



Case Study: HMP YOI Polmont

Youth Scotland's leadership initiative for young men serving time in HMP YOI Polmont is an important element of the Generation CashBack Lead programme.¹ By providing opportunities to develop skills, confidence and experience, the programme aims to improve young people's life chances on release, increase their ability to secure employment and reduce the likelihood of re-offending. Lead revolves around HMP YOI Polmont's gym, where peer mentors gain formal SCQF qualifications and achieve Sports Leadership Awards while supporting others to improve their health and wellbeing. In this anonymised case study, Pascale and Bernard² highlighted the important reach of activity delivered through a gym within HMP YOI Polmont, noting "the gym is a massive part of life in here". They described the

personal impact of involvement in Lead activity and identified many benefits for themselves and those they have supported through mentoring. Based on excerpts from a conversation with the two young men, this case study explains why the programme is achieving change.

Why leadership training can be so influential in prison settings

"In here you either sink or swim. A lot of the boys have been in the system before they end up here and all they've known is to act out, or use violence because they don't know how to work with their emotions – whereas there are opportunities here to address that behaviour and to look at how to change... Sports Leadership includes knowing the difference between [being] assertive and aggressive, learning how to look at somebody and see how they might be feeling... after being on the peer mentor course you sort of understand it better – you look at it differently than you would normally"

[Pascale]. "You need to remember the environment we're in as well – people kinda prey on weakness a wee bit – so you need to have a strong character so they'll listen... if you're a bit more outgoing, a bit more confident, they're like 'this guy knows what he's doing, he knows what he's talking about so I'll listen to him'" [Bernard].

A sense of pride in helping others

"The way I looked at it was a challenge, I liked the boy – but the way he felt about his weight [was affecting him]... we started with diet, circuits, rowing, work on the bike – he was really good and within a week he lost a stone. I saw the fitness levels change in him so I started some progression with light weights ... he started to look like he had on the outside and it helped him gain his confidence, the way he'd act in the hall... everything was different about him, the staff noticed it, you could tell he was a different person. After [that] a few other boys came to me for help too" [Pascale].



Different aspects of leadership

"I've had to mould my way to each person – help them lose weight, make a workout plan, help with strength building – it widened how much I was able to learn because everybody is different – I learned how to motivate and change my teaching style – it was an eye opener to me. Reading how each person needed taught – some people need the lash and hard tough love, others need more motivational support" [Pascale].

Responding to individual needs

"Basically a guy came in with [a disability] that came with a lot of mental health issues and physical stuff because he couldnae dae as much as he used to be able to, so basically he was sitting in his gaff too much and his muscles were deteriorating... so I volunteered to help. I would try and get him using machines and weights, to help him build his confidence up and show him that he could still do stuff despite his disability. You had to be mindful of things like [accessibility issues]. By the end he was doing quite an extensive workout... targeted exercises to build up strength in his legs because he'd spent so much time in his bed – and you started to notice, you seen him get more confident, start talking to more people. It was eye opening – because you don't think about [accessibility] – you don't spend a lot of time thinking about the restrictions some people face in their lives until you're actually confronted with it – it was different and challenging and I enjoyed it" [Bernard].

Confidence that Lead funded activity would help their futures

"I want to go into health and fitness jobs and now I've done staff classes, worked with lots of boys – so that helps build your confidence to work with people – I have all these qualifications but I also know how to put them into practice – I know how to train people and I'm confident I can do that on the outside" [Bernard]. "Our Sports Leadership Course covered a wide range of ages so we've also done groups with children – so if you wanted to go down a different route, say be a youth worker – you have a lot more experience" [Pascale].

Changes to self-esteem and self-worth

"Before I came here I didn't have any qualifications, because I was a wee s*** when I was younger, I didn't go to school, it wasn't that I was stupid I just didn't spend time to get qualifications. Coming here you get a reality check and think – I'm definitely not going to get a job if I don't have any qualifications, and now I have them, and I know I can do these things – I know my place is quite high in society if I follow this path when I leave prison. I know I can do pretty much anything I put my mind to" [Bernard]. "[Before prison] when I looked inside I didn't feel good about myself. Whereas now I feel good about myself and I've gained qualifications – I'll never be looked at the way I was before, because I've been in prison – but I'll try and regain what I lost through work and education... I may not look as good as I did before prison, but I'm on my way to getting that back as well as now having more confidence" [Pascale].

Applying new knowledge

"You get a better understanding of what it is you're actually doing – whereas before you'd maybe just think, 'I'll lift some weights', now you're thinking about primary and secondary muscle groups, thinking about gaining mass vs toning muscles, body changes, bone density, differences between men and women" [Pascale]. "If you just go to the gym it's easy to copy another person – but this helps you to understand and apply that understanding to your own needs" [Bernard].

Next steps

Generation CashBack is a three-year programme. This case study was produced in the first quarter of Year 2. In years 2 and 3, Lead will continue to provide access to Leadership Courses, formal qualifications, personal development training, peer mentor opportunities and events organisation. Young people will also be offered the opportunity to build on Year 1 qualifications e.g. those who have achieved a Sports Leaders Level 4 certificate will progress to level 5. This year there is also an intention to introduce the Level 2 Gym Instructor Qualification (SCQF L5) within HMP YO1 Polmont.

1 It links to Outcome 8: Young people are diverted from criminal behaviour or involvement in the Criminal Justice system.

2 Not their real names.

