

BECCLES U3A
MONTHLY MEETING OCTOBER 16TH

Chris Greenhill
My Day Monitoring Norwich Prison

Inside every prison there is an Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) – a group of ordinary members of the public doing an extraordinary job. IMB members are independent, unpaid and work an average of 3-4 visits per month. Chris is one such volunteer within Norwich Prison. His role is to monitor the day-to-day life in Norwich Prison and ensure that proper standards of care and decency are maintained.

Monitoring covers:

- Safety of the establishment
- Fairness of prisoner treatment
- Accommodation, the daily regime and the way it is managed
- Communication and consultation
- Healthcare
- Entitlements
- Education, training and preparation for release

Members have unrestricted access to their local prison at any time and can talk to any prisoner or detainee they wish to, out of sight and hearing of members of staff if necessary. A typical monitoring visit, for example, might include time spent in the kitchens, workshops, accommodation blocks, recreation areas, healthcare centre and chaplaincy.

Board members also play an important role in dealing with problems inside the establishment. If a prisoner or detainee has an issue, he or she can put in a confidential request to see a member of the IMB. Problems might include concerns over lost property, visits from family or friends, special religious or cultural requirements, or even serious allegations such as bullying.

If something serious happens at the establishment, for example a riot or a death in custody, representatives of the Board may be called in to attend and observe the way in which the situation is handled.

Having retired 10 years ago, Chris became interested in Blundeston Prison and following a visit applied to become a member of its IMB. Nine months later he was admitted and was surprised by the calmness within the prison and the care and tolerance displayed by many of the staff. He was also impressed that 40% of the total staff are women using their particular skills to deal with issues. Blundeston was renowned as a training prison equipping the prisoners with skills to take outside.

When Blundeston closed Chris moved to Norwich Prison which is much bigger and with fewer opportunities for the prisoners to learn new skills with some of the tasks being mundane. Chris gave a few amusing examples of the complaints he had dealt with during his time as a Board member.

He mentioned that budget cuts in recent years had reduced the staffing numbers in prisons nationally and increased the stress levels. One or two riots in prisons in other parts of the country had reinstated some budgets and recruitment is taking place and Norwich seems able to recruit staff.

In response to a question Chris said that he has never felt threatened during his time working within prisons although he did occasionally receive some abuse!

He thinks it is difficult to assess how successful the IMB is. Measures tend to be quantitative rather than qualitative.

The Butler Trust produces a book listing the good things about the prisons across the country based on interviews with prisoners and staff. The prisoners called Norwich 'a good jail', and thought it 'safer' than comparable jails, as well as cleaner than other locals. They said the staff were 'great', and recognised that, even while working under tremendous pressure, 'they really do care' and had a 'very positive' approach compared to other jails with which they were familiar. They praised staff as 'very good' at de-escalating situations. They also rated 'good' support for families, including both full day family visits and children's visits.

It was quite clear that Chris enjoys his involvement with Norwich Prison and contributes to these positive comments.