to them at Grendon.

Sullivan (2006) interviewed forty-eight prisoners leaving HMP Grendon between December 2004 and May 2005. Twenty-two of the men were planned leavers who had finished therapy and were moving on to complete their sentence or were being released. Seventeen of the men were unplanned leavers who chose to leave Grendon early or were being asked to leave. The other nine men were 'returned to unit' without joining a therapeutic community either by choice or obligation, meaning that they went back to the prison they came from. Although Sullivan's original research was developed to detect reasons why men left Grendon early without finishing therapy, the interviews also gave men the opportunity to say what they valued about Grendon. The responses can be divided into two categories: comments on aspects of Grendon itself, including the staff and regime, and comments about what men perceive they have gained from being there. Nearly all of the men made positive comments about their arrival and introduction to Grendon, as the following statement highlights:

I got off the bus and was greeted by my first name. Staff brought my stuff over. I was put in the office and introduced. It seemed weird – I was given a key! [to the cell]. I was nervous but excited, felt I was made welcome... invited to sit next to an officer in the office... it didn't seem right! In the system, it's them and us. (p.28)

Most men claimed that they were shocked and unable to believe that the welcome at Grendon was genuine, comparing it positively with their experiences at other prisons (Sullivan, 2007). Every man interviewed made positive comments about staff and there was a general feeling that staff throughout Grendon are friendly and respectful, as one unplanned leaver notes:

A female officer came into my cell and started talking...she held her hand out to shake mine... I was gobsmacked! I began to realise it is a good place after that. Very welcoming and nice feelings. Induction was very informal with everyone using first names. I felt odd with it at first, it gave me a 'conning me' feeling, but I got used to it. (pp.28-29)

Visits were also praised by the men, as one planned leaver comments:

Visits is nice, you can go in the garden in the summer, it's nice for the kids. The visits co-ordinator pushes the boat out. Families day is excellent, it blows my family away. My aunty was moved by the dignity and the humane manner. (p.29)

¹ This article appears in the National Association of Official Prison Visitors (NAOPV) Newsletter Spring 2008.

Ordinary visits at Grendon are supplemented by family days and lifer days, where men's families can see where they live and hear about the types of therapy they engage in:

We have family days when we put on a meal, family can see your cell, we play bingo. It's a very positive part. I've had five visits and two family days – brilliant! Nowhere else in the country has this. (p.29)

Positive comments were made about Grendon's food; one man, who left at the end of his therapy notes: "Friday tea was the best meal I've ever had in 19 years in the system" (p.30). Positive comments were also made about the food at Grendon by men who left prematurely: "The food is better than most other places." (p.30)

Most men felt that any bullying at Grendon was being, or would be, dealt with by the communities themselves as part of the ethos of openness and constructive challenge (Sullivan, 2007): "There's bullying in every prison, but a lot less here because of the structure and challenging" (p. 30). However, some men had not encountered bullying at all:

There is no bullying. I've never seen any. In other prisons you get bullied for not paying for drugs. Here we watch out for each other, but I've never seen it. (p. 30)

During the interviews each man described what he felt he had gained from his time at Grendon, including those who had only been there for a few weeks. Many claimed that they had improved self-esteem, self-worth and confidence from being there. Another frequently cited gain was learning how to talk to people, to express oneself and to be heard without behaving aggressively:

It has changed my life. I have self-esteem and confidence. I would never have had this before. For the first time ever I have a voice. (p.31)

Men are provided with opportunities to address their offending behaviours through cognitive behavioural therapy and social learning methods, which take place as part of the therapeutic regime, as one man comments:

It has allowed me to grow up emotionally. I have a better understanding of who I am and the consequences of my actions and the victims I create. I am responsible for the decisions I make. (p.31)

As Sullivan (2007) points out in her article 'Seeing beyond the Uniform: Positive Views of a Prison through Prisoners' Eyes', yes, it is difficult to attribute the positive views of Grendon with confidence as there may be a number of reasons why men express positive sentiments on leaving. For example, men have made a choice to come to Grendon and have invested part of their identity in that choice. This might mean that they seek to find the positive in having made that decision (Sullivan, 2007). Secondly, men might be positively predisposed toward Grendon before they arrive, as they have reached a point in their lives when they are ready to change. Another reason is that men who are being asked to leave, as well as men at the end of their therapy, may over-rate their achievements in order to feel positive about themselves. Finally, men may be eager to tell the interviewer what they think the interviewer wants to hear.

However, it would not be unreasonable to accept that some of the positive comments expressed are due to Grendon's therapeutic regime. Grendon provides an opportunity for a man, often for the first time in his life, to be a valued member of a community, who helps to make decisions and who has control over his future. These factors may help to explain the strength of positive feeling expressed by the men who participated in Sullivan's study.

References

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