INSTITUTE *for* STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

Policy Briefing

PRISON AND PROBATION OFFICER PRACTITIONER EXCHANGE: DE-RADICALISATION IN PRISON

About the Report

The Prison and Probation Practitioner Exchange was held at the Eaton Hotel in Birmingham on 5 and 6 December 2011. Organised by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in cooperation with the RecoRa Institute, the exchange brought together prison and probation service personnel from a variety of European countries: Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden, The Netherlands and the UK. Sessions included discussions on how to effectively manage extremist offenders before, during and after imprisonment; examples of effective interventions and the lessons learned; principles of good 'prison craft'; and practical needs of, and key challenges facing, prison and probation staff.

This report provides an overview of the key themes and areas of focus from the Practitioner Exchange but is not intended to be a comprehensive record of discussions. Contributions are not attributed to individual attendees and national correctional or probationary services are not identified. Although the report will be shared publicly on **www.counterextremism.org**, **www.strategicdialogue.org** and **www.recora.eu**, the agenda and delegate list will not be shared further. We would welcome any feedback on this report, which should be sent to Alex Strugnell **astrugnell@strategicdialogue.org**.

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The RecoRa Institute
Translating Research into Policy into Practice

Definitions and Key Themes

SUMMARY

- Definitions of extremism, and therefore extremism-related offences, **vary across national borders**.
- Definitions impact on the **number and treatment of extremist offenders** within prisons.
- Participants reported **a general disconnect between policy and practice**.
- Delegates noted the need for **trust in the professional judgement of prison staff,** while recognising the dangers associated with the mismanagement of extremist offenders.
- Questions have persisted due to a **lack of evidence of what works in the practice of managing extremist offenders.**

Participants explored the various understandings of extremism, unpicking what constitutes an 'extremist offender' within different national prison and probationary contexts across Europe. Differing national legislation and legal frameworks help to explain why certain countries adopt a broad approach to labelling offences as motivated by "extremism", while others hesitate to apply the term at all. As a result, there is an **impact on the size of extremist prison populations across these countries**, and also their composition in terms of the types of offences under this heading. A variety of factors were taken into consideration when labelling offenders:

- ***Type of extremism***: certain national contexts recognised a broad range of ideologies as potentially inspiring extremist offences (far-right, far-left, animal rights, religious, etc.), with others focusing almost exclusively on Al-Qaeda related and inspired extremism.
- ***Violent versus non-violent***: there are variations in understanding as to where different countries see the point of harm, and whether they focus on 'extremism' *per se* or 'violent extremism' specifically.
- ***Intent or action:*** other national differences relate to whether it is the intent or the actual action of extremist violence that should determine the exact point of prison intervention.

Despite the political rhetoric surrounding extremism, there was a general consensus that there is a **clear divide between policy and practice**. It was made clear that the **professional judgement of frontline workers was crucial**, both within the assessment and intervention phases of counter-extremism initiatives within prisons, and upon release. Alternatively, it was argued that the actions of **practitioners could serve to heighten the risks** should they fail to handle those vulnerable appropriately. Such major

"risks" included the **radicalisation of other prisoner populations**, the perpetration of **violent acts within prisons** or the masterminding of **violent attacks** outside the institution.

Overarching concerns raised by a number of practitioners highlighted additional **divides between general policies and the actual practice of counter-radicalisation across prison services**. These included:

- Anxiety surrounding not only those convicted on extremist-related charges, but those within the prison service classified as **'of concern'** or **'at risk'** of being radicalised inside prison.
- A lack of consensus surrounding the actual impact that **existing assessment and intervention tools may have on rehabilitating extremist offenders**.
- Nervousness surrounding the prospect that **current assessment and intervention mechanisms may be counterproductive** and actually lead to the radicalisation of 'at risk' prisoners.
- Additional questions surrounding the **free movement or restriction of extremist offenders** with the rest of the prison population (the 'segregation vs. integration' dilemma).

Questions were also raised about the extent to which evidence drawn from **current offender management practice could be applied to managing extremist offenders**. This included, for example, general lessons drawn from good prison craft, the 'what works' literature and the management of other ideologically-motivated offenders not categorised as 'extremist'.

Additionally, participants were particularly anxious about **certain elements of the existing assessment tools in relation to Muslim prisoners and whether they result in negative unintended consequences**:

- To what extent is the **adoption of Islamic religious practices in prison a valid predictor** of radicalisation? Participants were sceptical.
- Is this concept of 'concern' created by an actual **anxiety surrounding religious activity** (eg. a prisoner reading the Qur'an), even though we know that conversion can serve as a powerful coping mechanism, including in the face of radicalising forces?
- Is this concept of 'concern' also reinforced by the desire **not to interfere or enquire about the adoption of religious practices** for fear of being accused of discrimination?

There was an overall acknowledgement that many of these questions have persisted due to a **lack of evidence of what works in practice**. This notion was confirmed by the first official evaluation of a 'terrorist wing' in a participant country, the findings of which suggested that it had been operating differently to how policy-makers originally planned. This brought into focus the need for a sustained dialogue between prison and probation officers dealing with such types of offenders on the ground.

Assessment Tools

SUMMARY

- Assessment tools for non-extremist offenders are being **applied to those convicted of extremist offences**.
- These assessment toolkits may be exactly the same as those used for other offenders, or they may **contain some extremism-specific elements**.
- Concerns were raised questioning the **adequacy of formal assessment tools.**
- Participants were concerned that the attempt to iron out human error through **standardising professional judgements may have the reverse effect of devaluing professional judgement** derived from time spent with offenders.
- Participants noted the need to **combine formal assessment with more informal approaches**.

Participants explored and exchanged the various risk assessment tools that currently existed within different national prison services to design personalised sentence plans. Of those participant countries which did have a formalised assessment tool for extremist offenders - some did not - most used the **same, or potentially an up scaled version of the one used for prisoners convicted** of other serious criminal offences. Only one participant country was in the development phase of a specially designed 'extremist assessment toolkit'. Across all countries, the following criteria were included in assessment: lifestyle, peer influence, personality types, drug and alcohol misuse, living conditions, education, employment history, family history, financial history, behavioural and other psychiatric testing.

When dealing with formal assessment mechanisms, it was clear that practitioners faced similar dilemmas. Above all, delegates discussed whether these **general assessment tools could actually be applied across the prison population.** Certain practitioners noted that extremist offenders presented a different set of risks, and that therefore many of these systems were too rigid. Similarly, it was debated whether such toolkits should be applied to entire prison populations convicted on extremist-related offences. The importance of the role of time spent with offenders within the context of 'good prison craft' was consistently emphasised.

Others criticised the term itself, citing the **over-professionalisation of assessment 'toolkits'**, without necessarily looking beyond the formalised procedures and protocols in place. Participants noted the difference between assessing someone and, as one practitioner explained, being given the space and time 'to make their own conclusions'. In other words, **participants firmly believed that such formal assessments can prevent officers from getting to know prisoners as individuals, something which is ultimately essential for a successful assessment.**

While certain practitioners noted a tendency for 'over-assessment', a number of other penitentiary services tried to overcome this by **combining structured assessment mechanisms with other more informal approaches to evaluation**. Although there remained an ongoing debate about how effective certain assessment mechanisms worked in practice, it was repeatedly argued that any evaluation required **significant personal judgement by prison staff**. Moving away from a 'check-list culture' was viewed as being vital, because these kinds of processes and systems obstruct professional officer-prisoner relationship building.

Effective Interventions

SUMMARY

- Focusing on formal assessment mechanisms risks losing a **focus on relationship building, which is often the most effective tool to de-radicalise.**
- **Offender motivation, the right mentors and trust are essential elements** for successful interventions.
- **Interventions must take a holistic approach inside and outside of institutions,** and include education, welfare, relationships, and support post release in order to be successful.
- The **importance of the community** should not be understated in the long-term rehabilitation process.
- There is a **lack of evidence** of what works in practice.

IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS; BUILDING A FEEDBACK LOOP

Participants mentioned the need to move away from 'assessment mechanisms' or 'assessment toolkits' to establishing more informal 'relationships' with extremist offenders (**not talking *about* or talking *to*, but talking *with* them**).It was argued that there was a crucial difference between assessing the risk that someone poses and working with them constructively. In this sense, it was agreed that the role of

credible authorities in prisons (such as former extremists, Imams and other pastoral workers) would be crucial, not only during the assessment phase but in their rehabilitation, by building a culture of **trust.**

Once an offender is committed to taking part in the rehabilitation process, effective interventions require the need to build a relationship of trust or **'feedback loop'** between the prison officer and the individual. Participants discussed once again the importance of having the right mentors, both in terms of their **legitimacy vis-à-vis the offenders, and the long-term trust of prison staff**, who may also build productive relationships with them.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHANGE

Participants argued that successful interventions were based on the idea of **change**, and that these initiatives had to be targeted at extremist offenders who were willing to change their behaviours. **Motivating offenders on very long or indeterminate sentences** to alter their ways was cited as a particular challenge. Part of the initial rehabilitation process consists of **'selling' the intervention**, by persuading the offender that it is in his or her interest to take part (i.e. as a way of getting early parole).

Similarly, prison services had to be committed to the idea that extremist offenders, like other prison populations, had the potential to alter their behaviour. This was not always the case, as **at least one correctional department did not allow the downgrading of prison status during their sentence**.

BEYOND FORMAL INTERVENTIONS

Participants acknowledged different types of intervention; ice breaking programmes, rehabilitation programmes, coaching programmes etc. However, there was also **a move away from strict programmed interventions, and a focus on a range of other support which impacts the prisoner's chances of reform** – education, welfare, relationship with officers and who they mix with in prison or in the community.

Discussions also analysed the benefits and potential drawbacks associated with **individual versus group interventions**, and noted that lessons are being learned and applied from similar interventions with former members of cults, organised crime groups and street gangs.

ROLE OF COMMUNITY POST-RELEASE

The **supporting role of the outside community**, particularly in the often difficult transition from prison to release, was seen as particularly vital in the de-radicalisation process. Participants noted that while the **community can act as a powerful and credible support network for former offenders, it can also serve to undo the programmed interventions or 'relationship building'** processes done with mentors

in prison. It was seen as essential that prison and probation staff be aware of the community the offenders will be living in post-release.

LACK OF EVIDENCE

Participants reaffirmed that there was **not enough systematic evaluation of intervention programmes** and their effects on extremist offenders. There was **ambiguity about what constituted success**. Was the aim disengagement or de-radicalisation? In other words, would it be enough for offenders to disassociate themselves from former groups or networks, or is there a need to alter their personal views, attitudes and belief systems too? Would it be acceptable to hold extremist views if the offender does not act on them? Should **success be therefore calculated through total recidivism rates or the ideological views held by the individual offender?** And if so, how would success be measured?

Institutional Factors

SUMMARY

- National approaches varied with regards to whether it was better to '**segregate or integrate**' extremist offenders, with no consensus being reached.
- Good **communication among practitioners in prison and probation staff** is essential.
- **Information flows between prison staff and leadership,** practice and policy will create a more positive environment for both staff and prisoners.
- Focusing on **risk rather than nurturing trust** is detrimental to the rehabilitation process.
- **Staff number reductions and regular staff changes** minimise the ability to establish trust between prisoners and staff, hindering the overall rehabilitation process.
- The practice in some countries of **moving high risk prisoners between prisons was noted as being disruptive to the formation of relationships.**

SEGREGATION VERSUS INTEGRATION

The '**segregation versus integration' dilemma also highlighted serious issues facing practitioners** in prisons. Should extremist offenders be dispersed within multiple prison wings; encouraging them to build relationships and exposing them to non-extremist views? If so, should they be placed away from younger, more impressionable prisoners? Or, should extremist offenders be grouped together, to prevent them from radicalising others and/or the prison staff responsible for them? Does this approach serve only to reinforce extremist views by producing an 'echo chamber'? Does it risk exacerbating grievances?

JOINED UP WORKING BETWEEN AGENCIES

Establishing **good cooperation and the sustained flow of information between the police, prison staff, probation officers and mentors**, remained a key area of focus throughout the discussions. This included involving the probation services prior to release, allowing the police to disseminate intelligence reports among prison officers and creating a culture where mentors could speak openly with prison staff. Establishing good contact between the chaplaincy, who are most trusted by the general prison populations but least trusted by prison management**,** was also identified as being particularly important.

'TRUSTING INTELLIGENTLY'; THE BALANCE BETWEEN SECURITY AND TRUST

Attendees agreed that the current institutional environment was primarily shaped by a **language of 'risk', rather than a culture of 'trust' and 'opportunity'**. In most cases, this was caused primarily by the overlapping of successive risk management schemes, resulting in an institutional culture of risk aversion.

Participants debated the need for a new way of engaging and communicating with the prison population, which would go beyond abiding by formal prison protocols. The concepts of **'trusting intelligently'**, **'critical attentiveness'** and **'dynamic security'** were all explored when building positive relationships with extremist offenders.

Nevertheless, 'trusting intelligently' was seen as a concept that would be very difficult to implement in prison. Participants cited a **climate primarily dictated by a sense of risk aversion** that was at odds with the concept of trust. Power dynamics in prisons were such that it was argued that 'trust' could never meaningfully be established, and that **safety and security of prison staff posed a challenge to its implementation**. Improving the processes between necessary security measures and effective and meaningful relationship building was seen as one of the greatest challenge facing practitioners in prisons.

RESOURCES

Logistically, a lack of time, funding and persistent understaffing on prison wings meant that prison officers were often **finding it difficult to engage meaningfully on a personal level with offenders**. Participants stressed the importance of consistency of interaction between the prison populations and prison staff**,** especially in order to establish trust; however, **bureaucracy was often viewed as a barrier**. This included performance reviews, prison targets and regular staff changes on prison wings. That multiple officers were dealing with the same offender in a short timeframe was seen as a major barrier to establishing successful interventions.

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE MEDIA

Public opinion also had an impact on working with 'extremist' offenders. The nature of their crimes often meant that the **general public would be less willing to accept that time, money and effort could be spent on reintegrating such offenders**, and that staff should build 'relationships' with them. It was argued, however, that even with a shift in public opinion, achieving the right amount of investment would be even more difficult within the general context of increasing budget cuts to prison services across Europe.

The role that the media plays in reinforcing negative attitudes towards prisoners convicted on extremism-related charges was also explored. Participants agreed that altering public attitudes to accepting the value of having constructive intervention schemes was important, although the ability of individual officers to effect a change on this scale is obviously limited.

GOOD PRISON MANAGEMENT

Prison leadership and management were singled out for their role in setting the tone of the prison environment. Establishing good information flows between management and frontline workers was essential, as experiences on the prison wings were viewed as key in developing effective policies at the top. Once again, frontline workers called for greater transparency of dialogue between prisons, probation services and the police.

Addressing Professional Needs

SUMMARY

- Providing the right training, including **core competencies training** (such as basic interaction and communication skills), is essential.
- The reality that prison officers were required to **undertake additional training to perform tasks that extended beyond the role they were recruited for** was presented as a dilemma.
- **Curiosity on the part of staff to engage proactively with prisoners should be encouraged** to develop good relationships which support de-radicalisation.
- **Prison staff need to be empowered** to feel able to ask questions about behaviours with which they are unfamiliar.
- **The ethnic/religious background of prison staff has an impact** on levels of trust and interaction between staff and prisoners.

TRAINING

Participants agreed that specific training for prison and probation staff was necessary to deal with all types of extremist prisoners. This was seen as especially vital in certain prison services that recruited **staff from social backgrounds and geographical locations that may have meant they had little initial awareness or exposure towards such issues** (this included, for example, a basic understanding of major religious events, spiritual practices and teachings or briefings on international and local issues and how they impact on what was happening in prisons). This, it was argued, would also prevent frontline workers from being misinformed by acquiring their information about such issues indirectly from the media, for example.

There was a noted concern regarding the **unanticipated tasks that prison officers were expected to undertake**, tasks that in many cases extended well beyond the initial description of the job upon recruitment. This included sustained face-to-face interaction with offenders, relationship building requirements and other pastoral tasks for which **certain prison officers lacked motivation to implement** on a consistent and rigorous basis.

There was also a need to **raise the interest of prison and probation staff to learn about such issues**, thereby providing a 'way in' to engage in discussions and conversations with prisoners which would lead to productive relationship building. It was noted that formal training such as 'Islam awareness' programmes were not always addressing the day-to-day questions facing prison and probation officers when engaging in relationship-building with radicalised or at risk prison populations. On the other hand, it was noted that appropriate training could help prison officers to become more confident in interacting with prisoners and recognising if certain behaviour was out of the ordinary.

Next Steps

Target outcomes of the exchange centred on the **need to establish an ongoing dialogue between prison and probation services relating to countering extremism in prison**. The need to facilitate the dissemination and exchange of experiences and expertise on a European level was shared by all participating countries, with delegates viewing the Practitioner Exchange as the beginning of a sustainable debate between practitioners operating in and around prisons.

PEER SUPPORT NETWORK

A permanent peer support network was mentioned as a possible outcome, with **practitioners from European countries meeting regularly around key issues and themes relating to de-radicalisation**

in prison. Participants mentioned the potential for case-orientated offender focus sessions, and the exchange of more in-depth rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. Delegates also identified the need to not only engage systematically with statutory staff from different European prison and probation services, but with external NGOs such as the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and the RecoRa Institute.

Discussions also took place around how best to work in the framework of the Radicalisation Awareness Network, a new European umbrella network of practitioners and local actors involved in countering violent radicalisation. Participants agreed the network could provide the opportunity for a peer support network to be established**.**

ONLINE POSSIBILITIES

Participants discussed the use of online media to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge and expertise. The use of the counterextremism.org portal (**www.counterextremism.org**), was seen as a way to promote ongoing discussion and debate, both in terms **of providing an up-to-date repository of expertise relating to countering radicalisation in prisons, and as a powerful social networking tool through its forums and 'practitioner networks' functionality**. The Graduate Forum on the RecoRa Institute website (**www.recora.eu**) was also presented as a useful tool to promote further discussion.

FUTURE EXCHANGES

Participants discussed the potential for exchanges between institutions to build solutions to shared issues and **proactively exchange good practice**. Whilst sharing the actions outlined above, the participants made a commitment to continue the dialogue and work towards a **follow-up meeting in order to agree a formal action plan**.

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