

September 2017

A day in the life of an Exam Officer at HMP Norwich

I work in a Category B Male Prison housing up to 767 inmates. Did that get your attention! It's not the obvious place to be delivering exams. Every day is different here. As you would expect, it is demanding and challenging. We expect the unexpected and like other education environments, we have a constant movement of potential learners. We are not governed by school calendars and our offering is 'roll on – roll off'. It is the only way to serve our client group.

Every week I am asked to organise and invigilate Functional Skills exams, Health and Safety and Food Safety whilst other portfolio work is going on inside classrooms. The Governor expects attendance at English and Maths to gain at least a Level 1 qualification and the Vocational one day courses help learners to get a job inside and of course help upon their release.

As well as sorting the constant exam schedule, I do all our learner registrations and claiming which involves lots of chasing up and face to face contact with learners asking questions, trying to negotiate alternative activities, and querying results. It all needs a careful, considered response to avoid confrontation. You learn to trust your instincts.

We run classes in IT, (Robotics and Radio Technology), Art, ESOL (English for Students of Other Languages), PSD (Personal and Social Development, Mentoring and Business Skills). Then there are the workshops – City and Guilds Plumbing, Electrics, Carpentry and Painting and Decorating.

All the courses are designed to meet our continual turnover. The majority of our learners are with us for up to 6 weeks awaiting sentence, so the mood and behaviour can change in a moment, but naturally, we expect courtesy and respect and we try and give that back. There are others here for longer sentences.

Alongside classes we have our onsite TV station (WayOut TV) channelling a wealth of courses and classes for those who, for whatever reason, cannot join us in our Education Department. Last year I recorded 6 short meditation sessions available to watch in cell and on our classroom EdNet system. Together with accompanying workbooks they widen our reach and mean we can offer Mindfulness – and other classes, in cell on a daily basis.

On a daily level there are always unforeseen situations. Tomorrow's carefully planned agenda may well change and if you are not flexible here, you 'won't cut it' in this reactive environment. The best laid plans can be thwarted by regime commitments and education takes a back seat, with no explanation. Any plans we make take second place to judicial procedures.

There may be a 'Standfast' or 'Roll Check' but you are more than likely to have a refusal, a learner who needs a Reader, extra time, toilet breaks or time out. The key here is to interpret the regulations to meet the special needs of the environment.

We know that planning ahead may be doomed to failure, but we have to do some forward thinking with a constantly changing student body. On-demand Functional Skills exams are a godsend and perfectly suit the learner who tells us he is 'out' tomorrow.

As it is common for learners to be absent from exams for appointments, interviews or adjudications, there's no point having a meltdown. I just track down the learner again, and repeat the plan. 'Plan and prepare' has to be my motto! Exams happen as and when they need to. We sit single papers one, two or three at a time if necessary – just to get a learner a qualification before he leaves. Of course, he may come back at some point, and yes, that happens a lot. We don't say goodbye to all of them forever, though that is our aim.

I am continually re-prioritising my workload to accommodate events around us. If you can count on one thing, it is the anticipation of change! I can't be precious about my planning. Being flexible is essential.

I must admit that I am jealous of those learning environments where streamlined processes work. I would love to use the amazing tools available from *The Exams Office* website, but this is not my experience as we cannot access lots of all-singing software. There are limits on the sites we can link to and although our IT systems present challenges we get the job done. Surprisingly, we still meet our targets and meet and greet our learners with a willing heart.

I have been here 10 years now and although it may not be ideal for everyone, I feel it is right for me. HMP Norwich is a place that thrives on purpose over planning and I am proud to work here and serve those who find their way to our Education Department.