



As David Cameron says he wants prisons to have a more positive impact on

## Real Lives

A SHARED cell at a large male jail is an unlikely setting for a bit of cross-stitch but inmates at Leeds Prison are queuing up to take needlework to their cells. The Category B prison holds offenders who have committed everything from burglary and drug-dealing to murder. Now prison staff are using needlework in the battle to cut the cycle of re-offending.

It's a lengthy walk to the textile workshop, through long cream corridors, countless locked iron doors and up a winding metal staircase. Inside the echoing hall, inmates dressed in joggers and sweat-tops, stitch boxer shorts on sewing machines beneath the glare of strong strip lights. It's busy and noisy in the main workshop, but in a quiet room to one side sits a group of young men, quietly sewing cross-stitch Christmas designs and stuffed toys.

The cross-stitch workshop was started 18 months ago by prison officer, Denise Johnson and has so far raised £1,200 for Victim Support through the sale of Christmas cards and other small items.

"I started teaching a couple of lads and it's just grown and grown," says Mrs Johnson. "Even the governor is surprised at how it's taken off really. The lads love it. It passes the time and they have the chance to give something back."

Leeds Prison governor Paul Baker is now taking it a step further and rolling out a project with social enterprise and charity, Fine Cell Work, which trains prisoners in skilled needlework to create high quality cushions, bags, pictures and quilts.

Inmates will be taught by volunteers from the Embroiderers' and Quilters' Guild. The men will be paid for their work, which is sold through the shop and on-line. Fine Cell Work also receives commissions by establishments such as English Heritage. Over the years, some of the prisoners' work from high security jails such as Wakefield, have been displayed at the Tate and the Victoria and Albert museums.

Mr Baker, who is a trustee of Fine Cell Work, says: "It's not a typical thing that any governor might think of doing but I think it has real benefit."

"I still find it really odd when you get these great big hulking men with tattoos on their arms doing a bit of needlework but they absolutely love it and we have a queue of men wanting to do it."

Fine Cell Work was originally

# PRISONERS LEARNING HOW TO STITCH LIVES BACK TOGETHER



set up 15 years ago to work with prisoners in high-security jails to give them something to do in the long hours locked up in their cells.

The principle of the charity's founder Lady Anne Tree was to teach a meaningful skill which could provide a small income for when the prisoner was released.

The charity has 60 volunteers training more than 400 inmates in 29 prisons across England, Scotland and Wales. Some of the more elaborate cushions sell for more than £100, with a prisoner earning 30 to 40 per cent of the price of the sale.

Half of the cushions sold by the charity are made up at Wakefield prison. Intricately-designed double quilts, which require many hours of concentrated work, can sell for as much as £1,000.

Fine Cell Work has just won the Queen's award for voluntary service, the highest possible honour that can be given to a volunteer group.

The prisoners work for a couple of hours in the morning and afternoon, but some can choose to take their cross-stitch projects to their cells and receive extra

payments for the cards and toys they produce. Prison staff say they have noticed an improvement in behaviour since starting up the needlework project.

"It keeps them busy and focussed, rather than just sitting and watching telly," says Mr Baker. "We are trying to get them to do something positive and we know from research we carried out that it reduces mental anxiety and stress which could potentially lead to a reduction in self-harm and so on."

"As a governor I think it's