

SPARK INSIDE AT HMP BRIXTON:

BRIEF EVALUATION REPORT



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BIOGRAPHIES

PROFESSOR ROSIE MEEK

Rosie Meek is a chartered psychologist and prison scholar, experienced in both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. She has examined the role of sport and physical activity in prison settings resulting in the key text 'Sport in Prison' published by Routledge in 2013 and an independent review of sport and physical activity in youth and adult prisons, 'A Sporting Chance' published by the Ministry of Justice in 2018. Other areas of expertise include the role of voluntary and community organisations in reducing reoffending and promoting desistance from crime, and the evaluation of prison-based programmes at a number of different HMP establishments.

NINA BAINBRIDGE

Nina Bainbridge has coached leaders in UK-based and multi-national organisations, the UK's NHS and Prison systems. She uses a human-centred coaching approach to design and facilitate highly bespoke experiential leadership programmes for organisations such as Rolls-Royce, Lloyds bank, HSBC and HMPPS, that enable people to develop a coaching mindset and skillset in their work.

She set-up Everyday Coaching Skills with a clear purpose to provide practical coaching training that gives people the skills to enrich everyday conversations, ignite the best thinking of others, and have a positive and enduring impact on the world around them. Everyday Coaching Skills programmes enable people to explore the natural 'coach' in themselves, create inclusive cultures at work and integrate coaching skills into everyday moments at work and in life. She trained with the Coaches Training Institute in 2009, an ICF accredited programme.

SPARK INSIDE

Spark Inside is an award-winning charity in the UK established in 2012. They believe in the transformative power of coaching to unlock the full potential of individuals and drive culture change in the criminal justice system so that rehabilitation is possible. They were one of the first organisations to take life coaching to 15-to-25-year-old men in prison, and to use systems coaching to bring together prisoners and staff in prison.

Since their foundation, they have supported over 2,000 prisoners and prison officers to transform their lives across London and the South East, in custody and in the community, and are now expanding to new areas. Across the last 5 years, they have delivered 800 hours of one-to-one coaching for prison staff, and by 2030 will be reaching over 500 young people a year. Their vision is that the futures of people in contact with the criminal justice system are determined by their potential, not their past.

1. SUMMARY

Supporting and retaining the prison workforce is an urgent priority focus for HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)¹. As is maintaining safe and secure prisons and reducing the risk that people will reoffend (HMPPS, 2025b). Interpersonal interactions are key in ensuring each of these objectives and in the professional practice of supporting people in prison, desistance theory emphasises the value of interpersonal approaches that focus on individual interactions, personal relationships and improved communication (McNeill, 2006).

In the initiative being explored in this evaluation report, bespoke coaching skills training was directed to a group of embedded, permanent gym staff with a wealth of social capital who spend a significant amount of time directly interacting with the prisoners in their care. To this end, the organisation Spark Inside were seeking to promote coaching in an environment where those prisoners engaging with gym staff may be more open to being coached to reach their broader goals.

This report presents the findings from an external evaluation of the programme undertaken in 2025. The purpose of the external evaluation, which was modest in scale and resource, was to:

- Identify the key learnings from the programme
- Make recommendations based on the HMP Brixton pilot project

The insight provided in this report is based on individual, retrospective in-person semi-structured interviews with all six members of the PEI (Physical Education Instructor) team at HMP Brixton who engaged in the coaching skills training offered to them, together with two informal meetings with the delivery partner, scheduled at the start and end of the project. This brief evaluation sought to explore how receptive prison gym staff were to undertaking this training, and their experiences of integrating the training into their day-to-day engagement with the prisoners in their care, an observation which is especially timely since it coincides with the national HMPPS Physical Education team undertaking a curriculum review.

The findings generated four distinct recommendations, which spanned:

- 1) the roll-out of coaching skills training for gym staff;
- 2) coaching skills training for those with roles that include direct contact with prisoners and middle managers;
- 3) expand the programme to support prisoners who support other prisoners, with a bespoke life coaching training course and accompanying qualification;
- 4) undertake further research beyond HMP Brixton to establish the longitudinal impact of life coaching from the prisoner and staff perspective.

¹ Most recent internal statistics (HMPPS, 2025a) confirm that the overall leaving rate across HMPPS for the last 12 months to June 2025 stood at 10%. Furthermore, in the same time period, HMPPS staff lost an average of 12 working days to sickness absence, with mental ill health being the most prominent category of sickness absence.

2. INTRODUCTION

The organisation Spark Inside (www.sparkinside.org/) has a long and successful history of providing direct professional one-to-one coaching to prison staff and residents². In 2024 Spark Inside piloted providing coaching skills training for the first time. This brief evaluation seeks to explore, from the perspective of the HMPPS gym staff receiving this training, their experiences of receiving the training and whether providing coaching skills training to the gym staff in HMP Brixton subjectively improves their work with the prisoners in their care.

The gym staff (a team of six) were provided with two days of in person group training, provided by a qualified coach and coaching skills trainer. The content of the course include:

- What is coaching and why does it matter?
- Starting a session, checking in and building safety
- Listening skills
- Questioning skills
- Coaching practice
- Group supervision

Then each gym staff member attended two one-to-one coaching sessions in person to support them in their efforts to utilise those coaching skills in their day-to-day work in the prison.

The aim of this brief research was to understand, from the perspective of the six members of gym staff who completed the training:

- How different elements of the programme worked for the staff members
- What they felt they gained from the training and the coaching
- Whether and how they adopted any coaching skills gained in their interactions with prisoners
- Whether or not they perceived the coaching skills they were been trained in as relevant to their work in the gym
- Any perceived impact of receiving the training on their day-to-day working practices and interactions with the prisoners in their care.

Whilst this is the first of its kind to focus specifically on gym staff, previous evaluation research undertaken at the University of Lincoln (Harrison, Bretherton, Mason and Smith, 2023) on behalf of Spark Inside has explored the impact of providing coaching to non-gym prison staff, demonstrating the value of coaching in professional development, enhanced decision making, improved working relationships and improved wellbeing. Furthermore, other initiatives that have sought to enhance the quality of interactions between prison staff and those in their care, such as the Five Minute Intervention (Kenny & Webster, 2015) have not been grounded explicitly in Life Coaching or engaged gym staff specifically, and have focused on short, spontaneous opportunities to engage with prisoners, rather than the structured ongoing interactions that are inherent in life coaching. Another key difference is that Spark Inside coaching skills training incorporates using coaching skills with colleagues, as well as prisoners. It also includes follow-up coaching and support with trainees while they embed coaching skills in their work.

² For more details of Spark Inside's coaching in prisons work see: www.sparkinside.org/news/coaching-prison-staff-the-impact-so-far

3. THE PILOT SITE: HMP BRIXTON

HMP Brixton is one of the oldest and most overcrowded prisons in the country. It was a category C resettlement prison at the time that the coaching programme was initiated, but transitioned to a higher security (category B) reception prison in late 2025, at the time of the staff interviews. The most recent HM Inspectorate of Prisons report on HMP Brixton (from March 2025) drew attention to fact that in terms of staffing, there were not enough middle managers to ensure high standards across the prison, and that more support was needed to help Brixton (and indeed other London prisons) to recruit staff successfully. In terms of supporting prisoners, the inspection team expressed concern that there were very few interventions in the prison to help prisoners address their offending behaviour. However, one area of good practice was identified whereby enhanced prisoners could access evening 'community centre' association sessions. These sessions were run by the gym staff in the visits hall, where recreational equipment and games consoles were set up to enable prisoners to socialise off their wings (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2025).

4. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Permission was granted from the Ministry of Justice's National Research Committee (ref: 2025-1771) to invite the six members of gym staff at HMP Brixton to participate in semi-structured interviews. Consent was granted from all six members of staff, and these interviews were conducted individually within the prison in October 2025 (see Appendix 1 for the interview schedule), with each interview lasting between 30 minutes and one hour. To supplement these interviews, discussions were scheduled with the delivery partner at the inception and conclusion of the evaluation. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a Thematic Analysis where primary themes were identified. These are presented in Section 5, accompanied by illustrative quotes from the interviewees.



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5. KEY FINDINGS

5.1 THE ADDED VALUE OF OFFERING COACHING SKILLS TRAINING TO PRISON PHYSICAL EDUCATION INSTRUCTORS

"I really enjoyed the training. A lot of it for me and probably the rest of the team was stuff we already do but without necessarily realising that we do it. Nina was brilliant, really engaging."

The participants were all positive about the experience of receiving the training. They recognised how well life coaching fitted with their roles as sports coaches:

"It was brilliant because that's our job anyway, but it gave us more ammunition."

Participants attributed the success of the training to the delivery team ('the instructor Nina and also Eli who supported her, they were very good and they brought the programme to life') and the fact that the content aligned so well with their day-to-day roles:

"The concept of it was great. Because of the job we do, because of PE we have prisoners who want to be in there, they look at us differently from uniformed staff. They want to be in the gym, we can relate to them a little bit more."

The interviewees all agreed that in their roles as gym staff they were 'already half way there' in offering life coaching, in that they were already skilled in offering coaching in a range of sporting contexts and, crucially, already tend to have a good relationship with the prisoners in their care ('Gym staff already have good rapport'). Participants were able to identify how they were already intuitively using coaching skills in their day-to-day roles, and how the training had enabled them to refine and be intentional in using those skills:

"It has made me more aware of something I'm doing and how I can enhance it. A lot of it already doing instinctively. Now when we realise we are doing it we can work more with it."

The participants also spoke about how the training had encouraged them to reflect more on their own professional practice and had provided them with a deeper appreciation of the value of integrating life coaching into their work:

"The training, I found it quite reflective, it's understanding what you're doing and why you're doing it."

In terms of giving people ownership to make decisions for themselves."



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5.2 THE VALUE OF LIFE COACHING IN SUPPORTING STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING

After the training workshops, which ended in June, each staff member was provided with two in person one-to-one coaching sessions, in September and January. They were coached by the trainer, whose approach was flexible and responsive to whatever topics the client brought to the session but also sought to understand and support the client's use of coaching in their work.

"The training was fantastic, it helped me just in general. Your own wellbeing and how you make decisions yourself."

Interviewees recognised the value of undertaking the training in supporting their own wellbeing, in applying the techniques outside of work ("I've got two young children and it has really helped in my parenting"), and in engaging with Prison service colleagues as well as the prisoners in their care:

"We like talking with people, but this time it allowed us to learn to listen more without talking more. It allowed us to bring a lot more out of ourselves. From then on we've been utilising it every day, that's our job we're always talking and interacting with prisoners. The good thing is we can use it with staff as well."

It was even suggested that the development of life coaching skills should be adopted as part of the mandatory staff training:

"The Prison Service should introduce elements of it in all staff training, it's a people job and you deal with people whether as staff or prisoners, to be more aware and tolerant it would be great for anybody in the job."

5.3 REFLECTIONS ON THE CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENT OF LIFE COACHING IN PRISONS

Despite suggesting that staffing pressures may provide limited opportunities for members of staff to engage in meaningful one-to-one coaching opportunities:

"I have worked in several different jails and in this prison the gym sessions are shorter so we can engage more people in the gym each day. So we don't have so much time to chat."

Participants also recognised the value of life coaching skills for non-gym staff ("It would be good with the care team too") and in enhancing prisoner-staff interactions outside of the gym:

"In the gym prisoners want to be there so they're more positive, when you're on the wing they don't want to behave, we have to help them to find a way."

There was evidently an appreciation of the value of developing the training across the prison, from engaging with some of the more challenging individuals held within the prison ("It's been instrumental in working with people who are usually very difficult, it works really well, I use it all the time") to the Senior Management Team ("I remember introducing Nina to our Number 1 Governor and she went on to do something with the SMT").

Although staffing pressures meant that the delivery of the training was stretched over several months (*"Because there was a long time between sessions, the team had to go and refresh"*) this was ultimately seen as beneficial (*"It is a great idea and a great concept, it needs time"*).

And lastly, despite a recognition that current and ongoing staffing issues may limit the opportunities for staff to engage with coaching (*"Finding opportunities to use it is the hard part, we don't have time"*), there was a suggestion that the training could be adopted for other staff groups (*"It brings people together... should be built into every department"*), particularly in middle managers (*"There are so many new Custodial Managers and they don't know how to motivate staff"*) and in supporting prisoners who support other prisoners, for example peer mentors and gym orderlies. This would represent a positive way of recognising and developing the skills of this important and often overlooked population in our prisons.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1** Recognise the value of integrating coaching skills for gym staff, with the opportunity for PEIs to integrate the training into their CPD, or as part of the PEI mandatory training.
- 6.2** Consider coaching skills training for those with roles that include direct contact with prisoners (including Offender Managers) and middle managers (including Custodial Managers).
- 6.3** Pilot supporting prisoners who support other prisoners (peer mentors and gym staff) with a bespoke life coaching training course, preferably attached to a recognised qualification.
- 6.4** Undertake further (longitudinal) evaluation research which can explore the short, medium and long-term impact of life coaching from the prisoner and staff perspective, across a range of prison establishments, beyond HMP Brixton.



7. REFERENCES

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8. APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STAFF

1. Please outline the extent to which you have used the skills developed in your training in your establishment
2. What barriers have you encountered in using your new coaching skills in your establishment?
3. What support have you received in using your new coaching skills in your establishment?
4. How confident do you feel in using your new coaching skills in your establishment?
5. How motivated do you feel in using your new coaching skills in your establishment?
6. How has completing the training impacted your day-to-day role? Please give examples.
7. Have you remained in contact with your trainer and if so how have you kept in touch and has this been helpful in your role / coaching?
8. Do you have anecdotal evidence of how your involvement in the programme has impacted your colleagues and/or the prisoners in your care?
9. Do you have any anonymous prisoner participation data you can share, and/or official evidence of how your involvement in the programme has impacted your colleagues and/or the prisoners in your care?
10. What impact has the training had on your own wellbeing, and that of your colleagues?
11. Are there any other ways in which the coaching programme has had an impact on your establishment?
12. Would you like to add anything else about the coaching training?



We use coaching to unlock the potential of individuals and drive culture change in the criminal justice system so that rehabilitation is possible.