

The Mayor represents the Town regarding civic events and is often invited to attend other events within Oakham, Rutland and the surrounding area.

Recently I was invited to open a new Bistro within HM Prison Stocken. I found the prospect very interesting as many years ago my first teaching experience was in a prison and I have not entered one since then. If your perception of a prison and prison life is based on re-runs of Ronnie Barker in Porridge, HMP Stocken is far removed from this.

The Bistro provides a place where the prison staff can use their break times to eat and relax. It is staffed by prisoners with drinks and food prepared on site and within the prison's training kitchens. In my time teaching in a prison I was often provided with a mug of tea and an aptly named rock cake containing what I hoped were currents. The food and drinks provided in the Bistro are equal to the best I have ever found in similar premises. Prisoners are not employed in the Bistro as 'cheap labour' but as an integral part of HMP Stocken's training and educational programme. Because the Bistro is real, the onsite training element allows prisoners to gain National Vocational Qualifications such as Barista.

Following the opening of the Bistro and sampling the wares I was invited to tour the other training and educational facilities. The Prison has an ethos of education, training and work. Some enter the prison system unable to read and with very low numeracy skills. Educational and training facilities are provided in conjunction with Milton Keynes College and range from basic literacy and numeracy through to Open University degree courses. Plumbing to cycle repair, commercial cleaning to catering, art to IT and much more. The staff recognise that some prisoners may not like those they perceive to be in authority and use a prisoner mentoring system. Prisoners who have successfully completed a particular course work with staff to support others. Even mundane, possibly tedious work such as assembling huge camouflage nets for our armed forces is turned into a training opportunity. The supervising officer explained that this involved team work, teams of 4 or 5 working together. Many of the prisoners have never worked as part of a team with collective responsibility before and this produces particular challenges. All of these opportunities enhance prisoners' prospects of gaining worthwhile employment once they are released and can help break a cycle of crime and incarceration.

Stocken is a prison complete with all of the physical and procedural security measures designed to house and securely contain criminals, it is not a holiday camp. However I found the enthusiasm and dedication of the educational staff, prisoner mentors and prisoners studying that I met and talked to be inspiring.

Cllr Michael Haley
Mayor of Oakham