

Graylings' Book ban

Chris Grayling's intention to get books prevented from being sent in by friends and family is a pointless one but a familiar pattern we experience in our charitable work.

There are not enough jobs or educational opportunities in every prison therefore there has to be people who remain unemployed in each prison as there simply is not the space or resources to have everyone occupied with meaningful occupations. That time during the day when other inmates are out working or studying can be a long boring day especially if there is staff sickness and/or staff redeployment as it will mean no association (time out of cells) - bang up for most of the day. Each unemployed prisoner receives £2.50 per week and 50p is automatically deducted for the use of a TV in the cell. Thus each unemployed prisoner is left with £2.00 per week to spend. Out of that £2.00 they are expected to buy their own toiletries. They also if they choose buy writing paper, envelopes, stamps, newspaper/magazine subscriptions, phone credit, tobacco, and many other items on the canteen list like tea, coffee, snack food and soft drinks.

If they are fortunate enough to find a job or attend education then they can earn between £6.00 - £14.00 per week depending on the job they do as it varies from prison to prison. Some prisoners might have friends and family that are allowed to send in small amounts of money to top-up their private cash but for those who don't have family & friends in a position to help out they miss out. Therefore the option of being able to afford to buy books is not an option for everyone.

Grayling suggests the reason for the ban is to prevent contraband being concealed in books however **all** correspondence sent into prisoners is opened and read by the censors in the post room. Grayling is suggesting that prison officers in Security are not capable of opening a book to see if drugs, alcohol, mobile phones or weapons are hidden in the pages of a book which I think is doing a disservice to those staff employed to check the post. At Haven, we have received many a book back from the censors saying it is a 'prohibited item' and they are usually English dictionaries! English dictionaries are our most commonly requested books that we send into prisons and at one stage we were sending in 50 a week.

We once had a librarian who was employed as a Toe-by-Toe coordinator (a charity that helps inmates to learn how to read and write), send the Large Print English dictionary to the Security department as we had sent the book directly to her rather than the inmate. The dictionary was returned back to us saying we're not allowed to send dictionaries into this particular prison as we are not their 'chosen supplier' and the ban remains. Another example was when we sent a book of poetry into an inmate only for it to be returned to us again saying 'prohibited item' & more recently a refused book was the DSA Official Driving Theory Test book. The banning of books has been a constant issue for Haven since our inception in 1996. If Grayling is suggesting that prison staff are weak at detecting contraband hidden in the pages of a book then he needs to address that issue not banning books being sent in to read.

The other reason given by Grayling is to encourage Incentives & Earned Privileges (IEPS). We fail to see the logic here especially as there have been many reports highlighting the large amount of prisoners with low literacy skills, people who were excluded from school, dyslexic inmates, prisoners who have never read any books – if anything you would think you would want to encourage reading books rather than saying only if you are earn it.

It's true that every prison has a library but some are better than others. Some libraries are well stocked and money is spent on updating stock. We have had prisoners moan that the libraries are mostly full of crime books both factual and fiction and they desperately want something non-crime related but as a minority ask for crime books they often win the book selections. Another problem is as we are sure librarian staff would also say is the logistics - getting prisoners to access the library. As prisoners have to be escorted over to the prison library a few at a time it means that some prisoners may get access once a week if they are lucky. Staff in prison can be redeployed at a moment's notice and escorting prisoners over to the library isn't going to be a priority for staff.

From our experience there is a constant battle between punishment & rehabilitation and the two are at loggerheads in prisons. The punishment is the loss of a person's liberty otherwise called imprisonment. Rehabilitation or resettlement should be trying to turn a person's life around by convincing them of the error of their ways. The banning of books seems to just be an additional punishment to us.

Haven Distribution - Books to Prisoners