

Written evidence submitted by the Chartered Institute of Libraries and Information Professionals, Prison Libraries Group

The Prison Libraries Group (PrLG) is a special interest group of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). The aim of the group is to serve the interest of all members concerned with the provision of library services to prison communities. The group is committed to improving the quality of the service whilst raising the profile of prison libraries.

PrLG believes that a professionally managed prison library service can be of benefit to the whole prison community and can support prison management and prison education in the delivery of key aims and objectives.

We believe that prisoner rehabilitation makes social and economic sense. Prison libraries and prison library staff play a key part in this by helping to improve prisoner literacy skills, encouraging a love of reading for pleasure and improving basic online skills.

Prison libraries and appropriately qualified and skilled library staff offer a neutral environment for prisoners outside of the formal education and learning provision within the prison. A good prison library can:

- Enable prisoners to develop new skills and improve existing skills
- Help prisoners to locate, understand and communicate appropriate information
- Provide opportunities for prisoners to maintain family links through reading projects
- Enhance the well-being and raise the self-esteem and aspirations of prisoners
- Mirror the service offered by public libraries and enable prisoners to develop the library habit during their sentence and after release

The prison library can provide a welcoming, neutral space where prisoners can feel safe and relaxed. This type of space can be similar to a public library space which may give prisoners confidence to use public libraries on release. The prison library is a space where prisoners can interact socially in a positive manner. Research has shown that it can also have a normalising effect on behaviour (CILIP Prison Libraries Group generic social outcomes survey 2017).

Information literacy

Prisoners are cut off from most of the sources of information available to those “outside.” They may also lack the necessary information literacy skills to find and assess information. The prison library can give them independent or supported access to information. The library is also trusted by prisoners. Prisoners can get anxious and frustrated when they cannot access information, which can have a detrimental effect on their behaviour. A prison library with good information services can take pressure off wing staff and contribute to a calmer environment. Library staff are fundamental in helping prisoners to locate, retrieve, understand and communicate information. This is an important and transferrable skill.

Learning support

The library can support the learning process by helping students to find books for further reading relevant to their course and provide materials to help prisoners develop study skills and information literacy skills. The library is accessible to all and can provide independent learning opportunities for prisoners who are unable to attend classes due to security issues, or those who are reluctant to engage with formal learning. Literacy is a vital skill which enables full participation in society and is essential for academic and economic success. Prison libraries can work with prisoners of all abilities and help and encourage them to improve their skills.

Reading for pleasure

The role that reading for pleasure can play in the development of prisoners' skills is often underestimated. Reading builds knowledge, supports learning, grows understanding and provides an important escape route and release valve. It can also connect people, create supportive networks, build social capital and improve quality of life. Reading is also emerging as a powerful and versatile health and well-being tool. Taking part in activities such as reading groups helps prisoners to develop communication, reasoning and listening skills. Family reading projects, such as Storybook Dads/Mums can help prisoners to maintain family links.

Reading is an activity that can be done anywhere. In prison, it is an important way of enabling prisoners to be positively occupied during their time in cell.

Cultural and creative activity

Prison libraries can develop creative partnerships with organisations within the prison and in the outside community. Partnership working with arts organisations can enable prison libraries to deliver a programme of arts and cultural activities in the library. Many prisoners have never attended any sort of cultural event and activities such as author visits, poetry workshops or performances can broaden their horizons and increase their self-esteem. Libraries may also be able to access local and national arts funding streams to support activities.

Prison libraries really do change lives – not in earth-shattering ways, but simply by doing what public libraries do best. Providing a comfortable, neutral space, being non-judgemental, enabling people to discover, democratising knowledge, giving emotional enrichment. Simple things, but things which have a greater significance within the bleak landscape of a prison sentence.

“The friendly, supportive role that the library and its management provide is invaluable and vital... from a literary and educational basis.” (Prisoner, HMP Swaleside)

“Reading is one of the few pastimes we can use to educate ourselves further. I find it’s a big help with mental health and it’s a sense of escape from the prison world. For a moment it

can give you an independent feeling and enhance your mind to the world and culture around you.” (Prisoner, HMP Elmley)

“The library and reading is important to me as it helps me understand people more and how things work as I find it hard because of my special needs.” (Prisoner, HMP Elmley)

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