

# Career Guidance: Joining Up Services for Prisoners

Jackie Sadler and Leigh Henderson

This article is based on Equal funded work carried out by NICEC Fellows Jackie Sadler and Leigh Henderson in three prisons in the East of England, where IAG in custody is provided by Tribal, and one in the South West supported by a Tribal Area (now Regional) Manager, Cheryl Westbury. It seeks to draw out some of the challenges of providing information, advice and guidance in prison and the development work carried out under the Equal project and subsequent experience. The project was managed by Tribal under Equal funding initially and subsequently as part of the LSC East of England Test Bed programme.

## Background

Learning and skills services in prisons are delivered by the Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS), with DCSF, DIUS, DWP and the Ministry of Justice being the key stakeholders. Delivery is funded by the LSC and the Youth Justice Board; responsibility will pass to the Skills Funding Agency and the Young People's Funding Agency in 2009. The prime operational focus comes from the LSC, National Offender Management Service - including HM Prisons Service and the National Probation Service – and the Youth Justice Board.

OLASS is delivered through regionally contracted providers. IAG services are not separately contracted in all regions, though they are in the East, London, South West, and West Midlands regions. A third round of OLASS contracting, 'OLASS3', is under way. Against the background of regional contracts for nextstep and the forthcoming adult advancement and careers service, IAG in custody will be separately contracted across England from August 2009.

The prison system faces many challenges in reducing re-offending. Importantly, the highest priority for any prison governor is security; education and training support has to be considered in that context. It is also important to understand that there are significant differences between prison categories. In all but high security establishments, rapid turnover of prisoners ('churn') is a serious impediment

to providing progressive programmes for prisoners. In one local prison, the average length of stay is 42 days of which just nine are in education. A similar average length of stay is being experienced in an open prison, where hitherto a longer term approach to rehabilitation at the end of a sentence was the norm.

Only around five per cent of prisoners are women and they have significantly different needs to most men. Most are victims of abuse or have been sex workers, or both, and a high proportion have mental health difficulties. Many are looking to return to family life rather than to full time employment. Baroness Corston's report for the Home Office<sup>1</sup> suggested a radically different approach to helping female offenders reintegrate into society.

The reality for many prisoners on entering custody is to address their immediate priorities which may include family, housing, benefit or drugs issues. The prison service has identified seven 'pathways', including learning and skills. Two additional pathways for women are being developed for victims of abuse and sex workers. As one Head of Learning Skills (HoLS) puts it, 'we are managing a special needs community'. IAG is offered at induction into the prison, but other issues need to be addressed before a prisoner can really focus on their learning and skills development needs.

## The offender learning journey

The vision for learning and skills provision for offenders in custody was set out by the Government in 2006<sup>2</sup>. The aim is to introduce a 'campus model' of joined up delivery focused in delivering a coherent offender learning journey from 2009. The West Midlands and East of England were nominated as 'Test Bed' regions. The work carried in the three prisons in the East formed part of the Test Bed development programme.

The need for a coherent approach is illustrated in Figure 1 below. Each prison has a Head of Learning and Skills (HoLS) who manages and co-ordinates its learning and skills provision. The prison's role in managing the OLASS delivery is critical to achieving a more joined up approach – and in advocating better collaborative working with Nextstep, Job Centre Plus and voluntary and community organisations. There is a trend for HoLS posts to be combined with others to exercise a wider remit – usually called Head of Reducing Reoffending - with consequent benefits for coherent responses to the learning and skills needs of prisoners.

<sup>1</sup> Corston J., A Review Of Women With Particular Vulnerabilities In The Criminal Justice System, Home Office, 2007: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/corston-report>

ARTICLES

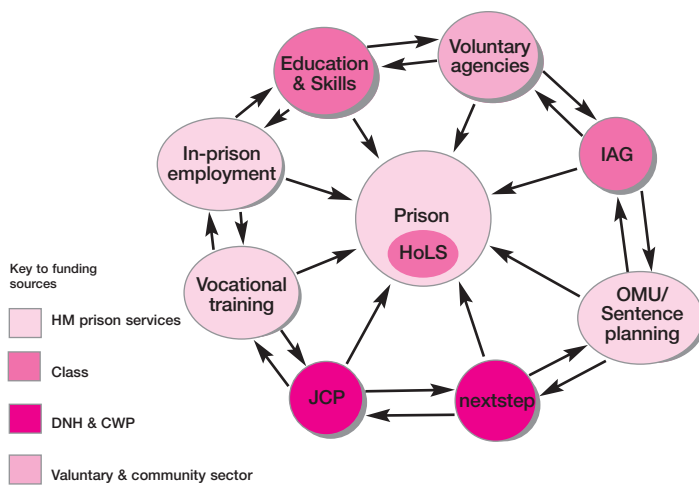
Co-ordinating the work of up to 30 agencies is a daunting task. Most provide IAG on their own area of expertise, such as personal finance, family relationships, drug and alcohol abuse or personal behaviour issues. The result can be very confusing for prisoners, especially at induction where many are disorientated and intoxicated.

The situation is confused further by short term funding for voluntary agencies which makes promotion of a coherent service to prisoners more challenging.

Many prisons have pre-release courses which include issues such as CV building and work on issues around disclosure to employers. Some programmes follow the prisoner through the gate and provide mentoring in the community, in some cases by using peer mentors who may have NVQ Level 3.

One of the barriers to providing a progressive programme for prisoners has been the lack of effective systems enabling records of achievement to be transferred between prisons. For example, it has not been unusual for prisoners to have their basic skills assessed several times, either due to being unable to complete them accurately due to intoxication or because records have not followed them to another prison.

**Figure 1: Multi Agency Delivery in Prisons**



The East of England Test Bed programme has addressed the barriers to greater coherence through a number of projects including;

- Better assessment of personal, 'employability' skills or characteristics
- An 'employability compact', where prisoners and offenders in the community sign up to a periodic assessment of their employability skills – such as

reliability and team working – in return for rewards which may include an opportunity to have a work trial or enhanced privileges

- Developing 'virtual campus' software the provides a platform for multi agency support towards employment in prison and 'through the gate'
- Cross prison IAG
- Seeing is Believing' employer visits to prisons.

**Cross prison information, advice and guidance**

Against this background, the development of cross prison IAG has entailed support for organisational development and change management in prisons. The Matrix Standard framework was used in all cases and two of the original prisons have now been accredited against the Standard. These were; HMP Bedford (a local prison) and HMP Eastwood Park (a women's prison in Gloucestershire).

All OLASS external agencies have to have Matrix accreditation. The cross prison IAG model recognises that IAG is a fundamentally important process in every prison, covering the seven (or nine) pathways and delivered by just about every member of prison or agency staff in direct contact with prisoners. Therefore the process entails working with people who have never heard of the Matrix Standard and to ensure that OLASS providers are clear about how cross prison IAG connects with their own accreditation.

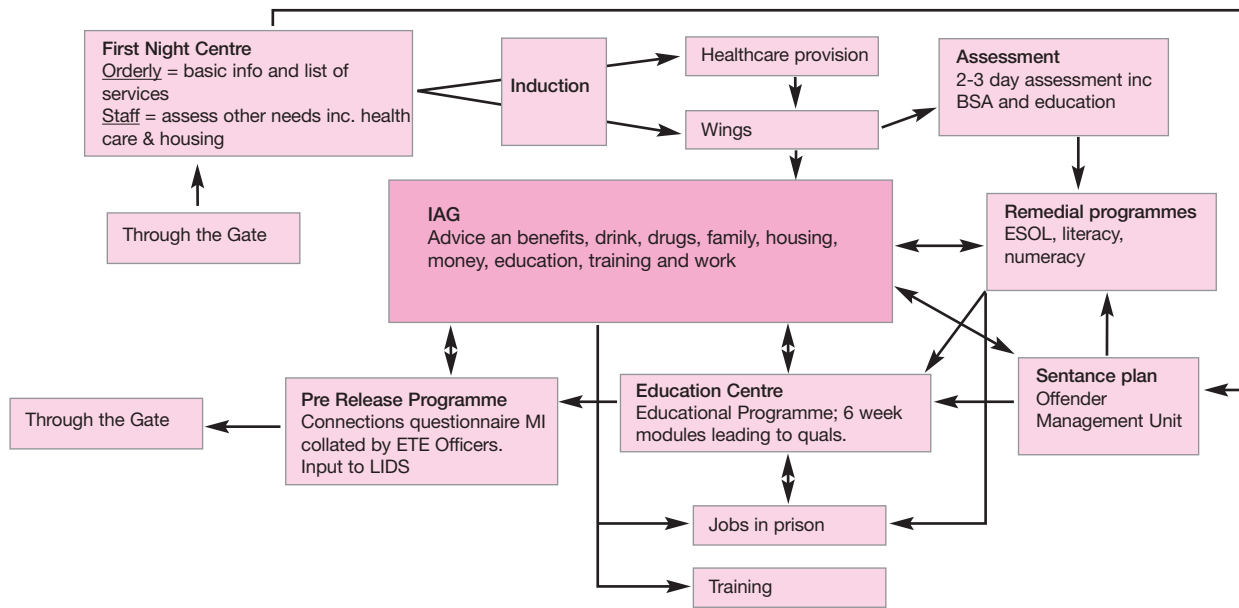
We defined the characteristics of a cross prison IAG service as:

- Being coherent from the prisoner's perspective
- Having a mission statement – integral to prison policy statements and agreed by the prison's senior management team
- It should facilitate the prisoner's journey
- Human and other resources should be sufficient in competence and quantity to deliver the service – including prison staff
- Partnership and information sharing protocols should underpin the collaborative approach
- Management information should cover the key indicators required by the service manager(s)
- Referral, marketing and feedback should be coherent
- Collaborative processes for CPD and CQI should exist.

<sup>2</sup> Reducing Re-Offending Through Skills and Employment: Next Steps; Home Office, DfES and DWP, December 2006.

# Career Guidance: joining up services for prisoners

**Figure 2: Typical Offender Prison Journey**



As noted earlier, prisons vary in how they process prisoners through their regime. However there are common elements in the employment and training pathway such as:

- Induction – including IAG and assessment
- Labour allocation
- IAG review (s)
- Resettlement – including specific programmes on preparing for work outside the gate, offender behaviour programmes, employability compacts and referral to external agencies.

The process can, typically, look similar to that shown in Figure 2

## Supporting change

Helping prisons bring together disparate processes to demonstrate that a unified IAG service is challenging. Critical to success is to have the support of the senior management team, a clear mission for IAG across the prison and a nominated project manager with the necessary authority to drive the process. In the pilot phase, having external consultancy support with a knowledge of the Matrix Standard helped to reassure prison staff that the process was based on clear principles and underpins the guidance and support element of the Common Inspection Framework. It therefore helped existing self assessment processes rather than being an additional process.

Given the significantly diverse characteristics of different prisons – even within categories – support had to be bespoke. Nevertheless, typically, pre-assessment processes included:

- Working with the HoLS to develop a mission statement and/or a statement of service for IAG across the prison
- Identifying the areas of provision to be submitted for assessment. Many prisons opt to focus on one area first ; typically learning and skills, leaving resettlement until later
- Preparing a broad assessment of areas requiring attention and supporting groups tasked with undertaking the work. These groups usually include partners such as OLASS providers, relevant prison departments (such as workshops and gymnasias and relevant voluntary agencies) and voluntary agencies
- Delivering IAG awareness training for prison staff
- Encouraging the development of a coherent marketing strategy. In several cases, this work included using offenders’ skills. In one case, the outcome was a series of materials using graphic symbols – an important approach in the context of lower than average literacy levels and high incidences of poor spoken English by black and minority ethnic groups
- Ensuring that communication across prison departments and agencies is at an appropriately high level. The range of information and rates of change are so high that this is an issue for even the best organised establishments. The Matrix Standard framework provides a comprehensive checklist for continuous quality improvement in this area in particular; indeed the prison Quality Improvement Group is frequently centrally involved in the process.

## Outcomes and good practice

It is not surprising that some prisons are finding that using the Matrix framework is a basis for their self assessment is helping them to fine tune what is already good practice in

## ARTICLES

terms of communication, collaborative working protocols and feedback strategies such as co-ordinated feedback strategies including focus groups.

Others are finding it difficult to work swiftly on addressing identified issues. In some cases this due to other significant projects such as new buildings and/or a rapid increase in the prison population or a change in the prisoner profile.

Several prisons are considering introducing a single point of delivery for IAG delivery. Others are addressing the problem of developing a progressive programme by prisoners – supported by IAG - transferring information on achievements and other information between prisons by developing unified systems for prisoners that will record all relevant achievement and regime information in one place. This is a critical issue for IAG. In many cases, IAG workers do not have ready access to information on prisoners' previous activities. IAG workers frequently have to ring other prisons to obtain the information.

To support the process Tribal, the IAG provider, is introducing learner folders for prisoners' certificates and assessments. Some prisons are introducing their own record of achievement systems – incorporating the Tribal process. Recording achievement will continue to be a significant matter for most prisoners as they will not have unique learner numbers (ULNs) before being sentenced. Where ULNs have been issued, learning providers will have access to the relevant information whilst offenders are in custody.

Whilst the benefits of working with the Matrix Standard for self assessment against the Common Inspection Framework are well understood, it is also apparent that implementing a significant proportion of the recommendations of reports of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCIP) can be materially supported by using the Matrix Standard. In future, HMCIP and OfSTED will conduct joint inspections.

It is expected that the Government will announce a national employability compact programme in 2009. Experience in the East of England Test Bed project shows that cross-prison IAG is an essential prerequisite to an effective compact process. OLASS3 will see a change in the arrangements for assessment in relation to IAG.

Close communication with ENTO, the holder of the Matrix Standard, has been maintained, including holding a joint workshop for Matrix advisers and assessors on cross prison IAG issues. It was noted that cross prison IAG has significant similarities to IAG to, for example, further education colleges.

## Moving forward

One other prison, HMP The Verne - a prison located in Portland, Dorset and with a very high proportion of foreign nationals, has been reassessed as a cross 'learning and skills' service. The prison will consider a wider accreditation at their next re-assessment. Nine others in both regions are now actively working towards Matrix accreditation, illustrating the benefits that prisons now see in this approach. The importance of IAG to a successful prison regime is now increasingly understood and that, in turn, reflects on the importance attached to IAG for learning and work by prison managers.

## Conclusion

In one sense, ensuring that prisons provide a coherent IAG service to prisoners is little different to the challenges in secondary schools or further education colleges. All are complex organisations where IAG is provided by specialists and other people who are in daily contact with their clients. The latter may not initially recognise their important role as part of the overall service, but individuals will frequently seek support from people they know, and trust, the most.

Whilst the contexts are significantly different in many ways, there may be lessons to be drawn from the cross-prison IAG project which could be helpful in other arenas. It is significant that an increasing number of prisons are adopting the cross prison IAG approach, underpinned by the matrix Framework.

A critically important issue in reducing re-offending is providing continuity of support through the gate into the community. Two community based projects, in Gloucester and Peterborough are seeking to improve through the gate support, led by the Probation Service in both cases. The latter group has committed to exploring how the Matrix Standard can support the development of the project.

What is missing is a significant body of research evidence to underpin the development of policy and practice in delivering IAG in prisons.

## For correspondence

Jackie Sadler, NICEC Fellow  
[cooper@sadler.u-net.com](mailto:cooper@sadler.u-net.com)

Leigh Henderson, NICEC Fellow  
[leighhen@googlemail.com](mailto:leighhen@googlemail.com)