

A change of Ethos and Delivery

Short-term Prison Sentences vs Community Sentencing

The 2002 Social Exclusion Report, [*'Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners'*](#) provided a comprehensive insight into the causes of crime and how to reduce re-offending. Sadly, little has been done to implement the recommendations that followed that research. Indeed, many people within the CJS have not even read it. Consequently, we are now facing even greater challenges, with the recent riots in our cities and the associated crimes re-emphasising what was previously learned.

The riots have however promoted new energy into the debate and we must be hopeful that something positive will arise. Importantly, it is clear that what we have been doing has not worked and as Rita Mae Brown wrote in her book, 'Sudden Death', *"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results"*. Change is urgently required.

When considering offending behaviour it is essential that we go back to basics and ask the fundamental question – *'why do people behave as they do'?* Whilst the basic answer is relatively simple and well researched, addressing it is a complex issue. Behaviour is a reflection of our individual **thoughts and feelings**, all of which stem from our personal experiences in life and the environment in which we have grown up.

Changing the **thoughts and feelings** inevitably leads to a change in behaviour. Yet, for those who offend, rather than attempt to promote change, by default we have tended to re-enforce the existing negative situation – *'you are a bad person and worthless. You will never achieve anything in life and every time you make a mistake we are going to punish you, exclude you and lock you up'!*

I am not suggesting that the consequences of committing crime should not include some form of associated punishment. I am however suggesting that those consequences and punishment need to include new and positive experiences that serve to promote the fundamental change in personal **'thoughts and feelings'**. Without this, the behaviour will remain unchanged. If we reflect upon our personal lives and ask some key questions, we start to recognise what is actually needed –

Where would we be now had we not grown up in a safe and caring environment?

How would we have been had we not been given boundaries and taught standards in behaviour (right and wrong) and social values?

What would have happened to us if our family and others had not been there to support us during our times of need?

Where would we be without the ability to read, write, communicate and manage our personal affairs?

Had we been abused and left to fend for ourselves, how would we be now?

Had we not been given the opportunity to undertake positive and enjoyable experiences, how would we feel now? What would our sense of self-worth be like?

Thoughts / Feelings / Behaviour

Maslow's hierarchy of basic human needs is an excellent example of how, from the most basic requirements of food, water and shelter, through to what he described as security, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, self-worth and self-actualisation, our personality and needs develop. The majority of offenders have rarely experienced the higher levels of need; they have simply missed out on what most of us take for granted. Consequently, they are unable to relate to them or understand what they mean. As for punishment, most offenders have been punished so much during their lives they simply do not care, and often do not care that they do not care.

Prison, by its very nature and infrastructure is not conducive to delivering the positive changes in **thoughts, feelings and behaviour** that an offender needs and society demands. Unfortunately, many people see Community sentences as a soft option and, to be fair, some are not as mentally challenging and constructive as they could be; that is not to say they cannot be improved. Importantly, because they are not constrained by the custodial environment, Community sentences can provide numerous opportunities for exposure to new and positive experiences, experiences that many offenders have never been helped to undertake or considered – an appreciation for life outside their immediate environment, success, a sense of self worth, social contribution and personal responsibility, all of which enable an offender to recognise that their life can be very different.

Such provision requires a fundamental change in ethos and approach, including the employment of people with appropriate confidence, leadership, life skills and belief to deliver it. Such people also provide the role modelling so often missing in an offender's life. Whilst there is clearly a cost in terms of time and money, the outcomes and overall reduction in re-offending can provide a net return that is undoubtedly worth the investment, including the promotion of improved values and standards, increasing inclusion and a reduction in selfishness and fear of crime.

Meaningful Community sentences can be more effective than short-term prison sentences.