



Stitching a Future

An Evaluation of Fine Cell Work

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RESEARCH

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This research has been carried out in compliance with the international standard (ISO 20252)

1. Background

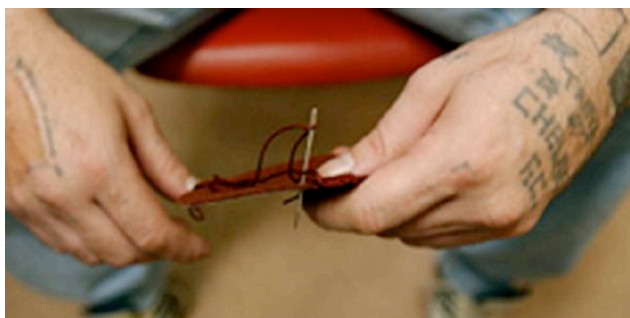
1.1 Aims and method

Qa Research (Qa) was commissioned by Fine Cell Work (FCW) to undertake a qualitative evaluation to understand offenders' experiences of engaging in the charity's in-cell needlework programme. Specifically FCW asked Qa to identify the key benefits of being involved with FCW, establish why offenders participate and continue their involvement, and investigate changes in soft outcomes such as behaviour, feelings about prison and attitudes towards others.

Qa spoke with 22 prisoners involved with FCW – using in-depth interviews and focus groups. Interviews took up to one hour to complete and consultations took place in five prisons during early 2011. The four male and one female prisons covered were representative of the FCW demographic as a whole, and the prisoners interviewed also represented a cross-section. All were serving sentences of over 3 years, and had varying lengths of time left to serve and involved in the project; broadly, from one to 15 years.

This initial evaluation is intended as the basis for developing an ongoing evaluation system covering statistically significant numbers of prisoners to assess the likelihood of Fine Cell Work's reduction of reoffending.

1.2 Introduction to Fine Cell Work



Fine Cell Work is a social enterprise set up 14 years ago to enable prisoners to practice a professional craft skill and earn and save money from it. Its mission statement is

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

Products such as cushions, quilts and rugs hand-crafted by prisoners are sold by FCW to designers, museums and the general public. FCW works with long-term prisoners over one to ten year periods and with 400 prisoners yearly. The dropout rate is approximately 18%, demonstrating the ability of the project to keep people involved. FCW has grown steadily since its inception and has extremely high demand from prisons, prisons and volunteers.

2. Key Findings

“You hope people realize you are making a worthwhile product; something someone, somewhere appreciates. It’s something to do, but it gives you contact with the outside world, giving something back as well. Giving back is a massive thing for me... There must be a more constructive way of spending £44k of the taxpayer’s money each year keeping us locked up behind these doors wasting away. There’s so much more I could be doing.”

“I don’t think Fine Cell know what this means to people like myself that are in here. It is something for them to grasp on to and don’t think Fine Cell realise what a mark they make on people and it would be nice for them to know that. I wouldn’t like to think what I would have done without it”

Prisoner serving a life sentence

2.1 Executive Summary

The qualitative findings in this evaluation (that is, in-depth rather than statistically representative) highlight the role that Fine Cell Work plays in the lives of prisoners on a number of levels. As well as providing practical skills, involvement with FCW

- Helps pass time productively, distracting the mind away from stress and anxiety and providing a catalyst for reflection
- Is therapeutic and helps with mental disorders such as anxiety and depression
- Promotes values such as calm, stillness and concentration
- Gives prisoners an opportunity to gain respect and a sense of achievement for their work – gaining self esteem and confidence
- Helps prisoners become more resilient through problem solving
- Provides prisoners volunteering as “class coordinators” with experience of managing teams, developing people and managing the logistics of supply and demand of materials
- Provides a positive activity to carry on with upon release, and something positive to focus on during their sentence

This evaluation affirms the important role played by Fine Cell Work’s volunteers, who offer ‘a keyhole’ to the outside world and ‘normal’ life which we feel is invaluable for prisoners serving long sentences. There is also value in keeping the group size small enough so volunteers can develop a rapport with the prisoners.

Prisoners agreed that they do feel part of FCW and talked about a relationship based on far more than the chance to earn extra money, characterised by **a desire to ‘give something back’**.

Positive impacts are reinforced and deepened by the sheer number of hours spent stitching or quilting, spread out over a number of years. Through applying themselves at such length, prisoners are able to **better come to terms with themselves**, start to **construct a more positive identity** and also to **picture a more optimistic future** outside prison than would be the case without FCW.

2.2 Impact on behaviour and feelings

Prisoners talked of how stitching calmed them, almost “a form of meditation”. This was seen to be part of the rehabilitation process:

“I have changed in the way I have become confident in what I am doing and it is very therapeutic”

When serving long sentences, **passing time quickly and keeping calm** are key priorities: Staying out of trouble on the wing was seen as a benefit to prison staff, and also potentially to help with parole applications:

“It keeps you quiet. You block out... If there’s any trouble the officers know stitchers won’t be involved.”

The group agreed that they all found stitching “relaxing” and “calming”.

As mentioned earlier, the fact that stitching or quilting devours time was a considerable benefit. This is particularly important for those serving long sentences; not only making the present productive, but also offering a **more positive future**:

“Definitely, just for the better, self esteem. I see things more clearly now and if it wasn’t for Fine Cell I don’t know what direction I would have took but its kept me focused it’s given me something to look forward to and I hope to continue it when I get out of here.”

A recurring theme was the sense of achievement prisoners felt, particularly when tackling difficult projects:

“It gives you a sense of worth. There are lots of hidden benefits - you find some inner peace. It stops you getting frustrated and stressed. It tires your brain because you are working, so it helps you to sleep. There isn’t enough physical or mental work in here to do that.”

Stitchers talked with pride about particular commissions they had been asked to do, and how this helped them to feel:

“I look forward to getting the new kits and I get a choice and I get excited because I know that’s me occupied for the next fortnight, I like a deadline to work to. I enjoy doing commissions because you take more pride in what you are doing”

Other skills developed included confidence and resilience i.e. instead of becoming frustrated by mistakes and set-backs they had learnt how to fix and cope with these. One prisoner talked about his determination to succeed:

“I say ‘If it can be done I’ll do it, if it can’t be done I’ll try”

Giving back and being useful were also mentioned:

“The worst thing is the flashbacks of what you might have done differently. In here, you are always reminded. The thing with FCW is ... you are doing something useful. And the most important thing for me is that I’m doing something for charity. Money isn’t a big issue. Yeah, we get paid, wages, and also we get bonuses. But it makes me feel I’m doing something useful. We’re doing something for Help The Heroes. I’m reminded of what my dad went through. He was shot in the arm in the Second World War, in the Welsh Guards in the D-Day landing. It’s very important for me to give something back.”

2.3 Impact on mental health

Some participants had struggled with mental health problems prior to their involvement with FCW, some mentioning that they had, had suicidal thoughts in the past.. It was felt that a constructive activity would help them work through their problems.

“I get a sense of pride in my work, and feel better generally. I have bad days, and used to feel suicidal. If I’d have had this when I was out, things might have been different.”

Participants also felt frustrated with no productive activity to undertake, generally feeling that being kept busy would help them.

“Some people who are mentally challenged and likely to get into trouble, it can be a way of calming them down. In the cell, they’ve got too much to think about if they’ve got nothing to do. But if they’re busy, they don’t think about anything and it keeps them calm.”

Another prisoner felt that stitching not only helped distract from the routine of prison life but also from issues that are raised during therapy sessions.

“I think it takes you attention away from your problems or things in your TP [therapy sessions] which can get you down... whereas something like that where you’re constantly counting the stitches it takes you to another place”

2.4 Impact on relationships

2.4.1 Sharing skills with other prisoners

It was felt that being able to meet and talk with other stitchers improved the skill level of inmates as they were able to compare work and learn new techniques.

“People need to be encouraged, and to learn from your mistakes. People say ‘ have you got five minutes’; I can help them if they have made a hole or a mistake.”

Many prisoners were teaching new skills to others, and proud of this:

“In my last block there are 2 lassies who are now on FC and I taught them to sew, I’m still taking it in. Some of the kits they give me I think to myself can I trust them to do that properly and it makes you feel good.”

More experienced stitchers especially talked about how they help to **develop and coach other stitchers** – using a wide range of team working and motivational skills into the bargain:

“You are encouraging them to have a skill that might be useful on the outside and you are encouraging them to know what it is like to work... Someone had been here a long time, was institutionalised, never did anything different, never encouraged to do anything. I encouraged him and he said, “Ooh, I like this.” Once he got more practice, he became more creative and got very good at it.”

2.4.2 Relationships with volunteers

Participants were asked what they thought of their volunteers. The ‘Wordle’ below shows that the volunteers generally were seen to be:



Supportive Helpful
Calm Respected Experienced
Needed Patient Friendly

“Volunteers have to get on with everyone”

“Our last volunteer was helpful, she’d only give you a piece when you were ready for it, and if you went wrong she’d unpick it and show you again. There was no telling off. In my last prison, they would keep extra pieces aside for me

2.4.3 Reactions of prison staff

While prisoners were not always keen to talk up impacts in this area, it was acknowledged that where prison staff took an interest, it was of the positive kind:

“Staff see us differently; some will stick their head round the door and say ‘that’s looking good’. I suppose it gets mentioned at my annual board. Some prisoners will say ‘how much do you get for that?’ I enjoy it, simple as that, my family are used to be me doing things like this.”

“Some of the girls [officers] are doing their own embroidery and they bring in packs of cross stitch for the girls as the prison has a budget for it”

Sometimes FCW projects overlap with the interest or previous employment history of officers, and this can generate additional support. In this case the project was a commission around “Help for Heroes”:

“The officers, some are ex-military, so they would do anything to help. It has been a team effort. And, I think ever since then, they have a bit more respect.”

2.4.4 Relationships with family and friends

Involvement in FCW is not only noticed by other prisoners or by staff. Visitors, friends and family from the outside were also told about FCW by the stitchers.

For example, one prisoner felt that the FCW had allowed him to “**fulfil my role as a father**” in not only providing for his children (presents etc) but showing his family he can sacrifice his time for them through FCW. He considers that FCW has “contributed to a different identity” and hopes that his involvement in the programme will show him in a positive light and provide good references for his parole application.

One prisoner reported how he was able to send some of his own stitched creations home, and this helped him sustain his relationship with his daughter. Another talked about paying for his sister's provisional licence so she can have driving lessons.

2.5 Impact on Skills

A key feature of FCW as a whole, is that people are judged solely for their commitment and skill to stitching, regardless of the reason they were imprisoned.

When asked what new skills participants had learnt as a result of their involvement in FCW most noted less tangible and softer learning – in addition to specific craft skills. Many cited:

1. Patience
2. Staying calm and relaxed
3. Increased motivation
4. Perseverance
5. Increased self confidence
6. Learning to be proud of achievements
7. Increased concentration
8. Learning to finish something they have started
9. Time keeping
10. Working to a deadline (when working on commissions)

Comments included:

“It was like goal setting – it was something I could do – it really helped me with my confidence. At first it was a little bit of a struggle to get it finished but as I become better at it [...] it's very self satisfying.”

“I have always finished my kits I have always got to finish what I start and I think that learns you for someone who is quite lazy to learn how to finish things, responsibility.”

“I feel a lot more content with myself, for the first time in years I have a focus.”

2.6 The meaning of money

Participants were asked how much money they normally make from FCW and what they spend this on. In discussion they talked about making up to about £20 per week if they worked up to 60 hours on a project.

“I'm a fast stitcher, so I reckon I can make £8 a week, so £500 a year... I probably do an hour at lunch time, in the evening until say 9, so about 20-30 hours a week”

Participants used their money for three main purposes:

1. To send home
2. To save
3. To buy necessities (and luxuries) in prison

2.6.1 Sending home

Many of those consulted were saving money and then sending it home. This was often to support family members such as children and elderly parents. Participants commented that they had sent money home to help their pay for their parent's electricity bills, to support siblings in gaining their driving licenses and to pay for presents for their children. Comments included:

“I send my money out to my family. It gives me pleasure to do that, I don't need it in here. It helps them to visit”

It was noted by many of those consulted that that the extra money from FCW has meant they are less reliant on family members supporting them financially.

“I used to rely on my son for money but now I don't have to [...] I feel a lot better”

Even when participants could get support from outside of prison they felt that this was not allowing them to live an independent life, for example one prisoner stated:

“Sometimes you don't want to ask your family, you want to earn”

The concept of **giving back** was mentioned a number of times, often in relation to payment.

2.6.2 Saving

Many of those consulted were saving the money they earned. Primarily they were saving for their release from prison. One participant explained that they had opened a bank account and bought premium bonds to help with saving as they were hoping to undertake the compulsory bike instruction and test so that he is 'road legal' and does not jeopardise his parole terms when released.

Another prisoner explained that he had been involved with FCW previously however had felt that he had 'wasted' his earnings on items for inside prison – for example he noted he had purchased a stereo and budgie. However since his release and subsequent return to prison he was focused on saving money ready for his release.

It was felt by many consulted that having a financial buffer when leaving prison was an important factor in not re-offending. Comments on saving money for release included:

“I've been in seven years, and I know it will be hard to find a job when I get out, so this gives me something put by.”

“I save it because I am so far into it the work that it get is bigger and bigger and bigger which makes me excited, it takes more time and you get more money but I saved that much that I don't even think about it, it's just the sewing.”

2.6.3 Buying things

Many participants commented that they use the money to buy items in prison. For some this was essential as the allowance given to them by the prison did not cover the items they needed to buy. For those who did not have family members to supplement their prison allowance earning money was more important to ensure that they were able to purchase all the things they needed.

“I have nobody outside to put money in so I just live on my wages, so this helps me live in here, I have been saving some of it, because me and someone in here are going to get a flat together so it’s a start if you save some.”

Finally, one participant explained that their additional income was helping them pay for an Open University course as they had struggled to find financial support elsewhere:

“... what’s left I put towards the cost of doing a qualification. Because I have a degree, I am not eligible for any funding, so I’m having to fight quite hard to get on an OU course.”

2.7 Being part of Fine Cell Work

To conclude the interview, prisoners were asked whether they felt part of FCW and if they received enough support from the charity. While most prisoners talked of feeling part of something, the strength of this attachment varied. Many talked about receiving post to thank them for their work - which is another key link with the outside world.

“Yes they always listen, some get letters and photos of their stitching”

“Yes they send me letters and let me know what has been auctioned. I think I feel more part of it because they have offered me the apprenticeship. I know if ever I need them I can write to them and get a response. Definitely I feel proud to be a part of it, I can’t tell you how much”

2.7.1 Thinking about the Future

It was clear that FCW provides a focus, not just in the immediate present, but also helps to give shape to life after a prisoner is released. What became clear through the course of the evaluation is that some prisoners are thinking about their future in an entrepreneurial way thanks to their involvement with FCW.

“I would love to keep stitching when I leave and if I got the responsibility of teaching that would be a bonus but this is all I live for right now”

Prisoners were thinking about including the skills learnt into their lives after release. Involvement with the charity after release could take the form of a hobby, but many were thinking about how they could use FCW to generate an income.

One prisoner suggested helping out in a formal capacity – for example delivering kits (security permitting) or assisting with other tasks such as design or marketing. Another hoped to generate commissions of their own to run alongside their work with FCW.

“I am going to dedicate two days a month to FCW once I am released. I have made that commitment. I feel that I can make more money for them.”

Prisoners felt they were ideally placed in some respects to take on a volunteering role with other prisoners (after release):

“People don’t know what you go through in here. It’s alright people who come in and give you stitching advice, but they don’t know what’s gone on before and why you wanted to stitch in the first place.”

A number of prisoners talked about **continuing their involvement with FCW**, usually voluntarily.

“I would volunteer because it has benefited me, been a lifeline for me in here and if I can give that lifeline back I would. I am talking from experience I have lived this.”

3. Recommendations and next steps

1. FCW should consider the viability of covering all prisons where longer sentences are served; so that if a prisoner transfers they can continue to stitch with support. **Over time the relationship between prisoner and FCW develops into one based on mutual respect, and the benefits of this are greatest over the longer term.**
2. Prisoners talked about continuing their involvement with FCW. Having acquired the relevant skills through persistence and effort, ex-prisoners might make the best advocates for potential recruits. Given security issues about released prisoners returning to prison as volunteers, a film or DVD might be a workable compromise.
3. We recommend that FCW consider commissioning a set of family case studies – consisting of interviews with prisoners and their families to highlight how the benefits of the charity’s work do not stop with the offender.
4. It has been identified that stitching helps a prisoner to think more optimistically and constructively about life after their release. In May 2011, in the forward to the BIS report ‘Making Prisons Work: Skills for Rehabilitation’ Further Education Minister John Hayes underlined the importance of equipping offenders with employment skills in order to reduce re-offending. Even more apt for FCW is his comment that more needs to be done to ensure the progress offenders make in prison is continued after they are released. Arguably taking the minister’s words one step further, respondents talked how in an entrepreneurial way about how stitching could form part of their life after release.
5. FCW needs to make the case that the skills learnt are vocational and linked to being able to generate an income. We recommend that short case studies are produced with prisoners who have continued with the charity after leaving prison with a view to sharing these with both the Home Office, but also new FCW recruits.