

Lewes Prison Staff Embrace Skills For Life

Robert Nurden introduces a blue print for the future

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 SfL 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 SfL 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 from that, the Network will help to promote and deliver off-the-job training for staff and embed SfL into on-the-job training. The most exciting aspect is that this may well provide the SfL model for prisons throughout the country.

Embedding training

The first objective is to introduce an SfL element into the prison's own staff induction process. This will be incorporated into 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 will be 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 pioneering

project 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. He said: 'It is vital we embed learning in the prison's overall delivery processes. 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, the filling-in of incident forms, the writing of reports, and the

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counting of not only inmates but materials too are now part of day-to-day life for our 350 staff. Improved numeracy, as well as literacy, is important. If this trial works there is no reason why it should not become the model for other prisons.'

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 will hope, too, to make it 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.

Another element in the wide-ranging effect that SfL invariably has in these situa-

tions is in the way trainees benefit as individuals. Literacy and numeracy does not stop at work. It is a 24-hour phenomenon and improvement impacts on every aspect of life, from the reading of road signs, using a PC, to helping their children with homework.

'Initially, one of the most important aspects of the project is the fact that we at The Network must familiarise ourselves with the discrete culture, policies and long-term learning and development plans of the prison itself,' said David Mathew, who with Sarah Whalley is co-ordinating the project for The Network.

Strategic plan

A steering group has been established to drive the project forward. If the Lewes pilot works well, the next step could be the development of an SfL strategic plan for the whole organisation approach in prisons, aiming to look specifically at entry-to-exit for prison staff. This will involve not only issues of recruitment and induction, but appraisal, performance review and target-setting as well.

Another aspect of the consultancy will be the involvement of union learning reps (ULRs), who play a key role in the project and are represented within the steering group. As in other SfL projects they are a vital bridge between staff and management. It is unclear at this stage whether the training itself will be conducted by LearnDirect or by a local college of further education.

'There are many more issues to do with SfL 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.'

It is hoped that the Lewes Prison case study will be written up, including recommendations for a best practice model for developing and delivering SfL for all staff in prisons nationwide. If all goes well, The Network intends to develop a suite of potential SfL courses for all staff, involving local educational providers.

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