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The Sustainable Food Trust's Harmony Project



*An Action Plan for Greener Prisons*

December 2020

**'Green prisons could be key for improving wellbeing and reducing reoffending'**

A new report by the Sustainable Food Trust's Harmony Project (SFT) [1] recommends that prisons in the UK should provide more opportunities for inmates to connect with the natural world with the goal of improving the wellbeing of staff and prisoners and supporting rehabilitation.

'*An Action Plan for Greener Prisons*' draws on research which indicates that access to the natural world, such as having the opportunity to grow food and work with animals, can improve mental wellbeing and reduce stress, anxiety and depression. Studies also suggest that active hands-on engagement with nature is effective in supporting marginalized people to reintegrate into society. This is a result of facilitating skills development, which builds self-confidence, provides meaningful activity and develops a deeper sense of responsibility. Within a prison context, horticultural programmes in particular have been proven to offer multiple benefits to prisoners.

In light of our research, our ongoing discussions with staff at HMP Bristol [2] and with the goal of improving staff and prisoner wellbeing, the SFT recommends that prisons across the UK look to:

- Increase opportunities for horticultural education and cookery classes
- Introduce animal husbandry and beekeeping courses
- Create a more harmonious interior colour therapy
- Optimise natural light and the presence of indoor plants
- Make use of video and photographic content depicting the natural world
- Introduce quieter, greener outdoor spaces
- Increase the planting of pollinator-friendly, native plants across the prison
- Make use of food grown on-site for catering

Despite 97% of prisoners expressing a desire to stop offending, rates of reoffending in the UK have not fallen in recent years. Up to 48% of those who spend time in prison will go on to reoffend within a year. The Government estimates that reoffending costs taxpayers £18 billion a year.

The Government has now recognised the urgent need for innovative solutions by allowing prison governors greater flexibility and control. International studies have shown that connection with nature can improve mental wellbeing, which fosters prisoner rehabilitation into society upon release and can help reduce rates of reoffending. This presents an opportunity to adopt policies that create 'greener prisons' and could see increased support for growing spaces, nature-inspired design, and improved educational training to help tackle the growing problems associated with mental health, nutritional health and substance dependency, while delivering improvements to prisoner post-sentence employment opportunities.

**In support of this report, James Lucas, Governor of HMP Bristol says:**

“At HMP Bristol, we want to transition to a more sustainable future. Our goal is to embed sustainability at the heart of the prison environment. We believe that there are considerable benefits to prisoners and staff to considering a new, more environmental approach and we support innovative solutions. Consequently, we welcome the publication of this report by the Sustainable Food Trust and will continue to collaborate with The Harmony Project team to explore these ideas.”

**Rory Stewart, Former Minister of State for Prisons and Probation says:**

“Providing decent, safe, and positive environments for prisoners through engagement with the natural world is not only a moral obligation, it also ultimately keeps the public safe through addressing many of the issues that lead to reoffending.

It has long been clear that connections to nature, to the outdoors, to gardening and food production are deeply important for my mental and physical health. Recent scientific research amply confirms this.

If we do not work to rehabilitate prisoners through such programmes and many other programmes in education and psychology - it will harm not just the prisoners themselves but the public too - because prisoners, who have been poorly treated, will be much more likely to reoffend on release.

We should be hugely grateful to the Sustainable Food Trust for bringing together such an important and valuable contribution to prisons and broader society.”

**Patrick Holden, Chief Executive of the SFT says:**

“As this report shows, finding ways to give prisoners access to more green space as well as providing land-based activities such as gardening and horticulture, could bring significant improvements to the mental health and wellbeing of the prison population. The separation from the natural world and lack of opportunity to produce some of our own food that has accompanied urbanisation and agricultural intensification is a cause of many of society’s broader problems.”

**Afzal Shah, Bristol City Council Cabinet Member for Climate, Ecology & Sustainable Growth says:**

“We believe that nature is one of Bristol's best assets, and vital to our economic and health recovery and as the first UK city to declare climate and ecological emergencies we are pursuing our vision of an ecologically resilient city that works for people and nature by 2030. Bristol continues to lead by working with partners across the city to set ambitious goals for sustainable low-carbon energy, food, infrastructure, transport and waste systems. We're supporting people and organisations to take the many actions in our homes and our day-to-day lives that will make a difference in their lives to help both the environment and their own emotional and personal well-being. I am confident this project at HMP Bristol will inspire similar work elsewhere.”

**ENDS**

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### **Notes for Editors**

[1] The Harmony Project is part of the Sustainable Food Trust, an organisation working to accelerate the transition to more sustainable food and farming systems. The Harmony Project forms an integral part of the SFT's wider educational work and its commitment to promote an understanding of the impact our choices and actions have on the world, in which everything is connected. The SFT was founded in 2011 by Patrick Holden CBE, former director of the Soil Association and the SFT's current chief executive.

[2] HMP Bristol is a Category B men's prison with an operational capacity of 520. The SFT has been working with HMP Bristol since the start of 2019. Prison leadership has already implemented several of the recommendations outlined in the SFT's report including planting pollinator-friendly plants across the prison, displaying photographs of the natural world and introducing chickens.