Earlier in the year I was invited to Stocken Prison for the opening of their new bistro.

Recently I was invited again to attend a presentation by prisoners who were completing a training course called ‘Fathers inside’ Before arriving all I knew was that it was a five week course delivered by Safe Ground, a National Arts organisation whose portfolio includes courses for people in prisons.

When a person is convicted and sentenced to a custodial sentence it is tough on the family they leave behind. Adults understand but how do you explain to a 4-year-old that daddy will not be living at home for the next 5 years and we can only go and see him every X weeks in his new home? This is not the purpose of the course though, many prisoners with young families are sent to prison with existing communication problems with their children.

Before the presentation I had the opportunity to listen too many of those on the course in a relaxed atmosphere over as cup of coffee, not as good as that served in the new bistro but still very welcome. During this time, the families of the men began to arrive to watch the presentation, wives, young children and in some cases, grandchildren. Some of the men were understandably nervous and emotional, possibly never having stood in front of a quite large audience before which included the prison Governor, prison staff, prison volunteers and their own and other families. Despite this they were all keen to explain what the course was about and more importantly, what they had achieved.

The course uses group work and drama techniques so that the participants experience alternative perspectives, develop empathy and self-awareness along with skills and competences. Participants look at child development, education, communication, and development of their skills as fathers in prison and then after release. The course, originally designed by prisoners for prisoners, has been running for many years however this is a first for Stocken for a long time. All 18 who started the course completed, and were awarded with their certificates, not the norm and quite an achievement.

That’s how the course deliverers explained it, the participants slightly differently.

‘We learn how to get on with our children so that they want to be with us’.

‘I’ve learn how to talk to my kids so we can have a conversation. When we speak instead of saying did you have a good day at school, I say what did you do at school today’.

‘ If I read to my little boy for 2 hours a day, this will help him with his reading and learning and we will become much closer’.

‘My ex-partner doesn’t want me to have access to my kids when I get out. I want to be able to prove to my probationary officer that I am a good father so I can see them’.

‘Fathers inside has made a big difference to me already. Now I write my daughter proper letters rather than just tacking a bit on the end of her mother’s. I now know what to say. It’s really improved our relationship. It’s a great course.’

The men performed a number of acts demonstrating what they had learnt on the course and what the course had involved. Afterwards the men were able to have lunch with their families and spend the afternoon playing games and participating in activities with their children.

My one regret is that I had to rush off at the end of the performance to attend another function. Perhaps if I’m lucky enough to be invited to Stocken again I will have more time and might even be lucky enough to visit the Bistro……

Cllr Michael Haley

Chairman & Mayor of Oakham