

## FINE CELL WORK

A case study of prison volunteering

June 2016

**Valuing  
volunteers  
in prison**

## Summary

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Fine Cell Work recruit volunteers who work in prisons throughout England. This case study will be especially interesting to readers who wish to:

- build working relationships with multiple different prisons of all types
- set up activities where volunteers operate relatively independently
- manage a national volunteering programme

## Introduction

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Fine Cell Work (FCW) trains prisoners in paid, skilled, creative needlework undertaken in the long hours spent in their cells to foster hope, discipline and self-esteem. This helps them to connect to society and to leave prison with the confidence and financial means to stop offending.



A team of over 50 volunteers work in over 70 prisons to teach over 500 prisoners a year. These highly-skilled volunteers teach a wide range of prisoners to make a variety of products. The prisoners are paid for their work, which is sold to the public.

FCW volunteers train groups of between 10 – 25 prisoners, and distribute craft materials to prisoners so that they can stitch in their cells. On average, prisoners stitch for up to 40 hours a week in their cells. Most classes take place fortnightly, though some are weekly.

FCW operates in a range of different category prisons, meaning we have developed considerable experience in establishing programmes across a variety of prison settings.

## **Benefits for service users**

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An independent evaluation carried out in 2011 found a variety of therapeutic and other benefits for stitchers, including a positive impact on:

- their attitudes, thinking and behaviour
- their mental health
- their relationships with other prisoners, with prison staff, and with family outside prison
- their finances and ability to save towards their eventual release.

There are particular benefits to FCW's in-cell stitching programme where the stitchers are serving long sentences and can participate over a long period, allowing them to become highly technically skilled, but also to benefit from a long and positive working relationship with the volunteers and with each other. Some high security prisons refer prisoners who have been self-harming, because having paid purposeful activity to carry out in-cell helps to take their minds off their problems and raises their self-esteem.

## **The importance of relationships with prison staff**

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The more FCW are able to involve prison staff in supporting the group, the better integrated they can become in the prison. According to their Service Level Agreements with FCW, each prison must provide a point of contact with whom volunteers can liaise about the class. FCW works with prisons to try and ensure the person nominated as a staff contact is interested and has capacity to deal with the volunteers, but this can be challenging and contacts are sometimes lost when prison staff move into different posts, meaning that the work that has gone into building a relationship can be lost. Patience is also needed, in view of the many other commitments which staff have.

An example of close liaison making the group work well is that at HMP Long Lartin, the volunteers and staff contact point liaise closely about applications from new prisoners to join the group, and ensure that there is an accurate movement list of who should attend the class, which takes place in the library. This close partnership makes it easier to deal appropriately with

stitchers who are not progressing, and who are producing work that is below the standards required to be sold by the charity. Strong support from the prison about group membership means that the volunteer is able to remove stitchers from the group when necessary.

The staff contact person is responsible for arranging risk assessment of each prisoner wishing to join the group. This also gives the opportunity for the prison to refer individuals who they think would benefit from participation; and this is most evident where there is a higher level of staff involvement. For example, in the Westgate Unit at HMP Frankland, the prison will sometimes refer prisoners whose behaviour has improved, using the opportunity to join the group as an incentive.

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## Setting up new groups

At HMP Leyhill, FCW worked with the prison and partner organisation Re-coop over several months, to identify working arrangements for the group that suited both sides, and the volunteers, as well as fitting in with the various requirements of the prison. This has meant a lengthy delay between agreeing to run a group and the first class actually happening, but has also allowed time for trust to be built between the charity, the volunteers, and the prison, as well as giving time for security clearance and training to be arranged for the volunteers. This deliberate, gradual approach has been found to help with getting a group established, and ensuring that it will be sustainable. Building trust with contacts within the prison is also important to show that the charity and the volunteers understand the importance of security.

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## Recruiting and training volunteers

FCW has built a strong reputation within the needlework community, and most volunteers apply for their role after hearing about the project through word of mouth, or after seeing the work displayed at exhibitions and sales. This means we receive more interest from potential volunteers than can be placed in prisons.

Potential volunteers are initially required to complete an online Skills Form which asks them to highlight the reasons why they would like to volunteer within prisons and to identify any beneficial skills and experience that they believe would help them to perform the role. If a role is available in a prison near them, applicants are invited to the prison for a 'taster session' which gives them an opportunity to experience a class and the realities of running groups. It also helps a great deal on these occasions if they can be introduced to prison staff contacts.

The security clearance process required by prisons is very time-consuming and is seen by many volunteers as being very complicated. FCW find that it helps to set volunteers' expectations about the length of time involved in vetting, but it is a barrier to volunteering and rules out some otherwise good applicants. It is generally sensible to allow a minimum of six months from the point of initiating volunteer recruitment to the time when they can expect to be involved in teaching a class. This is a significant investment of time and is only worthwhile for someone who expects to be able to commit themselves for at least a year after that, and FCW ask volunteers to think about the role accordingly.

FCW training is mandatory for all volunteers to attend before they start working in prisons regularly. Training is delivered by the Volunteer and Programmes Manager and covers:

- FCW policies and procedures
- stitching processes
- teaching skills
- boundaries, conditioning and safe working
- an introduction to working in prisons.

Volunteers are also supplied with a handbook that includes all FCW volunteer policies, and are asked to sign a volunteer agreement outlining their responsibilities and rights as volunteers.

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## Prisoner volunteering

A strong feature of FCW's programme is that we expect stitchers to move towards a point where they demonstrate responsibility towards others. Our volunteers select one or more Class Coordinators from among the prisoners to help them coordinate and deliver the group. Class Coordinators help with some of the arrangements to ensure that the class takes place, and sometimes assist with paperwork and record-keeping relating to needlework kits and stitcher pay. They can also be helpful in supporting the staff contact point. For example, in HMP Littlehey, the Class Coordinator keeps records of who is interested in joining the group and passes them to the prison to be added to a waiting list. Before each class, he also compiles names for a movement list, which is then passed to a member of staff. This helps ensure that the stitchers are able to move around the prison to attend the classes.

Volunteers also select Mentors, skilled stitchers who help to mentor and teach new stitchers or those who are learning new techniques. Currently 37% of the stitchers we work with are volunteering within their groups as Class Coordinators or as Mentors.

It is essential to keep the prison informed about these roles, so that they can refuse permission for things that they find unacceptable on security grounds, or can resolve problems in the rare occasions where a Class Coordinator does not live up to the trust placed in them. There are definite benefits (to the prisoner and the volunteers) of offering prisoners responsibility in this way, but it is a calculated risk, meaning that we can only do so where there is a positive partnership with the prison.

## **Access to the prison and the staff point of contact**

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All FCW prison volunteers are required to gain NOMS security clearance, while at least one volunteer from each team is also trained to draw keys. Having volunteers draw keys involves both pros and cons. In general it has meant volunteers are better able to operate independently, because they are less reliant on a member of staff to escort them from the gate to the classroom. However, it also removes the crucial opportunity for face-to-face contact with the staff point of contact, which used to be guaranteed because the volunteers were escorted from the gate to the classroom (and back again after the class). The conversations during this walk helped a great deal with ensuring that the staff were aware of the issues within the group and able to advise volunteers.

In some ways drawing keys seems to mark the volunteers as 'just one of the staff', and it can be easy for prisons to forget that they are volunteers, who are less familiar with the prison, less attuned to some issues that are second nature to staff members, and less able to access information about upcoming changes. This can lead to misunderstandings, or volunteers not being kept informed about things they need to be aware of, such as planned lockdowns. We deal with this by trying to ensure that staff points of contact are available by email, and by ensuring that there is a scheduled meeting to review how the group is running at least once a year.

## **Arranging times for classes**

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Even with strong partnerships with the prisons, FCW classes usually take place on weekdays and it seems to be hard for prisons to facilitate classes at other times. We work with prisons to find flexibility where it exists, and to find a compromise that is suitable for all, but it is sometimes necessary to remind the prison that volunteers are not paid and therefore cannot be required to offer time when it does not suit them.

We do have one class that takes place on a Saturday morning, at HMP Whatton. This is a successful arrangement but would not be easy to replicate elsewhere, because it relies on the fact

that the volunteers are very experienced and trusted by prison staff. In general, we find that successful volunteering is a weekday, daytime pursuit, and this makes it hard (though not always impossible) for volunteers who also work. The remote location of many prisons where we work also adds to this, because volunteers may be giving up a whole morning or afternoon to volunteer. Some volunteers also dislike having to drive to or from the prison in winter while it is dark. Greater flexibility over class times would make it very much easier to run groups.



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## Challenges for volunteers

*"I have learnt to be flexible, it's a wonderful skill to have!"*

*(FCW Volunteer)*

FCW groups have changed shape over the past 20 years, and volunteers have needed to be very flexible. In the beginning some volunteers would move from wing to wing to meet their stitchers (rather than teaching in specific classrooms). Over time we have moved, in most prisons, to running classes during the core day.

This change in working has been in many ways hugely beneficial for FCW. It has meant that volunteers have been assigned rooms to work from and as such are able to teach more prisoners than ever before. However, there have also been difficulties.

- It is not uncommon for there to be difficulties with rooms, where volunteers will arrive to run a class only to find it has been displaced by another activity, without prior consultation
- the FCW programme is not accredited, and other accredited provision takes priority, even though the stitchers are completing paid work to a very high standard
- timetabling clashes are an issue in some prisons, with prisoners not being able to attend classes because they have been told they must attend other places of work.

FCW does not have personnel based full-time in the prison, and as a result it does sometimes appear that changes happen without us being consulted. The volunteers then have to adapt to them. Consultation in advance takes a proactive approach by the prison staff point of contact, and will not happen automatically, because the volunteers typically visit the prison fortnightly, cannot attend meetings, and do not receive internal emails. However, it can seem that the volunteers and their classes can be forgotten unless someone thinks to communicate with them in advance. Even with a supportive prison staff contact, patience and flexibility are required to resolve problems. It can be frustrating for volunteers if the prison inadvertently gives the impression that their time is not valued.

### **Factors that support the success of volunteers**

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In order to deliver the FCW volunteering programme to prisons, the following need to be in place:

- staff capacity within FCW to recruit, train and coordinate volunteers, act as the point of contact for prisons, and help to resolve issues that may arise
- clear volunteer guidelines and policies to ensure safety of volunteers and prisoners
- a thorough volunteer training programme
- funding to cover volunteer expenses
- support and buy in for involving volunteers from our board of trustees and senior management team.

In Fine Cell Work's experience, most problems within the prison can be resolved by:

- clear oversight at a senior level of what volunteers are doing
- regular review meetings and a defined problem resolution procedure
- clear communication within the prison about what volunteers are there to do, and why they are involved
- wide staff awareness and support of FCW's activities, and support for the volunteers.



Most of these come down to support from prison staff:

*“Prison staff who take time to listen about what we are doing really get it and could not be more supportive!”*

*(FCW Volunteer)*

FCW believe prisons could encourage more, and better, volunteering schemes in prison by:

- making members of staff available to liaise with and support volunteers, and ensuring that this does not suffer in comparison with their other duties
- communicating the benefits of volunteering to all members of staff
- showing greater appreciation to volunteers by thanking volunteers for the work they do
- communicating better with volunteers, and consulting with them if changes are going to affect them
- involving volunteers in relevant meetings and seeing them as not staff, but nonetheless ‘part of the team’
- having a volunteer induction programme to show volunteers around the prison and introduce them to key staff on their first day
- improving communication between prison staff, volunteers and the organisations that they work with
- ensuring that prisoners' successes and achievements with FCW and similar organisations receive enough celebration and recognition within the prison.

## Conclusions

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Fine Cell Work would not have the financial resources or staff capacity to operate in so many prisons across the country without volunteers. Using volunteers also gives a different kind of relationship with the stitchers, who appreciate the chance to experience contact with someone from the outside world, who engages with them because they want to, and sees them as people and not just as offenders. Prisoners also often report feeling humbled and valued that an individual would take time out of their busy lives to come and sit and teach them how to stitch. This increases prisoners' self-esteem and confidence in a way that utilising paid staff would not. With the right support in place, and by developing effective partnerships with prison staff to integrate the groups within the prisons, using volunteers to deliver the programme is highly worthwhile.

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