



## **Spark Inside Prison Staff Coaching programme: Interim report.**

Prof Karen Harrison, Project Lead

Dr. Lauren Smith

Dr. Roger Bretherton

Ms. Rachael Mason.

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### **Introduction**

This is an interim report for Spark Inside which details headline findings from the interviews with prison staff, conducted up until the end of September 2023, who have participated in the Spark Inside prison staff coaching programme. The interviews were conducted by Karen Harrison and Lauren Smith. To date we have interviewed 11 participants. Seven from cohorts 1 & 2 and the remaining 4 from cohort 3. Of those interviewed, 3 worked in HMP Wormwood Scrubs, 4 worked in HMP Cookham Woods, 3 worked in HMP ISIS and 1 worked in a regional role. Of the 11 interviewed 9 were directly employed by HM Prison and Probation Staff (HMPPS), with the other two working for education and youth intervention providers.

### **Headline findings**

The results below are our initial findings and are not based on a full analysis of the data. This full analysis will be presented in our final report. The headlines identified are:

- Coaching is useful.
- The independence of the coach is important.
- Coaching leaves a positive lasting impact.
- Coaching positively affect health and wellbeing.
- Many would like more coaching sessions.
- Coaching as part of staff training and development.

Each of these is discussed in more detail below, alongside a selection of quotes from participants to exemplify findings. We have also provided some initial recommendations.

## *Coaching is useful.*

The overriding feeling amongst the participants was that they found the coaching useful:

It was honestly the best thing I ever did. Completely transformational . . . it was at the right time, just the right person. It was definitely, definitely, definitely needed and I recommend it to people.

I found it all quite helpful.

It's just sometimes nice to have that knowing that you've got it booked in, if anything pops up, you can think that actually I can talk about this today, or in a couple of days.

She was very supportive and helpful; she was very flexible in what I wanted to talk about. Lovely lady.

I was recently new in post as a Band 5 . . . so I thought it would be good to have that support and guidance, an ear to listen to, it was all positive and all good.

It taught me techniques like meditation, and when you're stressed or when you're anxious, for example, rubbing your fingers together and feeling the sensations.

I will always think back and think that life coaching really helped me and will attribute things to it.

Life coaching . . . facilitates me to figure out my own problems . . . [it] offers that space.

During Covid . . . I was virtually on the verge of burning out, I tired myself out, and even when I wasn't at work, all I was doing was thinking about work. And it was nice to have life coaching and think about career stuff, and actually not have to talk about work, it was other stuff that I was passionate about, that I cared about. It was like a hobby but not a hobby.

[I] very quickly learned that I needed to do things better like task management, time management, fitting in well-being, all that kind of stuff.

Aspects of the coaching which the participants found particularly useful included:

He was quite complimentary and gave me a bit of belief.

We spoke about how important listening is, and that is why I liked it because he would listen, I know it's his job, but it is just good.

[Coach] was very good, gave you lots of tips; things like just do something for 5 minutes, because if you do it for 5 minutes, you'll do it for 10.

What she did was validate my approach. So, when I did it for the first time, I wasn't quite so nervous.

I started doing compressed hours into the second or third month of the coaching . . . that has really worked for myself and my well-being, and I probably wouldn't have even bothered or thought to do any of that, or asked to apply, if I hadn't done the coaching.

For me, it was building my interpersonal managerial skills, rather than just being a supervisor. Because it was my first management position, in that sense of managing a team of eight; so, I guess it allowed me to develop and self-develop.

He made me understand my weaknesses as well, and how I can turn my weaknesses into strengths.

With Spark Inside, I have gained confidence . . . it has been a great thing that has encouraged me to move forward. To be able to aim high and follow what I want to be able to do.

He could have said that he wanted me to do this and this by the end of next week, but he never did that, it was more like an empowering strength - You are empowered over your own life.

We worked through the ways that I could have more time for self-reflection. I realised that I didn't self-reflect at all, I didn't do it, I didn't sit down and look back at my achievements, or look at my own side of life, it was everybody else's life, not my own. So, we spent quite a lot of time looking at that.

### ***The independence of the coach is important.***

Having the space to talk to someone was seen as beneficial by many, as was the fact that the person they were speaking to was independent and not from HMPPS:

You might not be able to talk to people at your work, maybe because of trust, but you want to talk to independent, unique individuals just to share your experience, just to see how you feel.

[Having] an unbiased opinion . . . in this job people often say what you want to hear, especially when you go up the ranks, you know, there's an ulterior motive, they might give you other advice that might not be right.

[Coaching] could also help with the retention of staff as well, knowing that they have got an external person that they can perhaps turn to

While others shared the view that independence was important, they also valued the fact that the coach understood their prison and the environment in which they worked:

To be able to speak to Spark Inside, who has been in the prison, who knows how it works is something better than what the prison service is paying OH for.

***Coaching leaves a positive lasting impact.***

Most of the participants felt that the coaching had left a mark, a lasting impact on them. This included being better at making decisions, being more confident in their actions, and “being able to speak up, having a voice with your managers”.

I think a bit of self-confidence, a bit of self-belief, when I was younger, I used to be dead shy, when I was a soldier, I just wanted to be the person that blended in, but now, I'm happy to be the person that says – Let's do this!

So, there was that self-growth and learning about how I can improve and do things differently next time, and perhaps [consider] other people's perspectives.

100%, confidence, it was almost enlightening in a sense, because it empowered me, it may be more confident.

I would say the coaching session gave a good bunch of confidence for me, and he made me realise how dynamic I am as well, and how I can think fast on my feet. I didn't realise how innovative I can be.

Normally I would never speak to the number one governor, I would be like – No, that's not me. But he kind of made me go the extra mile and say do you know what I think I can do this.

I've built a lot more confidence. I'm even looking for promotion . . . Had I not done the coaching, I wouldn't have been in the headspace or holistically in the space to be able to deal with the rejection that comes with applying for promotion.

For many it had changed the way in which they interacted with both colleagues and those under their care, using coaching inspired methods in these interactions. Generally, therefore participants felt that it was helping them in their job:

I line manage 6 individuals, and I do find myself talking very differently in catch ups with them. Again, I try and get them to tell me what's going on, as opposed to me telling them.

[It] showed me how to coach people, how to mentor, those are the key things that I needed for the role that I'm doing at the moment. Being able to talk to people, being able to find that information, being able to make sure that people can confide in you, come to you, and talk to you, you can have that good rapport with them.

I do a lot of coaching with my staff, and I very much use that thing where I don't give them the answer, they come to me with a problem, and I ask them what we can do to resolve that, what have you thought of? And then when they do give me the answer, I will ask them if they can think of any pros and cons not just from that session, but from all the sessions, I've really taken that on board where you can see the clogs ticking over in their head, and they're not just robots doing as they're told, they really have to develop and grow as people in order to find the answers.

It's harder to have conversations with those above you, because there are some people that I see that are very much still in the whole control mindset, where those in the high position will want to make the decisions, rather than giving staff the space and time - What do you guys want to do, what do you think would be the best solution to this problem? How do you want to do this? Because it's opened my mind and my understanding: that actually upskills more, gives them more not just responsibility, but ownership of what they're doing, and if more people were able to do that, I think the issues that we have with staff just following orders without even thinking; whereas with coaching, you give them the space to make those decisions, and it's – Oh wow, everything is not on me!

Being able to listen to people, being able to support irregularities or problems in people, or supporting people as well with that, and being able to support their weaknesses as well and help them gain more confidence in terms of their weaknesses. So, I think there are lasting skills that I have gained from the sessions.

The prison service, it's getting harder to work there, so all the positivity that I feel like it has given me . . . It is a really tough place to work at the minute. The morale is low, the boys are getting more and more violent, and it is tough, but at the time it was nice going to work, having that confidence, and speaking, but the place is quite hard to work at now.

I'm not stressed anymore, working in the prison service is a stressful job, and there will always be degree of stress regardless of what you tried to do, but I think I'm now a lot more, I wouldn't say laissez-faire, but something will come up and I'll deal with it, and then I'll move on, because that's what you have to do. When something comes out of the blue, which happens a lot in the prison service, there's never the same day, it just helps me focus and deal with that in a different approach, rather than go from here stressed, to here stressed, and nothing in the middle. It's now just – Ok, how am I going to deal with that? Let's move on. It has definitely worked.

It made me reassess how I manage stuff, made me think about how to develop stuff, maybe understand the importance of being a coach and the leader as opposed to being a manager; there's a massive difference between the two; just thinking things through, documenting stuff, I would say it's quite a big impact.

It made me happier with job satisfaction, talking to the coach and helping me out with my issues, and how to deal [with them].

. . . even now when I think about if I want to do something, I think what's the worst that could happen? Actually, this is the worst, OK that's not too bad.

It is just nice. Somebody is sat there who understands what you do, and to be able to say 'Look, you are doing good'. Because I think that is what I needed at that moment . . . So, the coach kept telling me 'Keep doing it, don't give up, one day somebody will recognise you'. And that happened.

For others, it had helped them to better manage their emotions and frustrations and to an extent get to know themselves more:

At the time I used to get quite frustrated, quite angry quite easily, I was getting very frustrated with the lack of preparation; so again, a lot of self-reflection, how about anger and frustration can be a negative and make it worse and realising that actually it's not a good way to be; how to manage that and adapt that and stop getting into those sorts of mindsets.

The coaching showed that I'm somebody that wants to make people happy quite often, so I would never say – No, I'm not OK. Because you don't need to impact on somebody else's wellbeing for the day. I wasn't really aware of that 100% until the coaching.

I kind of learned a bit about myself, why I felt the way I felt, if that makes sense, and how I came out of my introversion and being shy; so just being confident in what I say, in what I do. It took about two or three sessions.

Participants also noted how it had been instrumental in their decision to stay in the service:

I genuinely don't know if I would have stuck around if I hadn't done the coaching because of the levels of stress. In the prison service, nobody is ever fully happy at the job, because it's such a high intensity role, and having somewhere where you can decompress, and not unload, but be able to have a different avenue, makes such a big difference.

I think the prison service is/was always something that I never saw myself doing long term, and before the coaching, I was probably interested in looking at what else was out

there career wise, because I didn't necessarily know if this is what I was wanting to do forever. I think the coaching has changed that.

I've gone from wanting to leave and trying to do something else, for an easy life, to actually, I've got really good things around me in this current job role, and I have flexes in my job role, such as taking time out for a career break, which I might look now to pursue as opposed to saying then I'm going to do something else.

Despite these positive comments, one participant told us how the coaching had been instrumental in making the decision to leave HMPPS, "I changed careers completely!".

### ***Coaching can positively affect health and wellbeing.***

For many, the coaching had had a positive impact on their health and wellbeing:

It always left me quite confident and feeling good, it was a nice feeling, and if nothing else that is still nice in itself, to feel good and a bit more confident, and a bit more belief that you are better than what you were, you've got more than maybe you realise you did have.

Without it I would be in a darker place.

Definitely, I think mental health wise, I think my brain gets stressed out over figuring things out, and because I had the time and the space to kind of sit and process the things that needed to be done, other things I had ideas about, but never felt like I had any time to actually pay attention or focus on those things properly, and it was like – I have an hour!

To have the opportunity to talk to somebody, somebody with clarity, because who else can you talk about it with, if you ask the manager they go – What? Go give some dinners out. You're not going to talk to your family, it's about having somebody to talk to, and discuss these things, and you don't get that anywhere else. That's what it gave me, it gave me that place.

I always make sure I have time in my day for exercise, I have a very energetic dog, so he gets walked to death. I'm not just fully focused on work now, I'm able to focus on other things. I think I hid myself in work for a long time to kind of deal with life, and now I've actually been able to get a better balance from that . . . I think my wellbeing is definitely improved as a result.

It was definitely good for my mental health, having that independent person. Quite often . . . when you talk to colleagues about something, they will probably just join in the rant, they will turn it into a rant about something that's happened to them . . . whereas

here you have that independent person to talk everything through . . . at the time, it definitely had a positive impact.

Despite these positive comments, one stated that the positive impact only lasted as long as the coaching sessions:

We were trying to [do] something about me not being able to sleep, I could say yes it worked, but not for a very long time after the coaching, so when there was no coaching, there's nobody to talk to, so I kind of went back to the old way. But during that period of coaching, I knew I was going to speak to him tomorrow.

***Many would like more coaching sessions.***

Many of the participants would have liked to have continued with their sessions:

I would like some more sessions. I think it could be something that could go on forever. It would be great to have a life coach permanently, wouldn't it . . . but I think 8 would have been better.

It's amazing to have that sort of person around you that you can sort of lean on. I think I was done weekly, so even if it had been an ongoing monthly thing, for another year, or another 12 sessions sporadically as and when you sort of needed it, just seeing what was going on, I would happily have carried it on.

I still want more sessions, because yes, I have learned a lot, but I need more. They say the more you live the more you learn, so learning is a continuous process, we only stop learning when we die, and I still want to continue to learn, so I said in the last session that I wanted another session as well, so I am still up for it.

With six, you had just started to build that rapport and that relationship, [coach] is just understanding my personality, and how I work, and I'm just starting to understand how his advice should be interpreted, or certain ways of what he means, understanding his mindset, stuff like that, and all of a sudden, the six sessions are over. It is cut before it started really. Really to me, 10 would be ideal, if not 12 or 15.

No, I was fine with the programme, and it was very good, in my opinion, but maybe have more sessions, afterwards, rather than having six, maybe have 12, after four or five months, just to see what is happening.

For me, it reached a certain level, and then there was no more . . . for me if there had been another four to six more, I think that would have cemented the opportunity to offload, and develop skills in different ways as well because even though I know coaching isn't really for offloading as such, I was able to offload a little bit, and then reflect and unpick certain aspects of whether it was me acting in a different way, or was



that a stressor that was occurring on the landings. Yes, double the length of time personally I think would be more beneficial.

If I was financially able to, it's something that I probably would have continued on, maybe 8 weekly sessions or 10 weekly sessions.

I would be selfish to say 20 to 40, but it's something that is there to support staff, to encourage people, you are never going to get enough encouragement in life, so encouragement is going to be continuous, mentoring is about motivation, people at certain times of their life would need motivation, and motivation, you can't just stop it. So, it would be selfish for me to say 10 or 20, but I wish it continued further.

Interestingly one participant had four extra sessions making 10 in total and felt that this was about right:

So, the stuff that we were all working on, we were able to round up, I was able to apply things, put things in place . . . I think 6 would have left me hanging at some point and just doing those extra sessions just kind of like brought everything together, made it work. And yeah, it was really. It was really good.

Some even expressed sadness that their time with their coach had come to an end:

. . . almost kind of sad to see it finished because it was quite enjoyable.

Others wanted the ability to have a check in with their coach months down the track. Some with live issues, for example, would have preferred a session every 2-3 months so that they could discuss “how are we doing from that thing that happened six weeks ago? And you actually learn and develop and move on from it”. This was echoed by other participants:

It would be good to have a drop in 6 months or 12 months or 18 months later, just to kind of reinforce maybe that learning.

In an ideal world, it would have been really good to do it maybe once or twice a year, just to kind of re-centre my head, put me in perspective and plan things out and work through things.

I think a check in later on probably would have been good, and I think it would have been potentially nice for the life coach – Oh, this is what we have been working on for six weeks, and now this has happened, and this happened. Because it's nice that we did all this work, and then a few months down the line, this is the result of the work that we did.

It might have been beneficial if I had had six, and then maybe had a break, and then maybe come back to see whether or not I had used the techniques that we had discussed

in the others, and then maintained them, or had I slipped back into old habits and mindset . . . three to six months would have been enough time to see how I had put it into practice.

### *Coaching as part of staff development and training*

Overall, there was emphatic support for the programme to be continued in its current form but also rolled out as professional development and/or mandatory training:

People look at it in the prison service and people say – We've got this, and we've got that. But none of it works properly, whereas this is a bit different.

I would beg the organisation or whoever the sponsors are, to keep sponsoring, and keep helping our colleagues, our colleagues are stressed, it is really difficult; especially in the YCS, it is a really, really tough place of work.

There are lots of stressed people in prisons, and as you know, there are lots of young people in prisons that don't really know what they're doing, whether they want to stay, whether it is the career for them, and I think it would be interesting for other people to see what they could get out of it.

For me, on the whole, there are no bad staff, it is bad managers, the staff that are struggling, are the same staff that are messing up, if you look up the hierarchy, usually there is a bad manager at the top. I think it would be absolutely amazing [to coach these managers]. Obviously, you can't coach everyone to be able to be good at coaching and mentoring and growing stuff, but what you could do, is give them a darn side better effort.

I genuinely think that people in the prison service will benefit from either consistent therapy or consistent coaching, one or the other . . . [although therapy] coupled with something like coaching, not only am I looking back at problems, I can look forward for opportunities, things to be hopeful about, things to aspire to move towards.

I think it should be mandatory that we do some kind of Spark Inside training, on how to mentor others, rather than learning over a number of years with trial and error.

I think it's a really good scheme, and I just think the prison service really lacks anything like this. If I'm honest, if you could give the training to the Band 5's, that would probably be almost more beneficial than this coaching. If we were trained on how to coach, how to mentor, I think that should be mandatory, but I just want to praise the scheme and say how good I think it is, and that's I think it's a great thing that [Spark Inside] are doing, that it hopefully continues and gets put out wider.

I think there's a taboo over things like life coaching, or psychotherapy, and I was one of them, so I was thinking - You can't help me on this life coaching, that is all that fluffy stuff! But 100%, now I have done it, I think lots of people should have it; even a couple of sessions if it would just help them see things from a different perspective.

My [relative] . . . has been in the prison service for the last five years . . . I sometimes worry about her well-being, and how she's doing, and I think if she had that extra support . . . [it would] help manage some of the stuff that she sees all the time and help her to process her own life . . . Lots of people are getting diagnosed with PTSD in the service now because they don't have that supervision or outlet to talk about stuff. To talk about how their life is and how it impacts on them. So, I think if there was a chance for that to be a monthly session, it would be really beneficial, and it might help some of us that get retained, because we're not necessarily good at retaining staff.

In an ideal world you'd have a one to one with your line manager in terms of progression . . . [if] I want a promotion and my manager disagrees with the fact that I have the development skills, this is something they could often say, well, how about you do coaching.

Interestingly, one participant was currently participating in the 'Progression Buddy' scheme, aimed at supporting BAME officers through progression, and stated that she would not have got involved if it hadn't been for the initial Spark Inside coaching:

. . . it has helped that I've done this programme before this because in headspace terms, I know exactly what I want. I know where I wanna be going, so it made what I'm getting from this a lot more beneficial because it's very intentional.

Finally, being involved in the Spark Inside prison staff coaching programme inspired one participant to want to help others:

I'm currently taking a life coaching course now to be able to do life coaching within the prison service, because of how much I enjoyed the sessions, and I thought it would be really cool to be on the other side of it.

## **Recommendations**

- Rather than just an email, a face-to-face session explaining what coaching is and what the coaching programme will cover will help people to understand more fully what they are signing up for. The current email doesn't "do it justice".
- This should include those who have been through the programme so they can "speak about their experience and how it helped".
- If getting prison officers together is difficult the coaches could spread the message on the landings – "if he is there on the landing, and if he smiles at the prison officer and

says – We are Spark Inside, we are life coaching, do you know what life coaching is? It takes 3 minutes. But you've already spread the idea”.

- One method that worked in terms of recruitment was to get the governor to introduce the coaching programme, before the initial email went out – “the first explanation from the governor captured my attention anyway, and I think the way that he sold it to me it was very good”.
- Consider changing the title of life coaching – “Because life coaching sounds like your life is in bits, get a coach because otherwise you've got no chance. It's almost like having the word life coaching, yeah actually saying – Yep, I need a life coach because my life is so bad. And it's not like that, so I think maybe the marketing and the title needs to be a bit more fluffy with a bit more explanation”.
- Include coaching as part of talent development so that potential managers receive coaching as part of their training/professional development.
- There shouldn't be an arbitrary number of sessions – coaches and coachees should have some discretion on how many sessions would be beneficial and how long the sessions should last – “I think for me, there should be like longer sessions, some people might be quick, they might just need four sessions, it might just be on an individual basis, and not just the generalisation of how people can impact on the sessions”.
- While there was an appreciation why the sessions took place over the phone, some felt hybrid sessions or in person would further help to build rapport with their coaches.
- Could space/room inside the prison be used for the coaching sessions – “I'm actually in the building . . . it's actually authorised by the establishment . . . it's set up in a way that you feel invested in”.
- Is there a process if the coachee didn't get on with the coach? The participant who raised this got on with their coach brilliantly and attributed it's success to their relationship, but questioned what if they haven't got on. Was there the option to have a different coach?