Submission to the Work and Pensions Committee

Support for ex-offenders
April 2016

About Co-operatives UK
Co-operatives UK is the network for Britain’s thousands of co-operatives. We work to promote, develop and unite member owned businesses across the economy. From high street retailers to community owned pubs, fan owned football clubs to farmer controlled businesses, co-operatives are everywhere and together they are worth £37 billion to the British economy.

What is a co-operative?
A co-operative is a group of people acting together to meet their common needs and aspirations, sharing ownership and making decisions democratically. Co-operatives are not about making profits for shareholders but creating value for members. Many co-operatives are a democratic mutual form of social enterprise.

About this submission
We are specifically addressing the following question from the committee’s terms of reference: “How are prisoners helped to find employment; is support available both pre and post-release?”. Our submission provides insight into what is possible based on practices elsewhere in the world, rather than what is currently happening in the UK.

This submission draws on a chapter on co-operative approaches to criminal justice authored by Dave Nicholson and Cliff Mills in the book ‘Co-operative Advantage’.

1 Co-operative approaches to desistance
1.1 Important services for offenders and ex-offenders relating to education and employment can be organised as ‘multi-constituency co-operatives’. The criminological case for adopting co-operative and mutual models in offender education and employment support is underpinned by contemporary evidence and innovation that suggests co-operative practices can play a powerful role in promoting what is termed ‘desistance’; the process through which people cease and refrain from offending.

1.2 An established group of Italian ‘social co-operatives’ demonstrate this approach most clearly. These are what we in the UK might call ‘public service mutuals’; albeit ones which empower service users as members alongside

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Multi-constituency social co-operatives emerged in Italy in the 1970s as a totally new version of ‘3D’ mutuality for the delivery of social benefit. They are characterised by a model of ownership and governance which aligns different constituencies of interest which then have a say in decisions and a role in governance. Granting co-operative membership to these constituencies hardwires co-production into the venture. In a criminal justice setting these approaches empower offenders and ex-offenders, staff and broader communities of interest, through democratic participative membership, with shared ownership and responsibility.

1.3 This ‘modern mutual’ approach starts from the premise that the service is more likely to be effective if the user and provider work together to achieve the desired objective which they co-own. A binary or adversarial user-provider relationship tends not to be the most effective basis for strategic planning, or for the optimisation of increasingly stretched public funds. Instead, modern mutuality seeks to incorporate into the ownership and governance structure of the service itself the key constituencies of interest; those who are most affected by the service. Through embedding co-ownership and co-production in the design of the organisation itself, the model supports meaningful participation through membership of a co-operative or mutual organisation.

1.4 The multi-constituency co-operative approach is a new but very effective method for management and service-delivery. But it is also a lot more than that. These co-operatives generate significant social capital that research suggests is instrumental in assisting desistance.²

1.5 At the heart of the concept of co-operation is participation by individuals in a common endeavour, through membership of an association. In the context of supporting desistance, that very participation is itself an ingredient of the therapeutic process: being a member of a bespoke ‘society’ for individuals aimed at promoting desistance (a more tolerant ‘society' which acknowledges that its members may relapse from time to time) aims to be a step along the pathway towards and preparation for a more successful membership of society itself.

1.6 Desistance research has consistently emphasised the significance of not only the acquisition of capacities to govern and control the direction of one’s life but opportunities to exercise those capacities. Involvement in ‘generative activities’ (that contribute to the well-being of others), such as mentoring, volunteering, or employment can support the development or internalisation of

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an alternative identity or shifts in one’s sense of self. Engagement in generative activities has also been shown to ameliorate the effects of a stigmatised identity, re-establish a sense of self-worth and, importantly, a sense of citizenship. This suggests that the process of desistance from crime is not solely a ‘within-individual’ phenomenon but is also dependent on interactions between the individual and their relationships, their immediate environment, community and the social structure. As such, supporting the development of social capital, fostering connections between people and restoring relationships are key components in supporting desistance.

1.7 The multi-constituency model has another vitally important feature. Promoting desistance is crucially not just something for offenders and probation staff. Society itself has a role to play in receiving back individuals, and needs to engage in the process for it to be completed. The tendency for modern society to physically remove criminality from its midst and put it out of sight masks a deeper societal reluctance to face up to failure, and to enter into vulnerability by contemplating forgiveness. There is a contemporary cultural need for society to be drawn into the process of rehabilitation.

“These are the very processes, practices and outcomes that mutual and social co-operative structures can support... The emphasis on the centrality of reciprocal relationships and mutuality in supporting resettlement is the distinct contribution that co-operatives and mutuals have to offer to current approaches to supporting desistance and contributing to penal and public sector reform.”

1.8 Learning from abroad, particularly from the Italian social co-operative sector, provides evidence of the opportunities for co-operative innovation in criminal justice in the UK.

2 Exemplars of the co-operative approach

Employment and resettlement co-operatives

2.1 In the UK there are some great social examples of social enterprises ‘delivering work integration. What social co-operatives offer in addition is democratic member control and a permanent audible voice for those most affected by the service. Prisoners co-own and co-control the co-operative

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together with the other stakeholder members – ex-prisoners, victims, community members and criminal justice and social work professionals.

2.2 Looking to Italy for examples, a prisoner-led co-operative runs a micro-brewery in Saluzzo Prison in Italy, producing high quality craft beers which are exported across Europe and the United States. The same co-operative also operates in Turin Prison, processing, roasting and packaging coffee and cocoa for the Pausa Café (‘Coffee Break’) chain of co-operative café bars. Prisoners join the co-operative by paying a small fee. Membership then guarantees them paid employment during their time in prison as well as after their release in the cafés. They also receive resettlement support and, as members of the co-operative, they share in the profits and decision making of the business as a whole. The cafés provide a means by which the community can support the re-integration of former offenders, effectively recognising that re-integration is a two-way process and involves both parties.

2.3 Social co-operatives like Pausa are a fast developing feature of the Italian criminal justice system and are increasingly found throughout the EU and in many other countries as well. Some are entirely prisoner and ex-prisoner owned and managed while others include criminal justice and social work staff in their membership to provide additional rehabilitation and resettlement support services. Some work particularly with prisoners with drug and alcohol problems while others work with all categories of offender. Some operate both in prisons and in the community offering ‘through the prison gate’ employment and mutual support, while others provide day release employment and a guarantee of continued employment on release.

2.4 There is an active programme of through-the-prison-gate social co-operative development through Co-operative Development Bodies or Co-operative ‘Accelerators’ such as Acceleratore Di Impressa Ristretta (A.I.R) in Milan funded by the local authority and the wider Social Co-operative Federations.

2.5 An opportunity to replicate the ‘social co-operative model' of through-the-prison-gate employment and resettlement support and secondly by establishing the ‘new mutual’ model seen in other public services for the management of prisons and Community Rehabilitation services. Specific innovations in this context might include:

- mutual employment agencies, co-owned by ex-offender user workers and providing access to employment on more favourable terms than most agencies currently are able to offer.
- mutual prison industries developed by co-operative development bodies replicating the A.I.R. model from Milan.
- Support offenders and ex-offenders to be collaborative entrepreneurs with a co-operative variant of the New Enterprise Allowance.
2.6 A further innovation could again build on learning from Italy. The Italian social co-operatives also make placements available for offenders subject to community penalties. In the UK context this opens up possibilities of widening the scope of community payback to include unpaid work in a co-operative where the monetary value of the unpaid work is paid direct to victims as reparation for the offenders crime (or to victim’s charities or even as a contribution to the costs of resettlement and rehabilitation). On successful completion of the community payback paid employment in the co-operative would then be made available together with support into mainstream employment, thus providing a rehabilitative role for community payback as well as a reparative role and adding value to the punitive role as a ‘fine on time’. When additionally used in conjunction with restorative justice such a use of community payback could provide the ‘toughened-up’ community sentences long sought by successive governments.

Cliff Mills
Consultant for and on behalf of Anthony Collins Solicitors LLP

Dave Nicholson
Co-operative development expert

James Wright
Policy Officer
Co-operatives UK
james.wright@uk.coop
0161 214 1775