

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 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.

PRISONERS LEARNING HOW TO STITCH LIVES BACK TOGETHER



STITCH IN TIME: Tim at work on the Fine Cell Work project at Leeds Prison. Left, Arman busy in the workshop. PICTURES: SIMON HULME

got real benefits over typical prison work which can be sometimes mundane and not particularly rewarding and which they can't then take back into their cells."

Back at the workshop, Afzal, 24, is finishing off a cross-stitch of a Christmas stocking. "This is more artistic than stitching prison boxer shorts," he says. Tim, 22, adds: "While I'm doing cross-stitch my mind takes me somewhere else out of jail." He hopes cross-stitch might help him to find work when he is released.

Arman, 25, is working on a colourful parrot which he

says will take some time to finish. "Two or three hours have just gone by and I didn't even notice," he says. "It relieves the boredom."

Shane, 33, says: "I'd never done cross-stitch before and to be honest found the idea

a bit silly - grown men doing fine needle work. However, since taking it up I really enjoy it and find it really relaxing."

Some of the men continue sewing when they are released.

"I bumped into an ex-prisoner in a shop in Leeds and he was buying threads," says Mrs Johnson. "He's carrying on his cross-stitching so that's great."

The men can work towards a textile qualification, including a City and Guilds. Scissors are not allowed into the cells and each prisoner is risk-assessed

regarding the use of needles, though cross-stitch needles have a blunt point anyway.

Mr Baker is hoping to set up a dedicated Fine Cell Work workshop and plans to invest in an embroidery machine to expand commercially.

"The only way you reduce re-offending is by giving someone the chance to do something different when they get out," says Mr Baker. "If you just lock them up and do nothing, you'll get the same. I'm looking at lots of different and creative ways to say to someone 'you don't always need to do what you've always done'."

I think it's got real benefits over typical prison work which can be sometimes mundane.



As a governor I think it's

embroidered cushions every year.

It takes between one and two years to hand-sew a kingsize bed quilt.

Seventy five per cent of the stitchers are men.

It is part of FCW's rehabilitation effort to ask customers to write to thank the man or woman who stitched their purchase

For more information, visit <http://www.finecellwork.co.uk>

200 WAIT TO TAKE UP CHANCE TO SEW

LAST month Prime Minister David Cameron said he wanted to see more private firms and charities working in the UK's prisons in an attempt to reduce the amount of reoffending.

Mr Cameron says he wants prison to have a positive impact on inmates.

Fine Cell Work (FCW) worked with 490 prisoners in 2011.

There are more than 200 prisoners on the charity's waiting list to start work.

A Fine Cell Work cushion takes an average of 90 hours of work.

An average cushion contains 40,000 stitches.

FCW makes 2,000 hand-

embroidered cushions every year.

It takes between one and two years to hand-sew a kingsize bed quilt.

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