



THE EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF
PRISONS AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

January's Feature Article

Why Prison Radio works

The Prison Radio Association is a charity that has revolutionised prisoner communication in England and Wales. Here, Siobhann Tigne, Head of Prison Radio interviewed by Vivette Wadey (NOMS) talks about why prison radio works:



National Prison Radio (NPR), made by prisoners for prisoners. Since NPR started in 2009 it's covered all the most pressing issues to do with imprisonment such as relationship building, addiction and literacy.

The objective of NPR is to give listeners the information and support they need to stop re-offending and improve their lives when they're released.

The prisoners who make the radio programmes aren't there to become radio stars, although a few ex-offenders have successfully carved out a career in the extremely competitive UK media industry.

What's more important is that the experience of making radio programmes helps to improve literacy and communication, as well as develop critical transferable skills which will be useful in any work environment. It's a fantastic confidence boost too.

NPR in focus

It can be hard to get a job, but when you have a criminal conviction it's even harder. So, NPR has recently broadcast a series of special programmes suggesting ways to go about it.

Andrew Selous the UK government minister in charge of prisons agreed to be interviewed for it. The presenter, Simon, who's coming up to 40, described how he'd been in trouble with the law since he was 15 and admitted that he'd never had a job. He'd never tried to get one, and didn't have a clue about how to get one.

"I'm getting released soon and I don't know nothing," he said.

Mr. Selous encouraged him to start a conversation with someone who really knows him and come up with a plan. 'It's got to come from you but the important thing is just to get your first job and then you can move on,' he advised. 'Thanks man,' said Simon.



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Listening to that interview you sensed a genuine conversation was taking place between two very different men poles apart in life experience.

This series about getting work was called Job Junction. It featured a range of experiences: entrepreneurial ex-offenders who had set up their own businesses; current offenders who have a job in their prison's printing workshop; someone who volunteers out in the community, as well as employers who take on someone with a conviction, as long as they have the right attitude.

One employer didn't mince his words: "I don't want moody, lazy, grumpy, smelly moaners who I wouldn't want to sit next to on a train. I want people who make me smile."

Job Junction is typical of the sort of programming that National Prison Radio (NPR) produces. And this is just one reason why prison radio works. It gets to the heart of the problem and speaks to listeners in a clear, direct and relevant way. It cuts to the chase and it's useful.

Getting the right mix

National Prison Radio, is a mix of speech and music, it is also "an arm around the shoulder." It was formed in 1994 when there was a spate of suicides in Feltham prison, in the south of England.

Twenty one years later the issue hasn't gone away. A review into why young offenders are still taking their own lives and harming themselves was set up before Christmas led by Lord Harris. Appreciating the reach of NPR, the Harris Review harnessed the power of radio in order to communicate to their target group and tell them that their views were needed as essential primary evidence. Despite the delicate and sensitive subject matter, some offenders took up the opportunity to contribute.

The NPR set-up

NPR is broadcast to 104 prisons in England and Wales and is made by a charity called The Prison Radio Association. It operates out of three English prisons: Brixton, Coldingley and Styal where professional radio producers support offenders with their work.

Additionally, any prison which has its own radio equipment or offers a radio qualification, is entitled to contribute material.

All content must abide by very tight guidelines. Editorially, NPR is stricter than most radio stations on the public airwaves due to the specific security risks associated with the prison environment. There is never any "live" broadcasting, and even though it can't be heard outside the prison estate, all material is judged as if it could be. This is to protect victims of crime and their relatives.



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Mention “prison radio” and there’s always the inevitable wisecrack about a “captive audience”. Yes, that’s true, but offenders have a range of TV and radio stations to choose from in their cell.

Despite lots of entertainment options figures suggest that inmates want to hear NPR and it provides a service. New data indicates that 84% of prisoners in England and Wales listen to NPR and furthermore, 80% say they trust what they hear.

Case Study – here one former prisoner talks about the positive effect of prison radio.

How did you get involved in National Prison Radio?

When I arrived at HMP Brixton, during the induction process, I was introduced to the different courses that were available in the Prison. I was surprised to hear that there was a radio production course available. Radio and Television is something I wanted to get involved in when I was younger. I tried to get into film school when I was 18 but didn’t get in and then started working in a completely different industry.

At first, I didn’t think about joining but after a few weeks inside, I was finding prison life difficult and I needed something to occupy my days. I decided to put an application to join the course and I was accepted.

The course lasted around 6 weeks. At the end of it, I got an interview to work at National Prison Radio and I was offered a job.

How it benefit you while in custody?

One of the hardest things for me when I was inside was boredom. I’ve always worked and had a busy life before going in so being locked for most of the day got me quiet depressed very quickly. I also missed interacting with people. I used to find the wing environment really scary and did not have many interactions with other inmates.

Working for National Prison Radio enabled me to spend my days doing something that I really enjoyed. I always used to say, going to work every day was like an oasis of normality. When I was working at the radio, it did not feel like I was inside. Over time, this enabled me to build relationships with a lot of the staff and some of the inmates. The radio tutor and radio staff helped me a lot and enabled me to settle in an environment that I was finding difficult to get used to.

Over the months, the job also reminded me of the passion I had when I was younger. It helped me re-build my confidence and I picked up some new skills that would help me in my journey after release.



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Since your release have you used the skills you learnt in the community?

Six months after leaving prison, I started a foundation degree in Television Production. This was two years course that lead to my graduation. I can honestly say that I would never have taught of joining this course had it not been for the work I did with National Prison Radio whilst I was inside.

There were definitely a few times whilst I was at university when I looked back at some of the skills I learned whilst inside. Audio editing helped me a lot when I started editing videos. My tutor always used to comment on how much attention I put on making sure it sounded as good as it looked. Working in radio, we always used to be told of the importance of story telling and I was always very aware of this when working on university projects.

Would you encourage others to join prison radio?

I am a really strong believer that your prison experience can be as good or as bad as *you* want to make it.

Working for the radio station enabled me to turn my experience into a positive one. It gave me a purpose whilst I was inside and helped me a lot with integrating with the system. The contacts I made whilst working made the rest of my sentence more bearable to serve.

A lot of the courses inside are really basic. The radio production course was challenging and interesting and lead to me gain some new skills that I still use to this day.

How was the learning experience?

From what I have seen when I was inside and the other inmates I met, it is often very difficult to motivate inmates to pick up new skills. English and Maths courses are often seen as quiet boring and remind people of classroom environment where they often failed when they were younger.

Prison Radio is a great way to do this and to engage inmates in a different way. Through this project you can develop someone's writing skills, communication, organisation, project management. All very important skills to have once you're released

Not only do you engage the inmates that join the course but creating a Prison Radio is also a great way to engage and inform the rest of the prison population. I know from first hand experience what a difference the radio station made to me but I also know that it made a huge difference to the listeners. It is a great way to pass on important information to inmates, who often saw the radio station as being trustworthier than the information coming from the prison service itself.



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Is there anything else you would say about your experience and where you are now?

After leaving university, I found work in the industry within weeks. I started as a cameraman and I am now working as a technical operator for a TV station. I would not be where I am today had I not met the staff of National Prison Radio. Being inside was a really dark time for me and lead to me getting really depressed and worried about what my live would become after release.

National Prison Radio was a light at the end of the tunnel that help me start a new career and I can never thank enough all the staff that helped me through my journey.