

## Prisons cluster meeting highlights need for 'buy-in'

■ Jo Small, Development Adviser, South East – Skills for Life Improvement Programme

“The cluster meeting made me realise that I was not alone.” This was one of the memorable quotes when a small group of representatives from five prisons came together for their second ‘cluster group’ meeting in HMP High Down, Surrey, last month. The group was meeting as part of the Skills for Life Improvement Programme support for developing a whole organisation approach (WOA) to Skills for Life. Representatives include Heads of Learning and Skills as well as Skills for Life co-ordinators, Skills for Life tutors and Education Managers.

What is noticeable in working with these providers is that each is at a very different stage of development in relation to adopting a WOA. Some have managed to create a steering group and develop a Skills for Life strategy for the whole organisation. In some cases the Governor has allocated time at full staff meetings for WOA presentations, thus starting the crucial ‘buy in’ process. In others it can take some time to identify the key people to be involved and take the project forward. The key to success for a whole organisation approach is to find those key people who are able to act as ‘champions’.

### Current issues in provision for prison inmates

Many prisoners lack literacy, language and numeracy skills, and for many prisoners, education has been a negative experience. Skills for Life is therefore integral to education in prisons, with emphasis placed on the Skills for Life that prisoners will require once released and to find employment.

A challenge in prison education is that there are no longer key performance targets related to Skills for Life qualification achievements. Resourcing for this area of work is very much dependent on the priorities identified by individual prison governors.

### Desire to participate, share and learn

The mood of the meeting was positive, with a desire to participate, share and learn from each other. There was time to update on progress and share processes that they had developed individually. They focused on the individual improvement plans and challenges they are facing. The most common were:

- finding enough time for themselves and their small staff teams to carry out the work that is needed
- getting ‘buy in’ from senior management, and
- ‘selling’ the urgent need for Skills for Life improvement to other colleagues.

There was also time for detailed updates, for example on numeracy, and what one member of the group described as ‘joining up the dots’ in relation to current government priorities and initiatives.

They also explored peer review methods and how they can support transfer of good practice. In between the two meetings, two providers had already arranged visits to each other’s organisation. They had also decided to join up and share resources and skills to achieve their Skills for Life targets.

### On course to achieve

In reflecting on their next steps, the group went away with very tangible objectives. These included:

- Find ways of attracting steering group volunteers
- Complete the Skills for Life strategy, after presenting Skills for Life to all staff

- Devise an action plan based on draft strategy
- Research appropriate tools for assessment for staff
- Develop staff induction to include assessment, learning styles and Individual Learning Plans (ILP)
- Explore ways of incorporating Skills for Life in offenders’ sentence plans
- Review the learners’ journey against Skills for Life
- Start to ‘SMOG’\* all key documents as part of whole organisation approach.
- Action research into personal officers’ three monthly reviews – how to combine these with Skills for Life.

The experience of working with groups such as this confirms for me that cluster meetings are beneficial. They tend to empower, motivate and inspire. The day ended as positively as it had begun. Nigel Cook, Skills for Life co-coordinator at HMP Maidstone said: “As a result of attending these cluster meetings and having one-to-one visits, we now know where we are going and we are on course to achieve”.

*\*SMOG (simplified measure of gobbledygook) is a formula that gives a readability level for written material. Readability is an attempt to match the reading level of written material to the ‘reading with understanding’ level of the reader, [www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/SMOG.html](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/SMOG.html) – Ed.*

‘Prison staff are struggling to promote Skills for Life as there is no longer Key Performance targets related to Skills for Life qualification achievements.’