

Travellers in Prison Initiative

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Seirbhís Phríosúin
na hÉireann
Irish Prison Service



An tSeirbhís Phromhaidh
The Probation Service

METHOD

EVALUATION SPOTLIGHT

THE MEET AND GREET SCHEME IN CASTLEREA PRISON



INTRODUCTION

The 'Meet and Greet' initiative was a Castlereagh supported pilot peer-based initiative. It involved Traveller prisoners providing an introduction to prison life to new prisoners shortly after committal, and prior to the new prisoner's interview with the Governor. The initiative's main role was to introduce new prisoners to prison life, provide information, advice and assistance to prisoners during the initial period in custody.

1.1 Background

The initiative arose from the peer mediation programme in Castlereagh prison¹. The men who took part in the peer mediation identified a need for a peer-based source of information on prison life and they suggested an initiative where an existing prisoner (in this instance, from the peer mediation team) would provide orientation and information to new prisoners on prison life.

There was a strong local context for the initiative: the peer mediation pilot had involved the establishment of a steering group comprising prison staff and prisoners and others including the Chaplaincy, Red Cross and the ETB in Castlereagh, and had achieved a high participation rate, particularly among Travellers. A candidate to deliver the meet and greet was identified.

The practice of this 'meet and greet' approach is established in the literature: Boothby (2011)² refers to the 'The Insiders Scheme' which consists of volunteers called 'Insiders', who aim to provide basic information, reassurance, and practical

support (although not emotional support) to prisoners who are new to the prison system. This scheme supports the prisoners shortly after their arrival in prison and operates only during the early days of imprisonment. Such initiatives acknowledge that prisoners do not have to be passive recipients of rehabilitation and consider them as important resources within the prison system to contribute to prisoners' rehabilitation (Cressey 1965; Kerish 1975).^{3,4}

According to Devillya et al (2005)⁵ information offered by like-minded peers on the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of prison life, particularly for young offenders, may be more acceptable than that communicated by correctional staff. (p.227)

There has been no detailed evaluation of the pilot meet and greet initiative, but consultations were undertaken as part of this evaluation briefing with an ex-prisoner involved in the meet and greet in Castlereagh, a prison staff member in Castlereagh and an ex-prisoner involved in a similar initiative in another prison.

¹ The peer mediation programme in Castlereagh was an initiative of the prison in collaboration with the Traveller Mediation Service, Education and Training Board in Castlereagh prison, Red Cross and Travellers in Prison Initiative.

² Boothby, M. (2011) 'Insiders' views of their role: toward their training', *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 53(4), 424-448

³ Within the context of offending behaviour, the Differential Association Theory (Sutherland and Cressey 1960), the Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger 1957), and the construct of social support can help to explain how these and other peer programmes work. Differential Association Theory argues that, through interacting with people who can teach the skills and techniques involved in offending, one can learn offending behaviour (Milburn 1995; Turner and Shepherd 1999). Similarly, offenders acting as peer supporters can also help other offenders to change their offending behaviour and lifestyles (Turner and Shepherd 1999). Cognitive Dissonance Theory postulates that, when prisoners assume the role of peer supporters, they change their own beliefs and values and, in turn, contribute to their own rehabilitation (Keller 1993; Maruna 2001).

⁴ Sutherland, EH and Cressey, CR (1960) 'A Theory of Differential Association', in *Criminological Theory: Past to Present*, FT Cullen and R Agnew (Eds). Los Angeles: Roxbury Company, 2006. 122-125

Festinger, L (2057) *A theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press

Cressey, D. R. (1965). Social psychological foundations for using criminals on the rehabilitation of criminals. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 2, 49-59.

Kerish, B.R. (1975). Peer counseling. In R. E. Hosford, & C. S. Moss (Eds.) *The crumbling walls: Treatment and counseling of prisoners* (pp. 45-52). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

⁵ Devillya, G, Sorbello, L, Ecclestone, L and Ward, T (2005) 'Prison-based peer-education schemes', *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 10 (2005) 219-240

2.0 – THE MEET AND GREET PROCESS

The process in Castlerea was straightforward: one of the peer mediators, who was a Traveller man, met with each prisoner (whether Traveller or settled) at the point of their committal, and gave information about prison life, in particular the education services in the school. The prisoner would assess the prisoner informally around their school needs, provided information on prison life and leaflets, and told them that if they had any questions, they could approach any of the Red Cross Volunteers in the prison⁶. This information meeting took about ten minutes, and it took place after the initial committal process and before the morning governor meeting. The 'meet and greet' lead would usually register the new prisoner with the school, so that one of the new prisoners' first tasks would be to meet with the head of the school.

The total capacity of Castlerea is 340 prisoners. It has a high proportion of Traveller prisoners (in June 2020, 13% of places were occupied by Travellers). In addition, given that Castlerea is a relatively small prison, the number of daily committals is relatively low: for example, in March 2021, there were a total of 53 committals; the previous February 2020 (pre-pandemic) there were 78 committals in the month and so an average of just under 3 committals per day means that the meet and greet system is very manageable with one or two people assigned to the task. In fact, initially two people were appointed to the initiative, but soon after it started, one of the individuals was released.

While the Meet and Greet includes information and induction to the prison, the importance of promoting education opportunities in prison for Travellers was viewed as a particularly important part of the role:

The majority of Traveller men cannot write their own name – so education is critical for everyone. If you do not have education, you have nothing in this world, and you will get into trouble.

You got to have something to wake up for every morning – otherwise your time is twice as long, twice as hard and your head will be wrecked...Empty thoughts are idle thoughts, and idle thoughts are dangerous thoughts.

The timing of the Meet and Greet

The timing of the Meet and Greet was raised in the discussions. Committal has been described as a particularly daunting time for a prisoner, and so is considered by some prison staff as not always ideal time to provide these types of supports to a prisoner:

Engaging with prisoners on committal is not always the right time – their head is all over the place and there are so many competing demands... so many services are all clambering to meet prisoners within the first 72 hours – this is not the most productive time.

⁶ The Irish Red Cross prison programme, is a community-based health and first aid programme. It is a partnership involving the Irish Red Cross, the Irish Prison Service and Education & Training Boards. Initially piloted in Wheatfield Prison in June 2009, it has since been implemented in all 14 prisons throughout Ireland. The Red Cross volunteers can be identified by badges worn and other identifiers.

However, the rationale for engaging with Travellers at committal is that many choose to go ‘on protection’⁷ when they enter prison, and this decision – made around the committal time – can have long-term impacts, particularly as regards accessing education or other prison services. Prisoners on protection have limited access to communal prison activities, such as education, work or other activities. Linking in with prisoners around committal was seen by prisoners as providing an important window of opportunity:

Important for Travellers as many of them end up on Protection immediately – prison can be seen as a dangerous place which it is – but if you have no enemies, owe no debts, it is not so bad – we would advise them not to go on Protection in these instances and to put their head down and go to the school, so it is useful to do this at committal.

Features of the ‘Meet and Greet’

Some of the work of the Meet and Greet is similar to support provided by ‘Listeners’ in other prisons.⁸

We used to do it in Mountjoy as part of the Listeners scheme. You would meet new committals and give them some information.

However, there are important differences. First, unlike the Listeners, those delivering Meet and Greet do not guarantee confidentiality. Second, the Meet and Greet

leads are not expected, nor equipped, to provide emotional support. Finally, the Meet and Greet generally does not provide ongoing support but is focused on the early stages of imprisonment, with some follow up with the prisoner post-committal, which is delivered through the Red Cross volunteers.

According to the ex-prisoner interviewed, there was an anecdotal increase in prisoners attending the school, and in his experience, the early intervention and encouragement to engage in the school resulted in greater participation.

In the case of Castlerea, the ‘Meet and Greet’ is not operating at the time of this evaluation – partly to do with Covid, and partly because it ended when the Traveller man assigned to the task was released. The importance of the individual and their characteristics was noted. When asked about the characteristics of the individual undertaking the work, the following attributes were identified as vital:

- A reliable person, who will commit to carrying out the work and will commit to checking daily for new prisoner committals;
- Someone with no history of bullying;
- Someone who can be trusted in the role, as it could potentially be open to abuse.

...Otherwise it is not going to work. He will not last a week.

The Chief put his trust in me – some others might get involved in bringing in drugs – but he had that trust in me.

⁷ According to the IPRT (5 May 2021), in October 2020, 72% of the 728 prisoners on restricted regimes were there on a voluntary basis. Prisoners may seek a restricted regime for valid reasons where they believe that they are in danger.

⁸ The Samaritans established the Listeners initiative in response to the 1999 report of the National Steering Group on Death in Prison. Listeners establish a rota to ensure a 24-hour service is available to anyone who needs it. Support is offered on a one-to-one basis to ensure confidentiality. The scheme was initiated in Ireland in response to the 1999 report of the National Steering Group on Deaths in Prison.

3.0 – OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS AND GUIDELINES

In the UK, peer-based schemes (referred to as Insiders) are well established in the prison environment. Guidelines based on evaluations indicate that some operational considerations should underpin the schemes, and it is recommended that these operate here.⁹

These include the need for prison officers to support the initiatives, and indeed to enable prisoners to take part in education. Prisoners depend on prison officers to facilitate them to attend school. The school provides a list of prisoners (students) who are registered to attend school to the prison officer. The formality of the new prisoners' registration with the school (facilitated by the Meet and Greet lead) enabled access to education almost as soon as they entered prison:

It made a lot of difference, because their name was on the [school] list and so they had to let them in. They would be registered with the school.

Even for the Meet and Greet lead in Castlerea, there were some barriers and in the early days, on occasion he was prevented from going down to meet the new prisoners. These needed intervention from the Chief and the head of the school:

There were a few times that I was not allowed to go down to [meet the prisoner] but this was soon addressed and the meet and greet sessions were listed in the class office.

The importance of frontline staff buy-in and, the prison officers' support is key, according to the evaluation of Insiders schemes in the UK.

There are some risks associated with a Meet and Greet initiative and boundaries need to be clear: for example, the HM Prisons Inspectorate in the UK found that in some prisons there, peer supporters did not have a clear role with appropriate boundaries, nor did they have adequate supervision. In some prisons, there was concern that the insiders had inappropriate access to confidential information about newly arrived prisoners or were conducting risk assessments (about cell-sharing, mental health and resettlement, for example). This concern was raised during prison inspections and by prisoners themselves (p.5).¹⁰

⁹ HM Prison Service Safer Custody Group (2004) *Good practice guide for Insiders peer support schemes*. London: HM Prison Service

¹⁰ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2016) *Life in prison: Peer support A findings paper by HM Inspectorate of Prisons*. London: Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons

3.1 Guidelines

Guidelines produced for Meet and Greet schemes have been developed arising from the consultations undertaken for the TPI evaluation and from the UK evaluations, and are presented in the table below.

TABLE 1 OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR A MEET AND GREET INITIATIVE	
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To offer information and immediate reassurance on arrival at the establishment to new prisoners, • To offer additional follow-up support to first timers, • To alert staff if they are concerned about a new prisoner being at risk of suicide / self-harm or bullying, • To record that the initial interview has taken place, make referrals and in some instances follow up issues with the individual prisoner, • To work with the prisoner to identify immediate training requirements and to support them to register with the school
Relationship with wider operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral arrangements should be in place so that any concerns can be passed onto prison staff • There should be an identified staff member (prison officer) as link person to support the Meet and Greet lead • Ongoing relationship with the school and with Red Cross volunteers are required • Three monthly update meetings with the governor / Chief should take place • All prison staff should be informed of and briefed about the 'Meet and Greet' scheme, and about the role of the lead • Meetings with new prisoners by the Meet and Greet lead should be listed in the formal schedule of activities for the day
Supports	<p>The Meet and Greet lead may need some induction or briefing (e.g. one half day). This might cover:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attitudes and values • confidentiality and boundaries • recognising signs of distress • communication skills • sources of support at the establishment • administration - information booklets, forms, monitoring, ethnic identifier, etc • A checklist of information could be provided to support information delivery.

<p>Timing of the meeting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be kept under review. The experience of the prisoner lead suggests it should take place shortly after committal (particularly for Travellers), prison staff do not view committal as always the ideal time. • UK literature suggests shortly after committal but acknowledges that some prisoners are in a state of shock when first committed (and some others are detoxing or experiencing withdrawal symptoms from drug use) and so some time lag (of a couple of days) may be useful in these instances. • Some follow-up may be required to reinforce information.
<p>Characteristics of lead</p>	<p>This is vital, according to the research in the UK. The research there echoes the views of those consulted as part of this evaluation as regards characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliable – the person needs to commit to the role and check with officers each day to establish if there are new committals • Trustworthy • Has literacy skills • Good communicators with appropriate interpersonal skills • Caring and able to work in a team • Available for at least two months • No history of bullying in the prison • Drug-free
<p>Limits to confidentiality</p>	<p>The limits to confidentiality should be clear for the new prisoner. The evaluation in the UK suggests that it be made clear that some information may be recorded. While much of what prisoners say will not be shared with anyone but if the Meet and Greet lead has concerns about a fellow prisoner, they must explain that they are going to share their concerns with a member of staff.</p>
<p>Boundaries</p>	<p>It is important that the Meet and Greet lead is provided with clarity around their role (role description), understands the boundaries and limits of their role, and is supported in this function.</p>