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Restorative practice in prisons:

assessing the impact of the demise of the Inside Out Trust

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Introduction

The Inside Out Trust (IOT) was founded as a charitable organisation in 1994. The IOT developed prison workshops based on restorative justice principles, and at one stage delivered more than 100 workshops in a wide range of prisons in England and Wales. Prisoners were involved in such activities as repairing bicycles, refurbishing wheelchairs, upgrading computers and producing Braille and large print books for charities, both in the UK and in developing countries worldwide. IOT workshops aimed to provide prisoners with an opportunity to not only learn about the needs of other people and to contribute positively to society, but also to learn new skills which could improve their resettlement prospects. In 2004, the IOT commissioned ARCS (UK) Limited, in partnership with the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, to undertake a large-scale multi-method evaluation of their activities within a range of prisons. Unfortunately, the sudden demise of the IOT in the summer of 2007 due to financial difficulties halted the evaluation prematurely and instead, a small-scale 'closing' evaluation¹ was undertaken to examine the impact of the IOT's demise on: prison staff responsible for keeping prisoners engaged in purposeful activities; the wider regimes of those prisons that had previously delivered IOT workshops; and those prisoners that had been involved with the workshops. This article briefly summarises the findings from this 'closing' evaluation².

The demise of the IOT: the impact on prison staff and prison regimes

Bearing in mind the range and sheer number of IOT workshops that were being delivered prior to the summer of 2007, it was perhaps unsurprising that the sudden demise of IOT had an immediate impact on those involved closely with the workshops. Although used to projects closing, many of prison staff interviewed for the evaluation reported feeling sad to see the end of the IOT and the resulting closure of workshops. Overwhelmingly, prison staff had enjoyed working with the IOT and felt that their work had been both valued and valuable.

It had a very good reputation, the wheelchairs and the bicycles, very good, very well ran. [I] wish we could have kept them [the workshops] on ... but times change and we couldn't. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

I enjoyed doing it, ... I believe in doing it. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

Furthermore, the IOT workshops were particularly useful to prisons in terms of providing purposeful activities for prisoners³, and the sudden closure of many of the workshops meant that there was a significant reduction in prison capacity to deliver such activities.

At the time of the Inside Out Trust actually closing we lost around about thirty-six prisoner places. [So, did that have a big impact on you then?] Oh, it did at the time, yeah. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

1. The 'closing' evaluation (undertaken during 2008 and 2009) was funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies. It was conducted in a sample of six prisons that had previously delivered IOT workshops. These prisons, and the IOT projects that they had delivered, included: a category C training prison for men aged 18 to 21 (carpentry and textiles); a category A and B prison for adult males serving 4 years and over, IPP or life sentences (artificial limbs, bicycles, Braille, hearing aids, sewing machines, spectacles, textiles and wheelchairs); a category C prison for adult males, with a mixed population of young offenders aged 18 to 21 (bicycles, Braille, computers, large print and textiles); a category C prison for adult males, including a prisoner support wing for vulnerable prisoners (Braille and computers); a category C prison for adult males (bicycles and wheelchairs); and a category B training prison for adult males, with a 50% lifer and 50% vulnerable prisoner population (bicycle, Braille, large print and wheelchairs). As part of the 'closing' evaluation, interviews were conducted with eight prison service staff (who had previously been IOT workshop instructors) and a focus group was undertaken with prisoners who had previously worked in IOT workshops. In addition, interviews were also conducted with four former IOT staff.
2. The full evaluation report, released in February 2011, presents findings from all of the research work undertaken during the period from November 2004 to the end of the 'closing' evaluation in 2009. Copies of the full report can be obtained by e-mailing: research@arcs-ltd.com.
3. Purposeful activity incorporates all constructive activities that contribute to rehabilitation and successful resettlement, including undertaking education, work or offending behaviour programmes. It is thus vital to prisoners, and to prisons' rehabilitation attempts.

[At the time of the demise] there [were four workshops] ... employing fifteen prisoners in each, so it was like 'Oh my God, what are we going to do with them?'. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

While some IOT workshops were continued by other charities (such as *IT Schools Africa*⁴, *Jole Rider*⁵ and *Wheels for the World*⁶), in many cases it was only the workshop instructors' own initiative and determination that enabled their particular workshop/s to continue.

I contacted Raleigh Cycles, ... I wrote to their sales organiser and I ... told him the situation. ... A week later, he rang me up and he says 'Would you like 120 bikes? ... They're returns, brand new but returns. They might have small faults, so you might get ... one bike out of two and bits and pieces'. And I said 'Yeah okay'. Anyway when he turned up [at the prison] ... he actually had about 200 bikes on there and I'd got nowhere to put them! ... Anyway, they were fantastic bikes and the lads loved working on them. ... And that's the way we went ahead. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

I had to get on the phone, ... ring up a charity, ... a name out of the book and say 'Would you be interested?' And a lot of people said no. [But] I found a charity, Re-Cycle⁷ [and] they said 'Yes, anything you can send to us, we'll take, and take to Africa'. ... So, then I started ringing around other companies, Universal Cycle, Raleigh, GPO, Center Parcs, and they were all great, '[Yes] you can have the bikes'. So, we [had] got a supplier. And then, I went back to the old driver that we had with the IOT and said 'Would you like to continue working and the prison will physically pay you?' So, we negotiated a price and he comes in with his own van and he collects the bikes. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

The IOT staff themselves also did their best to help the workshops to continue, despite the fact that they were not obliged to.

I kept in touch with the prisons for three or four months and I gave them everything that

I had. ... All the information, all the contacts, all the pending projects that were on the list to do, so that they could continue. (Former IOT staff member)

Nonetheless, despite the dedication and commitment from individual prison staff, not all of the IOT workshops were able to sustain themselves and a number had to eventually close.

We carried on running them [the workshops] as best we could with the materials that we had [remaining] and then eventually it just wrapped up. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

In general, charity workshops tend to be in the minority in prisons when compared to profitable production-based workshops, and with the IOT now gone, there are consequently even fewer charity workshops within the secure estate. Added to this, many of those interviewed expressed a general concern about the longevity of IOT-type charity workshops within prisons because of their inherent lack of profitability.

It [the IOT workshop] wasn't taken on board ... in the prison because we didn't make any money. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

I think individual prisons, and probably the prison service as a whole, still values charity work, but they can't afford to run it. (Former IOT staff member)

[How do you see the future for charity workshops?] I fear for them. ... They'll go if we need to make more money. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

And even those workshop instructors who had struggled to continue their workshops after the demise of IOT were concerned that the prison would eventually come to view their workshops' non-profitability unfavourably and shut them down.

You have to make sure that you're a value to the prison, because if you are, then they might not close you down. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

4. *IT Schools Africa* delivers recycled computers to schools in Africa.

5. *Jole Rider* works with prisons to refurbish bikes for their *Bikes4Africa* programme.

6. *Wheels for the World* restore and distribute refurbished wheelchairs to Africa and eastern Europe.

7. *Re-Cycle* collects and distributes second-hand bicycles to Africa.

The demise of the IOT: the impact on prisoners

Both prison staff and former IOT staff believed that it was those prisoners who had been previously involved with the IOT workshops that had been most disadvantaged by the IOT's demise. The rapidity of the closure of many of the IOT's workshops caused a substantial amount of uncertainty and disruption for prisoners — particularly in the first few weeks following the demise of IOT.

Despite the IOT workshops paying prisoners less than production-based workshops⁸, they were nonetheless very popular with prisoners — primarily because the IOT workshops were seen as more interesting than other prison workshops and prisoners appreciated the opportunities to develop skills.

There's another [work]shop [in the prison] where they put light bulbs in trailer boards. I saw that and I thought, 'I'd go mental if I had to do that my whole sentence'. (Former IOT workshop participant)

This [the IOT workshop] is the only worthwhile occupation within the prison. It is challenging, interesting, worthwhile, and has many applications outside of prison. (IOT workshop participant⁹)

I work on Braille and to ... do my job you basically have to learn a completely new language, ... you have to take an outside [RNIB Braille] exam. Now, there isn't a lot of people who actually went on a [prison work]shop where you have to learn a completely separate language to be able to do your job. So the people I actually work with [in the IOT workshop] are in there because they want to do the job, [even though] we're not as well paid [as some other prison workshops]. (IOT workshop participant)

The IOT workshops were also reported as having a more relaxed and supportive atmosphere than production-based workshops.

[There's a] more pleasant atmosphere [in the IOT workshops as compared to other workshops]. People are more polite, and

generally there is no trouble. (IOT workshop participant)

Not everybody [in the IOT workshops] is the same intellectual level of learning. Some people really, really struggle. Some people find it very easy. So it tends to be between ourselves. We help each other. (IOT workshop participant)

In addition, the prison staff reported that due to the atmosphere that characterised them, the IOT workshops appeared to be particularly beneficial for 'difficult' prisoners¹⁰.

I've had people [troublesome prisoners] that can't work anywhere else [in the prison] working for me. I mean I've had governors saying to me 'Are you sure you want him? [and] it's like 'Well, yeah, he's all right with me'. And then it would be [the prisoner saying] 'You know, I've had a really good time here today' on the first day and ... they get on with it, and you never have any problem with them at all. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

I remember [an IOT workshop instructor] telling me about a chap who was very violent who'd come into his [work]shop. He started off sitting at the back and he [the prisoner] wouldn't, ... he couldn't have anyone [sat] behind him. ... [But] within sort of six months of being in his workshop he would sit right at the front and that was a massive thing for him [the prisoner]. (Former IOT staff member)

The extent to which the IOT workshops were enjoyed and valued by the prisoners was often reflected in their behaviour when they returned to the wings.

It [the IOT] helped the [prisoners'] behaviour. ... On the wings, it [reportedly] helped prison staff. When somebody's gone and been doing a good days work, he goes back on the wing and he's much calmer and is much more pleasant to be with. (Former IOT staff member)

8. An ex-IOT workshop participant said: 'We got £10.50 a week compared to £13 in other shops'.

9. During the initial fieldwork phase of the full evaluation (undertaken prior to the demise of the IOT in 2007), the views of a number of IOT workshop participants were gathered. Where relevant, these views have been included in this article.

10. Data on IOT participants from the central Inmate Information System (IIS) held by the Home Office showed that, compared with the total prison population, IOT participants had typically been convicted of more serious crimes — such as violent crime (36% of participants) and sexual offences (11% of participants) — and were serving longer than average sentences — two-thirds of participants were serving a sentence of longer than 12 months, and one in ten was serving a life sentence.

In addition, both prisoners and prison staff emphasised the restorative aspect of the IOT workshops. While not direct restoration to the victim, the workshops did encourage reflection of other people's situations and gave participants an opportunity to make a positive contribution to the wider community.

All my life, all I've done is take off people. Since I started working here [in the IOT workshop], I look at what I can do for people instead. (IOT workshop participant)

You're putting something back... [You think] 'I'm actually making a difference in somebody's life'. (Former IOT workshop participant)

It makes you think about these things. It must be awful for them. ... And you step out of yours and into their shoes. (Former IOT workshop participant)

And with the IOT and prison staff ensuring that personal feedback from recipients of the goods was given to the prisoners, not only was the 'restorative loop' thereby completed, but prisoners' self-esteem was also increased.

I receive a great deal of job satisfaction from seeing the photographs and reading the letters of the recipients of the wheelchairs I have worked on. This is the most positive aspect of the work. (IOT workshop participant)

[The IOT workshop] gives one a sense of worth and importance. Emotions that are few and far between in prison. (IOT workshop participant)

[The prisoners] were very proud of what they did. Many a time, when the people came to pick up the bikes, or the wheelchairs, the prisoners would have their photos taken with the bikes that were going out so that they could show people, tell people. They were very proud of what they did and they got a lot out of it. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

The IOT workshops also offered substantial potential for increasing prisoner engagement in education — recognising the contribution that qualifications and accredited skills could make to prisoners' employability once back in the community.

The provision of a relaxed environment, with prisoners engaged in meaningful work that they enjoy, was viewed as a particularly effective means of getting prisoners interested in education (despite commonly shared poor experiences of formal education).

We used to run VQs. It weren't a big qualification but it was part of working towards an NVQ, so we used to do ten elements of a VQ and there were quite a lot of lads got that. (Former IOT workshop instructor)

Indeed, in some IOT workshops, 'education pods' were introduced to allow staff from the prison education department to deliver educational activities on a part-time basis to IOT workshop participants.

If you needed to do a course, like Enhanced Thinking Skills [in order to progress your sentence], you could do that part-time, [and] you didn't lose your workshop place. (Former IOT workshop participant)

Conclusions

For those prison service staff involved with the IOT workshops, the sudden demise of the IOT was shocking and caused immediate disruption to their work. While some workshops were continued by the prisons themselves or other charities (with success often directly related to the original IOT instructor's initiative and determination to sustain their workshop/s), unfortunately many of the workshops could not be sustained over the longer-term and subsequently closed. This resulted in a significant reduction in the capacity of many prisons to deliver purposeful activities. Added to this, with charity workshops tending to be in the minority in prisons (as production-based workshops are favoured due to their profitability), the IOT's demise means that there are now even fewer charity workshops within the secure estate.


While prison staff reported feeling sad at the loss of the IOT workshops, which for many had provided a relatively pleasant 'oasis' in an otherwise stressful prison environment, they believed that it was the prisoners themselves who were most disadvantaged by the demise of the IOT. Prisoners reported valuing the relaxed and supportive environment of the IOT workshops and the opportunity to feel challenged and learn new skills. Furthermore, the calm and supportive atmosphere had encouraged prisoners to communicate more with staff and amongst themselves. As a result, the workshops helped

prisoners to build positive relationships, learn team-working skills, and develop both support networks and social skills. Prison staff reported that they found the workshops beneficial for all types of prisoner, but in particular, those serving long sentences and those that were deemed to be vulnerable. IOT workshops were also valuable for prisoners who were difficult or violent, with participation in the workshops often resulting in their behaviour being more stable when they returned to the wings.

Both prisoners and prison staff emphasised the restorative aspects of IOT workshops as being particularly important. While this was not direct restoration to the individual victim, it did encourage reflection of other people's situations, promote the development of empathy, and enable prisoners to make a positive contribution to society. The IOT themselves ensured that personal feedback from recipients of the goods was delivered to the prisoners, thereby completing the 'restorative loop'.

Overall, there is no doubt that the demise of IOT and the resulting cessation of many of the IOT workshops has resulted in the loss of an extremely valuable service. As one former IOT workshop instructor summarised:

What annoyed me was that the Prison Service itself didn't take it [the IOT workshops] up in a more vigorous way. ... They were terrified I think, of being labelled soft or whatever — ... 'These people are in prison for punishment. Therefore we'll make it as dull and horrible as possible'. ... But it doesn't work, and everybody knows it doesn't work. ... They [IOT participants] said what a breath of fresh air it was for them to be able to do something creative and positive and life-affirming. ... It was win-win-win. There wasn't a down-side to it as far as I could see.


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