**Notes from the Prison/Probation Seminar - Saturday 28th June 2019**

**Venue: Park Inn, York**

Attendees were welcomed to the seminar by the Trustee for Prisons Pat McG and the Trustee for Probation Maxine W. The AA Preamble and the Declaration of Unity were read.

**Criminal Justice and Probation presentation entitled ‘The inside Storey, Freedom Behind Bars’**

This was given my Pat McG (see attached PowerPoint file). Highlights from which include:

* AA meetings take place in 64% of UK prisons
* Carrying the message into prisons can: -
	1. Help inmates cope better with their difficulties and stresses in prison
	2. Help to reduce the chances of reoffending after release and increase the chance of ex-offenders living fulfilling and productive lives - many ex-prisoners going on to become valuable members of AA.
	3. Enhance the sobriety of the visiting member

Pat’s presentation also covered: -

* Prison Postal Service
* An AA information sheet for prison staff
* An example ‘service level agreement’
* Recommendations regarding the selection of prison sponsors and their teams
* Personal conduct within prisons
* Content of a typical meeting
* Security clearance

**Presentation by Heather N.**

Heather is a long-standing, regular visitor to HMP Full Sutton (near York), which is a Category A men’s prison with the 5th highest security level in Europe.

Heather said that carrying AA’s message in this prison has been vital in maintaining her sobriety. Heather has learned that, despite what she may have learned about a prisoner’s offending, she does not display feelings or emotions and is there to simply show love and to carry the message of hope.

Security clearance for this prison took Heather one year to complete and also involved a considerable amount of training. Consistent with AA’s guidelines, Heather always visits with another man. There have been no serious incidents and Heather has always felt safe.

Heather believes that the seed of hope is very important. Prisoners get to know how their alcoholism lay behind why they are there and they find out that *The Promises* can and do materialise. Heather has seen some profound changes in prisoners, sometimes over a period of time. She has seen men learning to live with other people just as they are and has seen serenity. Prisoners have shared ‘we have found a new way of doing things and a kind of stability we never had’.

**Share - Davey McW.**

Davey gave a very moving account of his life experiences and his time in Barlinnie prison both before and after he “ran into the arms of AA”. He described the profound change that has been brought about. A small selection of his inspiring words: “people showed me how to live”, “I went straight into service” and “a prisoner may not be ready (yet) but, if in a meeting, is in with a chance”.

Clearly, AA members are doing a huge amount of vital work at Barlinnie. The significant cooperation from the prison authorities with AA is not only much appreciated, but also a testament to the way our members carry themselves and the positive effects of AA on the lives of so many prisoners in Barlinnie over many years.

**Talk by Tom Fox – Head of Corporate Affairs Scottish Prison Service**

Tom has been working with AA/Prison Sponsors for the past 12 years. He said that the Scottish Prison service (SPS) had benefitted hugely over the past 50-60 years from the work of AA volunteers.

As there are only 15 prisons in Scotland (of which 2 are private). Tom recognises that it has been easier to build and maintain a good relationship with AA in Scotland than it has in England and Wales.

Tom has been able, on occasion, to smooth the way for ex-offenders to visit prisons as AA members. He said that the SPS has recognised that the ‘sheep-dip’ method of solving prisoners’ problems cannot work (in the past the approach was ‘where there is a deficit, we (the SPS) will fill it’). Instead efforts are now being made to create an environment for ***agency***– asking the prisoner “what can you do?” Clearly this chimes with AA’s principles of taking personal responsibility and being accountable for our actions. Tom said “the challenges for people coming out of prison are, for us, almost unimaginable”.

The SPS has a mission statement containing 7 values, one of which is “***Humility****- We cannot do this on our own, we recognise that we can learn from others*”.

Crime rates are the lowest for 50 years, however the prison population has gone up a lot recently and is now at around 8,250. Other trends are longer sentences and therefore an older average prisoner age. Drink is a bigger problem than drugs. For a significant number of prisoners, alcohol is a major factor in offending. Tom said that prisons are full of fear, of yesterday, of tomorrow - cannot live in today. Tom wants prisoners to know that they don’t need to be a prisoner of what shaped them – a message of hope.

When talking to new prison officer recruits, he expects the correct answer when posing the question “Do you believe people can change for the better?” Tom wants to create an environment where prisoners can change themselves. They cannot create such an environment without the help of people like AA. Prisoners need to believe that it ispossible for them – again the AA member shows this by example.

**Talk by Keith Gardner – Head of Analysis and Improvement, Community Justice Scotland**

Keith delivered a presentation describing the scope and activities of Community Justice Scotland (established in 2017). Community Justice Scotland oversees large number of Criminal Justice Partnerships, Criminal Justice Coordinators and 8 other statutory partners. Taken together, these manage and aim to rehabilitate (i) offenders convicted in Scotland but not sent to prison and (ii) offenders released from prison and then subject to supervision in the community.

Keith said what works are:

* Mentoring
* Holistic Resettlement
* Alcohol Interventions
* Peer and family Interventions

Keith places a great emphasis on the establishment of meaningful relationships, adding that what has been absent in the past are love, faith and hope. Keith was very appreciative of what AA has to offer in support of their work.

**Ministry of Justice Presentation: by Robert Stanbury and Sarah Hancock (see accompanying slides)**

Robert began by saying there is a desire within the MOJ to facilitate ‘Mutual Aid’ (12-Step Fellowships) in prisons because there is clear empirical evidence that it works. He quoted the Patel Report ‘DHSC 2010’, which concluded that 12-Step involvement is highly effective and therefore valued. Governors and commissioners of services within prisons are held to account for ensuring mutual aid is available.

Robert and Sarah then talked about vetting. There is recognition at Minister level that there are advantages for people with previous convictions but with ‘relevant expertise’ being allowed into prisons. For this category of vetting (Standard Plus), the Governor has ultimate discretion. People without any convictions would go through ‘Enhanced Vetting’.

Watchwords for completing vetting forms – disclose ALL you know. If in doubt or if dates and precise details are unknown – state it in general terms. It was pointed out that applicants need to complete the electronic form within 15 days otherwise it expires.

Between August 2015 and August 2018 74% of ‘Standard Plus’ applications were successful.

Checks are done by SSCL (Shared Services Connected Limited) based in Newport, Wales.

In the Q&A that followed, it was identified that some vetting delays and apparent failures were due to members not dealing directly with the prison’s ‘vetting contact point’. Sometimes, when DART teams or other staff in the prison get involved, the process can break down.

The Government guidance and rules are set out on the following websites:

https://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/offenders/psipso/psi-2014/psi-07-2014-security-vetting.pdf

https://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/offenders/psipso/psi-2014/psi-27-2014-security-vetting-additional-risk.pdf

**Bob McD and Neal C - Members of the Probation Sub-Committee**

**Bob McD.** briefly described the history of Probation services in England and Wales, beginning in 1907 when it took over from churches. Then there was a gradual shift from “social work” to punishment. In 2004 the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) was introduced with the subsequent opening up of the service to competition. In 2008, major reforms were announced involving the splitting of probation services between the ‘National Probation Service’ (NPS) and ‘Community Rehabilitation Companies’. Many problems ensued including, lowering of morale, loss of confidence by courts, loss of experienced staff.

**2020 plans:** - 11 new probation regions delivering supervision to everyone - but will be obliged to contract with private and voluntary groups for all interventions. These further changes may take a while to bed down!

Probation services are involved throughout the criminal justice system. Pre-sentence reports, which can include options for diversion; Through the Gate; supervision of those released on licence; supervision of those on community sentences; “breaching” those in default of licence conditions; enduring that training, treatment and rehabilitation are made available to offenders who require them. Probation officers carry the same spread of opinion about AA as everyone else. It’s good to get to talk to individual Probation officers – even more effective to get them along to AA meetings. Steering an individual towards AA can make a big difference to their lives and their chances of reoffending.

Finally, we are always here – with the same commitment and preparedness to go wherever our help is needed.

**Neal** **C.** listed a few of the activities that are being successfully carried out throughout the country that fall within the remit of Probation Liaison. Namely: -

* Work with prison ‘resettlement teams’ with prisoners who are approaching their release date (‘Through the Gate’)
* NPS and Community Rehabilitation Companies: - Meetings with local Senior Probation Officers and also presentation slots at one of their regular team meetings. Suggested format being:
	+ A 10 minute ES&H share from a member who has experienced prison/probation
	+ An explanation of what AA is, what AA isn’t
	+ Discussion regarding practical ways of helping relevant offenders get to AA meetings
	+ The Chit System
	+ Q&A – helps engagement with individual probation officers and uncovers perceived difficulties about cooperating with AA
* Approaches to Police and Crime Commissioners (at least one PCC has attended an open AA meeting)
* Approaches to Police, particularly those working in custody suites
* Approaches to Magistrates
* Approaches to services such as ‘Liaison and Diversion’ (or similar agencies commissioned to provide health and welfare support in the courts and police stations

**In conclusion**:

The Trustee for Probation Maxine W. thanked everyone for attending and for their service in AA. Maxine asked us to remember that by being active in carrying the message, if we can help just one person to get sober, then we have made a difference.

**The seminar closed with the serenity Prayer at 3:55pm.**