

Written evidence submitted by Safe Ground

Introduction

Safe Ground is an award-winning arts education organisation responsible for the first ever arts-based family learning programmes in UK prisons). Our flagship Family Man (FM) and Fathers Inside (FI) programmes have been delivered to almost 6000 men in over 60 prisons since 2003.

Alongside these well evidenced and popular programmes, we design and deliver a range of bespoke programmatic interventions in custodial and community settings. Our direct delivery to groups and individuals is complemented by a range of arts events, public and policy work all designed to challenge and change the notion of punishment as a singular or reliable response to harm.

We work with up to 250 children, young people, men, women, staff and family members inside and outside secure settings in an average year and in 2020 we celebrate our 25th birthday as an organisation.

There is extensive evidence of the impact of our programmes; Justice Data Lab 2013, 2014 and 2016 and 15 academic studies all demonstrate that our programmes impact on improved family relationships and re-engagement with education, training and employment (ETE). Justice Data Lab Research (December 2016) shows that 50 men who attended our Family Man programme were 16 percentage points (40%) less likely to reoffend than a matched pair control group of men who did not take the Fathers Inside programme. This is one of the most significant results of any programme ever measured by The Justice Data Lab² and led to Safe Ground winning The Longford Prize in 2017 for penal reform

“Safe Ground has an outstanding and independently-verified track record of reaching the angry young men who both commit crime and are victims of crime. Its ‘Man Up’ and ‘Fathers Inside’ programmes challenge those in both the adult and the youth estate to develop a greater self-awareness and resilience that will lead them to change the entrenched patterns of their lives.” – The Longford Trust 2017 .”

Despite the Farmer Review 2017³ describing family work as ‘a golden thread’, we have less guarantee than ever that our well evidenced work will be commissioned in any planned manner.

What follows is an extract from a briefing Safe Ground wrote in 2019, reviewing the first year’s impact of the Dynamic Purchasing System. The whole document gives some broader context and is available on request. It was not formally published, but on our website.

--HOW POLICY IMPACTS CRIMINAL JUSTICE CHARITIES--

...In May 2016, Dame Sally Coates published her prominent review of education within prisons and highlighted areas of reform, including greater autonomy for prison governors. Following this, the

government published a White Paper ('Prison Safety and Reform') later that year which addressed the issues within the prison estate and promised to deliver a number of reforms as set out in the Coates review.

Amongst other areas, governors would be given "greater power over service provision in their prison, devolving control over education, work, family ties, offender behaviour and resettlement programmes".¹ In April 2019, the education system within prisons completely changed. Previously under OLASS (Offender Learning and Skills Service), voluntary organisations were commissioned by education providers to run programmes and provide educational services for people in prison. This system was replaced by the formation of the Prison Education Framework (PEF) and the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS). The PEF provides a core curriculum in prisons, including English, Maths, ICT, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). Alongside this, the DPS enables prison governors to recruit smaller providers and voluntary organisations to provide their services through a bidding process. In essence, governors "commission the providers and manage its delivery".² This grants greater autonomy to governors and so localises control over prison education. According to the Coates report, this was intended to create a more individualistic approach to prison education which would yield longer-lasting benefits for people leaving prison.³

Even before its introduction in April 2019, however, the risks of moving contract management from independent education providers to prison governors were identified. In January 2019, the Criminal Justice Alliance pointed out that those who manage prisons do not always have experience in managing contracts and have little time to do this on top of their other responsibilities.⁴ Furthermore, current pressures on the prison system have prevented effective progress in implementing the White Paper's proposals. The thinktank *Reform* identified prison staff shortages and reduced investment (real-terms spending on prisons fell in 2016-17 and 2017-18) as hindering the success of the new policies.⁵ Those involved in prison management have also expressed doubt about the effectiveness of the reforms. According to the Justice Committee, the Prison Governors' Association is "firmly of the belief that Prison Safety and Reform [the 2016 White Paper] has in the main been a damp squib. The White Paper promised much change for the better, but the reality is that for the Governor running their prison, the promised reform has been minimal."⁶ The Committee requested a government evaluation on the impact of granting greater autonomy to governors, but no such thing had been published at the time of their report's writing in October 2019.⁷ It can be difficult, therefore, to assess how the PEF and DPS have affected prisons and those who manage them, whereas the impact upon service providers is perhaps easier to witness.

The total budget for the DPS is around £16 million.⁸ Contracts have recently been extended from one to two years in an attempt to increase financial security for providers. HMPPS argues that the short-term contracts "provide an opportunity for further competition.

¹ Ministry of Justice, 'Prison Safety and Reform' (2016), p.9

² Ministry of Justice, 'Education and Employment Strategy' (2016), p.13

³ Dame S. Coates, *Ministry of Justice*, 'Unlocking Potential: A review of education in prison' (2016), p.5

⁴ F. Cooney, *Criminal Justice Alliance*, 'New prison education contracts create challenges and opportunities' (2019). Available at: <http://criminaljusticealliance.org/blog/new-prison-education-contracts-create-challenges-opportunities/> [accessed 24/02/20]

⁵ A. Shilson-Thomas, *Reform*, 'The prison system: Priorities for investment' (2020), p.5

⁶ Justice Committee, *House of Commons*, 'Prison Governance: First Report of Session 2019' (2019), p.16

⁷ *Ibid*, p.26

⁸ Prisoner Learning Alliance and Clinks, 'Voluntary Sector Roundtable on Learning from the Prison Education Dynamic Purchasing System' (2019). Available at: <https://prisonerlearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Minutes-of-the-voluntary-sector-roundtable-on-the-DPS-10th-July-2019.pdf>

We believe this maintains a competitive element that enables smaller suppliers (which have been requested by governors) to engage, as well as driving up the quality, flexibility and value of the work.”⁹

Among other organisations, however, Safe Ground challenges the fundamental nature of the DPS; extending contract length does not solve its underlying issues surrounding commissioning and delivery.

The Justice Committee reports their concern that the DPS, which was intended to widen prison access to education and service providers, acts as a disincentive both for governors to seek services and for services to apply for commission.¹⁰ In addition, where DPS contracts are granted, these tend to be for IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance). These services, which aim to increase employability for people in prison, have received over half of the total DPS funding while bespoke arts provision has received just 3% of the total funding so far.¹¹ This is disappointing and reveals how prison management are not prioritising the vital arts provision which has shown to transform the lives of those in prison.¹²

The new system has negatively impacted many organisations which provide specialised and tailored programmes. This has impacted upon the quality of education delivered in prisons as arts and family courses tend to be side-lined for the more traditional Maths and English courses covered by the PEF, or for IAG services which dominate the DPS’ budget. It has also had repercussions for the way in which smaller organisations are commissioned, often leading to financial instability and insecurity when demand for services decreases. Safe Ground is only one such example; while some broader organisations may have benefitted from the new policy, many small criminal justice charities across the UK are struggling to adapt and survive.

Safe Ground remains in discussion with representatives from the MoJ and a number of charitable organisations. We aim to establish how the quality of education provided by the DPS is being measured, how many small, specialist organisations can continue to deliver evidence-based impact like that of our programmes, and to what extent the DPS improves services for people in prison.

--We look forward to the Ministry of Justice publishing impact data on these issues--.

Recent events and future impacts

Since the Covid 19 public health crisis, much has changed to worsen the complex realities of education and personal development opportunities in prisons across the UK. A total failure by government to implement any early release scheme and a lockdown situation removing all visits for months at a time have compounded what was an already tinder box situation. [The important work](#) of Article 39 and The Howard League, amongst others during this time have all focused on children

[accessed 17/03/20]

⁹ P. Copple, *HMPPS* (2020). Letter to C. Weinberg, 4 March

¹⁰ Justice Committee, ‘Prison Governance’, p.48

¹¹ F. Cooney, *Prisoner Learning Alliance*, ‘One year on – what’s happening with the DPS?’ (2019). Available at: <https://prisonerlearningalliance.org.uk/2019/12/one-year-on-whats-happening-with-the-dps/> [accessed 17/03/20]

¹² L. Brewster, ‘The Impact of Prison Arts Programs on Inmate Attitudes and Behavior: A Quantitative Evaluation’, *Justice Policy Journal* 11 (2), (2014); L. M. Johnson, ‘A Place for Art in Prison: Art as a Tool for Rehabilitation and Management’, *The Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice*, 5 (2), (2008) pp.100-120

in secure settings, most of whom have been without any educational, recreational or social stimulation for months, often in cells for 23.5 hours a day.

Simultaneously, MoJ has been working with education and virtual service providers to fast track a series of online and IT adaptations. Some virtual contact systems have been established (although reliability, quality and equivalence are all hotly contested) and increasingly, there are rumours of education provision becoming transferred to a virtual platform. Safe Ground is participating in a process of developing complementary and supplementary, interim and accompanying online materials and curriculum; however, a transfer to online learning would be a huge mistake and would undermine years of experience and evidence established for the value, unique and significant experience and the absolute requirement of in person, group and collective learning experiences.

Alongside the Prisoner Learning Alliance, Safe Ground (a founder member of PLA and long serving advisory board member until 2020), advocate for at best, a blended mix of online and face to face education opportunities for all. Removing access to in person, therapeutic group work for any reason, cannot be justified nor is there a rationale to do so. It is however, a real threat to quality service provision and to the valuable environment in which we operate.

Over 25 years, Safe Ground has worked in collaboration with DfE (co-funded with NOMS for 2 years as well as by DCSF previous to that, MoJ and Home Office previous to that); and with NOMS, HMPPS and individual prisons, secure training centres and secure children's homes to deliver quality and to innovate and support. At this point we feel it is imperative not only that our important contributions be recognised and acknowledged (by formal inclusion as part of educational curricula); but also that our concerns, questions, proposals and models for how education might be enhanced, promoted, developed and delivered, be incorporated and taken seriously.

Organisations like Safe Ground, PET, PLA and others could be huge assets in the design and delivery of meaningful services to improve people's lives. As it is, we are more often treated as disposable or interchangeable outside influences who do not have a place at the table. Much like people in prison and their families themselves. This in itself is a lesson we learn and a form of 'social modelling' we internalise.

Meaningful, valuable and life-long learning is a process that involves the learner as much as the teacher. It requires the input, support, commitment and appropriate appreciation from leadership and from all involved in the design, delivery and access of the service. We have a quarter of a century experience of delivering excellence in some of the most complex, difficult and unlikely environments and we believe we continue to offer invaluable insights and input both to policy makers and to learners.

Education in prison is a fundamental gateway to critical engagement, clarity, personal development and transformational change, just as it is in any environment. The importance of high quality, evidence based and participant led, therapeutic and group work programmes cannot and must not be overlooked or lost alongside a governmental drive to promote employment or functional skills. These are not unilateral or unconnected processes and our skill in engaging, supporting and enabling people to find their own routes to development will be well placed at the heart of all educational design.

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December 2020