

On Wednesday 21st September 2011, Southampton University hosted a ground-breaking event that brought together young prisoners and ex-prisoners whose lives have been transformed through participation in sport.

Dr Rosie Meek, a lecturer in psychology in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Southampton, organised the event as part of her evaluation of the Portland Prison Sports Academy, an initiative that Bristol-based 2nd Chance Project received funding for from the Football Foundation, as a result of Ian Wright's Football Behind Bars series. For the past two years Dr Meek has been working with the 80 participants who have taken part in football and rugby Academies, monitoring inmates' improvements during and after participation in the scheme, and tracking their progress after release. The Academies are run intensively over 15 weeks, drawing on creative partnerships between prison staff, community delivery partners and the expertise of the 2nd Chance Project staff, who provide specialist support for offenders in the transition from custody to community.

The Governor of Portland Young Offenders Institute granted special permission for a number of those currently serving prison sentences to attend on the day. They were joined by a group of young men who have previously participated in the Academy and have subsequently been released from prison. Members of prison staff and project delivery partners, including representatives from football (Chelsea FC) and cricket (Cricket for Change) also attended and contributed to the discussions.

The primary focus of the day was to encourage the young men to discuss their experiences of the innovative prison-based sports programme and to celebrate the positive changes they have made to their lives, but Academy participants and delivery staff were also invited to contribute their views on how the programme should be developed and expanded for the future. Indeed many made use of the 'video diary room' to submit their views.

The ultimate aim of the initiative - to harness the power of sport in reducing reoffending - is especially pertinent in the context of current concerns about national reoffending figures. Indeed, it was the resettlement focus of the project that first inspired Dr Meek to get involved. She says:

"I have devoted much of my research to exploring the psychological and social processes involved in the transition from prison to the community. Young offenders have one of the highest rates of reconviction after release, with around three quarters reoffending within a year. The current 'revolving door' effect ruins lives, damages communities and costs the UK economy billions. A clear finding emerging from the research so far is that this innovative project is especially effective in using sport as a vehicle for change, engaging prisoners and motivating them to take responsibility for desisting from crime.

I've worked with numerous individuals with complex resettlement needs who have spent too many of their young years in the prison system and who can

now attribute positive changes in their lives to lessons they've learnt on and off the pitch as part of the Academy".

As well as improving behaviour and engagement among those serving longer sentences, the project provides crucial 'through the gate' support in the form of Justin Coleman, Transitions Director of the 2nd Chance Project. Justin's knowledgeable and supportive approach has had a long-lasting positive impact on those he works with. He commented that:

"Crucially, the project recognises the need for more flexible services which will address the complex needs of young people in prison."

A campus tour was also arranged by Jonny Brooks-Bartlett, the Vice President of the Southampton University Student's Sport and Athletic Union, giving the visitors the opportunity to see the University academic and sporting facilities.

The event was been supported by the Third Sector Research Centre and the Foundation for Professionals in Services to Adolescents