Rehabilitation by Design

In October 2016 Gleeds Worldwide published the report Rehabilitation by Design: Influencing Change in Prisoner Behaviour. The focus of the Gleeds report is primarily on how to ensure prisons are supportive environments for rehabilitation. This is a follow-up to the recent ‘Prisons and Courts Reform Bill’ and according to Gleeds this bill provides the perfect opportunity to make prisons more conducive to rehabilitation. At the end of 2015 the Government announced plans to invest £1.3 billion in a high quality modern prison estate. Nine new prisons will be constructed in England and Wales.1

This short article provides a précis of the 103 page Gleeds paper and focuses on the topics identified that are connected with how the built environment can improve outcomes for prisoners and staff.

The current condition of UK prisons

Since the 1940s, the UK’s prison population has been steadily growing and, since the 1990s, the rate of growth has been especially high.2 Over the last two decades, the prison population in England and Wales has almost doubled (reaching 84,405 in mid-June 2016)1. The size of our prison population is a problem, with prisons currently operating at 111% of certified normal capacity on average, with some at over 160%.1

A major reason for the high number of prisoners in the UK is the high rate of re-offending. Close to half (46%) of adult releases have been re-convicted within one year3. Re-offending alone costs the Government up to £13 billion a year4. Our prisons are ineffective at reducing re-offending and are instead places which breed violence, bullying and intimidation.1 During an average week prison staff across the country will have dealt with:

• Almost 600 incidents of self-harm
• At least one self-inflicted death, probably more
• Approximately 350 assaults – including 90 on staff

Part of the problem is the prisons themselves. Many prison buildings within the estate were constructed more than a century ago and conditions in some of these premises are no longer up to modern day standards; they are not fit-for-purpose, if that purpose is rehabilitation.1 In Victorian times the prison itself was considered the punishment (as opposed to being removed from society). Early facilities were therefore designed to enforce isolation and intimidation.1 Of prisons currently in use, 28 were built in the nineteenth century, five in the eighteenth century, with two built as far back as the sixteenth century. Prisons need to become environments which prepare offenders for successful re-entry into the community. After all, a custodial sentence is somewhat futile if that prisoner goes on to re-offend upon release.1

Creating an environment more conducive to rehabilitation

For any new prison environment, it is important that functional design is realistic and that this allows for an appropriate degree of future flexibility in terms of layout and ever developing technology. Many existing facilities, because of their age, do not offer a corrective rehabilitative environment, nor do they provide an environment which supports prisoner mental health or wellbeing.1
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For example, there may be:

- A lack of suitable space for purposeful activities (such as training rooms, sports facilities, gardens and allotments)
- Sensory overload and/or sensory deprivation caused by minimal access to daylight and nature, poor acoustics, and inadequate temperature control in both hot and cold conditions
- Cramped and overcrowded conditions which can contribute to prisoner depression, frustration, anger and violence

Prison accommodation

Prisons, especially accommodation units, have historically been noisy, institutional environments that do little to ease anxiety or promote healthy behaviour change. This has a detrimental impact on both prisoners and staff. To improve this, the design and layout of cells should reflect the numerous cell functions, providing a multi-purpose personal space. This means somewhere to sleep, toilet, shower, eat, watch television, read and undertake personal study.

Prison healthcare

Providing healthcare in prisons is a highly complex issue. Well over half of prisoners (64%) reported that they had used drugs four weeks prior to custody; in addition the rate of self-inflicted deaths in prison is at least three times higher than in the community. As such, prisons – in many ways – have come to act as mental health facilities, providing care for people with highly complex needs and who demonstrate very challenging behaviours. The Prison Reform Trust recently found that 62% of men sentenced to prison have a personality disorder and 67% of all prisoners are on some form of prescribed medication. Prisons face high rates of self-harm, suicide, drug use and substance related health issues.

Older men constitute the fastest growing section of the prison population. In 2014 there were 10,749 people over 50 in prison in England and Wales (12% of the total prison population). This number is growing year on year and is predicted to reach 20,000 by 2020. The inappropriateness of old, Victorian jails for elderly prisoners is self-evident (steep staircases, long walkways, travel distances, incessant noise, etc). Unsurprisingly, more people are also dying before completing their sentences, often in environments neither designed nor equipped to cope with them. Contrary to popular belief, dying prisoners are rarely released; hence there is now an urgent demand for palliative care in prisons.

As such the prison needs to be able to perform the functions of a mental health unit, a detox facility, elderly care unit and provide services associated more commonly with an accident and emergency department.

Provision for visitors

It can be argued that many of the people who motivate offenders to change their behaviour are actually located outside the prison – family, friends, volunteers etc. As such we should seek to (where possible) let the ‘outside in’ through clever design.

Supporting family to visit can therefore both reduce re-offending and improve parent-child relationships. If family bonds are broken during a custodial sentence, offenders may become homeless on release which can have consequence for gaining and sustaining employment. Visitor centres are therefore an extremely important part of the prison complex. Careful consideration needs to be given to ensure these areas are inviting and that the interactions that occur within them are meaningful.

Visitor areas should avoid institutional design – prioritising natural light, bright colours and comfortable yet durable fixtures. Wherever possible visitor centres should seek to replicate a normalised home environment in order to prepare both offenders and their families for release.

Supporting prison education

52% of male prisoners have no qualifications at all upon arrest and 48% have literary skills at or below the expected level for an 11-year-old. Sustained desistance from crime relates in part to the availability of opportunities for employment or training both within and upon release from prison.

Classrooms should be adequate in number, with spatial layout and adaptability to different tasks in order to support problem solving, creativity and social interaction. They should have large windows to let in as much natural light as possible and should be in dedicated, quiet areas of the prison that do not have much footfall from others passing through. Quiet rooms are also needed in housing units and on each wing, because association rooms can be distracting places to study.

Prison staff

It should not be forgotten that prisons are workplaces and that good design is essential if we hope to recruit and retain high-calibre applicants. Prisons should be designed so as to assist staff in their day-to-day duties and make them feel like valued employees and agents of change. Even the best
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staff will struggle to support behaviour change if the built environment is not conducive to such a goal. Both staff and prisoners benefit from natural light with views of nature, noise control/good acoustics, comfortable temperatures, time spent each day in a variety of spaces including outdoors, few barriers between staff and prisoners, good communications, lack of boredom and of course safety and security. Staff satisfaction and wellbeing results in less time taken as sick leave, and improves the retention of good, consistent staff. This not only benefits offenders but also improves safety and reduces costs based on less staff training/recruitment1.

Designing using EBD principles

The primary purpose of imprisonment is to protect society against crime and dissuade re-offending. This can only be achieved if prison architecture supports this purpose rather than creating an environment which dehumanises and institutionalises offenders. Providing a prison environment which facilitates rehabilitative programmes is therefore critical to this success1.

It is now widely accepted that the built environments in which we live have consequences for the mind and the body. For example, prisons in the Nordic countries – which have significantly lower re-offending rates – are designed so as to avoid sensory overload1. That is, they are built in such a way to reduce the likelihood of becoming over-lit, unnecessarily noisy, oppressively hot/uncomfortably cool, or insufficiently ventilated. In short, we can build environments which reduce frustration and anger, and are thus more conducive to rehabilitation1.

In Scandinavia, prison architects have famously experimented with progressive and highly stylised forms of architecture, which also explore more open, flexible spatial planning, seeking to mirror more closely ‘normal’ life outside the prison as a component of rehabilitation1. A normalised prison environment will include: cells that seek to provide opportunities for agency (a sense of control over your personal environment); communal areas that prisoners take responsibility for maintaining; a framework of rewards to encourage progress and access to both passive and active incentivised spaces. All of these combine to give the offender more autonomy and agency1.

We should consider how best to create environments which are conducive to behaviour change, while at the same taking account of building standards. The design of a new prison facility should consider:

- Allowing the segregation of prisoners according to sex, age, criminal record, offence and current behaviour
- The provision of spaces for work, educational, recreational and creative activities for prisoners
- Deterring and preventing prisoners from escape by providing a level of security appropriate to the security risk posed by the prisoners
- Excellent sightlines within buildings and around estate
- Pleasant and supportive work environment for staff

Internal features

Features linked to a more positive prison environments for both staff and prisoner are natural lighting, references to nature, use of varied materials, uneven lines and sensitive colour palettes. As with any environment though, and never more so then in the prison context, the management of temperature, noise and light will have a significant impact on levels of frustration, anger and depression1. Noise in particular has strong psychological effects and findings in other settings show that noise can:

- Damage mental and physical health
- Affect the amount and quality of sleep
- Increase levels of annoyance, frustration and aggressive behaviour
- Reduce pro-social behaviour and meaningful interactions with others
- Interfere with concentration and patience during task-focused activity (e.g. education)
- Result in higher levels of medication being prescribed for health concerns

Consideration should also be given to the use of low maintenance materials, finishes, and building systems: While the initial costs for some low maintenance materials, finishes, and building systems may be higher at times, the staffing costs...
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associated with maintaining and replacing them over the long term should be considered.

Prison layout

Many prisons throughout the world appear to be designed for the most dangerous and difficult prisoners with an abundance of security and safety measures which interfere with rehabilitation. Certainly, in prisons, security and safety must come first. However, with a good classification system and periodic reassessments, most prisoners can be placed in more normative and less expensive medium and minimum-security prisons which are more supportive of rehabilitation, rather than in maximum and super-maximum security facilities. Studies have also shown that over-isolation and over-control of one’s life by others can be detrimental to mental health and wellbeing, and can make the transition from prison to the community difficult and unsuccessful.

One prison design concept that balances safety and security with rehabilitation is a doughnut-shaped campus style configuration. On the outside edge of the doughnut is a very secure perimeter, and all the buildings to which prisoners have access face the doughnut hole, which contains landscaped courtyards and recreation areas. The buildings have lots of glazing providing views of nature, sound absorbing materials that help reduce noise, and movable furniture (for all but the highest security levels).

Conclusions

The effective design and the introduction of greater measures focused on rehabilitation can lead to cost savings and wider social benefits. Considering that re-offending alone costs the Government up to £13 billion a year, the measures described in connection with improving the built environment could help lead to a positive fundamental shift in the cost base and effectiveness of the UK prison and offender rehabilitation system.

References

(2) Allen, Grahame & Dempsey, Noel; Commons Library Briefing, July 4, 2016, Prison Population Statistics (18)
(4) ibid (4)
(5) Ministry of Justice (2013) Gender differences in substance misuse and mental health amongst prisoners (103)