

Lewes prison staff embrace



Skills for Life

A *Skills for Life* (SfL) initiative currently in operation at Lewes Prison in East Sussex could provide the model for the training of prison staff across the whole country. The East Sussex prison has opened its gates to The Network, based at Lancaster University, so that it can introduce a whole organisational, awareness-raising pilot project for its staff: managers, trainers, officers, caterers, cleaners and chaplains. It is thought to be the first scheme of its kind in Britain.

The aim, over several months, is to embed *Skills for Life* into every aspect of the staff's working practices. The Network, a membership organisation dedicated to workplace language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) provision, is advising senior prison staff on how this might best be done. If it succeeds, it could become the blueprint for all British jails.

The Network is seeking to introduce 'top-to-toe' *Skills for Life* awareness into the prison's policy areas, its recruitment, selection and induction processes, and its appraisal and performance reviews. Early on, The Network's consultants and Prison Training Manager will make clear the levels of SfL

training entitlement that are available to employees – that is, visiting, temporary and volunteer staff, as well as permanent and agency staff. Following on, the Network will help to promote and deliver off-the-job training for staff and embed SfL into on-the-job training.

"This is a new area for The Network to get involved in," said David Mathew, who is co-ordinating the project with colleague Sara Whalley. "In that sense it is exciting, particularly as I am sure there are areas of need that will emerge that we haven't yet envisaged. However, the most exciting aspect is that this may well provide the *Skills for Life* model for prisons throughout the country."

The first objective is to introduce a *Skills for Life* element into the prison's own staff induction process. This will take the form of either the Move On mini test or the Target Skills test, both of which are currently in operation at Lewes. The pilot will then try to embed SfL into existing training programmes, which will be supported by a prison managers' toolkit. It is hoped that from these approaches a document will emerge that identifies clear progression routes for staff. Integral to the package is the need to market the training to staff via a range of considered and timely methods which will include open days, talks and workshops, as well as publicity material.

The decision by Governor Eoin McLennan-Murray to give the pilot the green light was partly prompted by the growing complexity of working procedures. Regulations within Her Majesty's prisons have become far more stringent in recent years and the knock-on effect of that is more demanding work for staff.

Eoin McLennan-Murray, who for two years worked in the DfES's Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit, is fully backing the initiative. "It is vital we embed learning in the prison's overall delivery processes," he said. "Locally, we need to iron out some errors in our written work – grammar mistakes, wrong use of words, and so on. We need to present the right professional image, not least to solicitors and the courts.

"Following health and safety regulations (such as the risk register for the identification of hazards or the filling-in of incident forms) the writing of reports and the counting of inmates and materials are now part of day-to-day life for our 350 staff. Improved numeracy, as well as literacy, is important." He was, he added, taking part in the training himself. "We can all improve our performance," he said.

Staff whose duties previously required them to have only limited literacy and numeracy skills, now have to be at ease with a wide range of written material – writing instructional

posters for display on the wings, for example. What's more, they must also have good speaking and listening skills. Poor skills may mean procedures become sloppy or that regulations are simply not followed.

The success of The Network's project at Lewes will also be judged on its impact on levels of staff retention, performance and absenteeism. It is also hoped that it will be easier for staff to access promotion to higher-grade jobs within the prison – or, if staff choose, to enable them to broaden their choice of career outside the prison.

"There are many more issues to do with *Skills for Life* than we envisaged at first," said Nikki Wild, training manager at Lewes Prison, "but it is clear that 'whole organisation' means just that. The scheme involves a much more radical overhaul – and that is to be welcomed. We are confident that procedures at the prison can be improved after this project in conjunction with The Network." 

The Network

for workplace language, literacy and numeracy

A project that is currently supporting the development of whole organisation approaches to *Skills for Life* is being funded by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA). For more information about the Whole Organisation Project visit: www.woasfl.org

The Network, based at Lancaster University, is a national organisation dedicated to workplace language, literacy and numeracy provision which supports *Skills for Life*. The Network, tel: 01524 593405 www.thenetwork.co.uk