
Review of the Spark Inside Coaching Programme for Prison Staff



I just knew that this was going to be a life changing experience . . . there was somebody that I could trust with what I was saying. . . it was completely transformational.

**Overview of findings
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The project

Spark Inside is a registered charity delivering accredited, high-quality coaching programmes to people within prisons in England. This began with expert coaches working with prisoners but, since the Covid-19 pandemic, it has also included coaching of prison staff. The Spark Inside life coaching programme provides prison staff with the reflective space and tools to improve their own wellbeing. The programme has been delivered to prison staff across all operational grades and has also been made available to those working in prisons from probation, youth intervention and education.

Spark Inside asked us to evaluate the programme, so that they could understand the experiences of the prison staff participants and the coaches and identify what worked well within the programme and what improvements might be made. The evaluation focused on interviews with participants and coaches. Between March and December 2023, we carried out 24 interviews, 17 with prison staff and 7 with coaches. This short report captures our findings.

What is coaching?

Spark Inside defines coaching as a facilitated conversation, allowing individuals and systems or groups to find their own solutions to their own problems. Unlike mentoring, coaching offers very little advice or guidance. Coaching empowers people living and working in prisons, enabling self-sufficiency, fostering independence, and building personal responsibility. It uses specific tools and techniques which can help transform lives and achieve goals.

Benefits of the programme



I genuinely don't know if I would have stuck around if I hadn't done the coaching because of the levels of stress... having somewhere where you can decompress...makes such a big difference.

The feedback we received about the programme from both prison staff participants and coaches was overwhelmingly positive. By far the main benefit for prison staff was the opportunity to speak to **someone who listened**, who could be relied on to **keep the**

discussion confidential, who was **non-judgemental**, and who was **independent from the prison service**. Prison staff repeatedly told us that their coaches had exceptional listening skills, that enabled them to talk about difficult topics and process sometimes traumatic experiences in new ways. When talking to coaches, we heard about the range of tools and techniques they brought with them to the sessions, which they were able to adapt to the needs of the participants, with all focusing on client-led sessions. Participants told us how useful this was in clarifying their own understanding of an issue or experience, and in helping them think more clearly about what to do next.



Key benefits of the programme

Other benefits we heard about included:

- ⇒ **Developing skills and abilities.** Professional development was the primary reason that prison staff joined the programme, and we heard from all interviewees about the positive impact the sessions had on skills and abilities. Participants told us about how their time with the coaches had helped them to see things from different perspectives, improve their own listening and coaching skills, and find new ways to solve problems.
- ⇒ **Increased confidence.** Many participants told us that they had found the sessions empowering, and that this had increased their confidence to deal with difficult situations at home and at work. We heard from the coaches how important it was that they took on the role as champions and advocates for their coachees, and this was appreciated by prison staff, who described the process as increasing their self-belief, enriching, and confidence-boosting.

- ⇒ **Improved wellbeing.** Coaches told us that stress and anxiety were the most prevalent issues that prison staff wanted help with, and we heard from participants how helpful the sessions were in learning about ways to deal with that stress. Sessions provided the time and space to think things through in new ways, and this helped participants see things from different perspectives. Prison staff told us how the sessions had helped them create a better work-life balance, deal with difficult situations more effectively, be more creative, and be more grounded and in the present. One went so far as to say, “without it I would be in a darker place.”
- ⇒ **Improved communication.** Several of the participants talked to us about how they were using the listening skills they had learned from the sessions in the workplace, and how this had improved the way they communicate with their colleagues. Coupled with their increased self-confidence, this had led to positive discussions and changes at work and had improved relationships.
- ⇒ **Positive impact on retention.** Some prison staff engaged with the coaching programme because they were deciding whether to leave the service or to change their role within it. The vast majority of these told us that coaching had been instrumental in their decision to stay in the service. We heard from one participant that the coaching had made them feel more valued, and this had encouraged them to stay in their job. Overall, the perception from both coaches and participants was that coaching and the ability to have someone to talk to could make a real difference to retention rates.

Keys to success

As part of the evaluation, we were asked to consider critical success factors for the programme. Based on our analysis, we have identified four keys to success:



1. The importance of relationships

We heard how important the coaching relationship was to both coaches and prison staff, with positive relationships being seen as the key to successful coaching. Time was often spent in the first session building trust between the two parties, and participants told us how important this connection was, particularly in encouraging them to open up. The importance of this relational connection led to the suggestion that if the connection was not right then perhaps there should be the ability to change coaches.

2. Understanding what coaching is (and isn't)

One of the barriers to successful coaching was that some prison staff didn't understand what coaching was. While many participants still benefitted from the programme, time taken to correct these misconceptions took away from the time for the actual coaching. Another misunderstanding was that many of the clients thought that the coaching was only for their professional lives. In the interviews with participants, we saw a clear shift in the contents of the session from professional to personal over the course of the sessions, with this change often connected to the building up of trust with the coach.

3. Experience and expertise of the coaches

What came through from our analysis was how important it was that the coaches brought the right experience and expertise with them to the sessions, enabling them to be flexible and intuitive in the approaches they used. Coaches told us about their esteem for prison staff, while participants described their coaches as 'amazing'. Most coaches drew upon different models to provide holistic support and client-centred coaching. The coaches also told us that they valued the support provided by Spark Inside, from the orientation training to supervision and peer support.

4. Independent support

Perhaps most importantly for the success of the programme was the fact that it was independent of HMPPS. We heard from many participants that they did not have alternative outlets in terms of support, and some told us that they either could not trust their work colleagues to always give them the right advice or were too afraid to show vulnerability. Coaching gave the prison staff a safe place to talk about their concerns and provided a confidential space where participants could bring whatever problem was concerning them and receive non-judgemental help and support.

Recommendations

We invite Spark Inside to consider the following recommendations to ensure the continued success of the programme. Recommendations are based directly on feedback from prison staff and coaches, and from our analysis.

⇒ **Recruitment and orientation**

To help address some of the initial misconceptions of the programme, and to ensure that it reaches the right people at the right time, we suggest using a **more personalised and directed recruitment process** rather than the blanket emails often used for this programme. Line managers could be involved in the process so that specific members of staff can be targeted. **Orientation could be delivered before coaching sessions started**, potentially adapted from the orientation used by Spark Inside for the Hero's Journey. Spark Inside coaches and/ or influential prison staff who have already completed coaching and who found it to be beneficial would also be valuable advocates.

⇒ **Delivery of the sessions**

We gathered ideas from interviewees about ways to improve the delivery of the sessions. Based on these, we recommend **creating time in the prison officer's working day so that they can participate in coaching in worktime rather than home time**. This would need to be in an environment where they are not distracted and will not be interrupted, and line managers/ HR would need to be aware that a colleague is participating in the programme so that practical arrangements, such as time off, can be considered. We also suggest: **making face-to-face coaching sessions an option; being more flexible in the number of coaching sessions** which individuals can access; and **providing a three- or six-month check-in opportunity** for those who want it.

⇒ **Communication and availability**

Finally, we recommend some changes in relation to communicating the programme and embedding it within broader support options. The coaching programme could become **part of a suite of support options for those who are seeking promotion or starting a new job**, and participation could be fed into assessment centre decisions. The **programme could also be made available more widely** so that it can be used as a confidential avenue to support those who find themselves in the prison working environment. This is likely to improve health and wellbeing and through this staff retention.