



Prison Brain Gyms: exercising the mind for over-50s

RAMM + prisoners' wellbeing

“I know the chaps enjoyed it very much.... It was the best impact score we have had!

*Mental wellbeing coordinator for
Devon prisons, Recoop*

Case Study: Prison Brain Gyms

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Prison Brain Gyms: Exercising the mind for over-50s

The challenge

The number of older people entering the criminal justice system has trebled in the past 20 years, and prisoners over 50 are especially likely to have physical or mental health issues. More than 80% of older prisoners have longstanding illnesses or disabilities, while over 50% suffer from a mental disorder and 30% have a diagnosis of depression, according to prisoners' wellbeing charity Recoop (www.recoop.org.uk). Many institutions lack the resources and specialist knowledge to meet this age group's health and social care needs. Recoop, a national project dedicated to resettling and caring for older prisoners and ex-offenders, says that maintaining and improving wellbeing is essential for successful reintegration into society after release.

The background

Recoop invited RAMM to contribute to "brain gym" sessions – a kind of exercise for the mind – for wellbeing groups of over-50s at Exeter and Dartmoor prisons. Museum objects are fantastic tools for sparking conversations, which can improve people's wellbeing by providing both mental stimulation and social interaction. In the prison context, material from outside can light the way for mental journeys beyond the cell walls.

The project

RAMM's four sessions at Exeter and Dartmoor combined visual presentations with the chance to handle artefacts. They discussed how to redesign and update a museum, based on the redevelopment which led to RAMM winning the title of Museum of the Year 2012. And they told the story of St Nicholas Priory, originally part of Exeter's first medieval monastery and now presented by RAMM as an Elizabethan town house.

Prisoners of all categories are sent to Exeter from around the West Country. Dartmoor Prison – an imposing building in bleak moorlands – is no longer the high-security institution it was for

many decades, and now focuses on training and resettlement. Recoop, the museum's partner organisation, gave museum staff and volunteers training and induction on prison routine and security issues.

What changed?

Discussion flowed easily, on topics ranging from building projects to history and culture. Of 16 inmates who took part in sessions, most were not local and few had visited RAMM or St Nicholas Priory, so the museum introduced participants to a new experience and reached a new audience. RAMM provided guidebooks which will be available from Exeter prison's library.

This is an extreme illustration of how a museum and its objects can provide a completely non-institutional focus for people who need to build confidence and skills in their transition to a healthier, more independent life.

What did people say?

"We, as over 50s, are a diverse group and it's especially important for those with a different ethnic origin to absorb their new cultural heritage. Very interesting talk and presentation. More local history talks, please. We need to find subjects that could give us an interest when we get out."

Participant

"Refreshing to have someone who really knew the subject come and talk to us. It was fascinating!"

Participant

"I certainly want to go and see St Nicholas Priory when I get out. Our heritage is so important and it's why so many overseas visitors come to England."

Participant

What next?

Recoop is keen to continue the partnership and RAMM hopes to widen sessions to involve other staff. Recoop has received a donation to cover RAMM's costs for further visits.

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