

Close Supervision Centres

A Modern Form of Torture

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[ed. – Posted to U.K. Indymedia by Sean Dunohoe, reprinted here with very minor edits for spelling and grammar. It's not hard to imagine the conceptual discrepancies between ourselves and the author (on rights, law, criminality etc.), so without further annotation we'll let the rest of the text speak for itself about these black-holes of modern democracy and their overseer's colonial-style divide-and-rule tactics.

Close Supervision Centres (C.S.C.s), based on the American "Special Management Units", started in 1998 at Woodhill prison in Milton Keynes to hold prisoners who fought back, encouraged others to do so too, embarrassed the prison service, or were otherwise the most "disruptive and dangerous". Inmates who subsequently conformed had the possibility at first to rejoin the main prison population; not so with the C.S.C. above the "Exceptional Risk Unit" in Wakefield prison, where convicts are left entombed in their cells and allowed no human interaction. One subject to that regime, Kevan Thakrar (a regular correspondent to the 'outside' world and vocal opponent of the prison regime), reports that many are "unable to succeed in escaping this hell without first being driven insane, and only then do they manage to elude the fire by being sectioned under the Mental Health Act 1983 to a high security hospital in order to attempt to treat them for the damage the extreme environmental stress has caused. If these patients are successful in recovering [they] are then returned to the CSC to be broken again and again. [Death] is contemplated daily by the CSC prisoners, and attempted routinely by those who realise it is the only way left for them to be able to leave..."

November 2015, another inmate, Eddie Brown, hung himself inside the C.S.C.; reportedly at the encouragement of all the screws. Additionally, a function of the regime is violent normalisation of 'othered' subjectivities, such as the terrorisation of Muslim prisoners (including the latter-mentioned Douglas Vinter) by guards and other inmates until they feel compelled to adopt Christianity. From a November 2015 letter by Kevan: "Following each capitulation were celebrations and congratulations for another job well done by those running the unit and their puppets, then the transfer in of the next target in what is a systematic attack on Islamic prisoners. [...] None of this is new, HMP Wakefield has always been known to operate a racist regime enforced by an all white workforce, [with] the techniques learned through Psychological training which is mandatory for all CSC officers[...] Benefits and bonuses are given to racist prisoners, whilst others are kept in total isolation from each other and there is little action which can be taken against the culprits. [...] Publicity following the recent death of a prisoner at HMP Woodhill's Close Supervision Centre (CSC) [has] focused almost exclusively

on the issue of transgender. Edward (Eddie) Latham had changed his name to Eddie Brown whilst serving time in Rampton secure hospital, and I am told very recently may have changed it again to Joanne Latham. [...] For almost two years, Latham had been confined within solitary confinement conditions which are well known to cause suicidal behavior as well as mental deterioration. Added to this was the common brutality and sadistic behaviors of both the local Woodhill CSC personnel, and the national CSC Management Committee who ordered Latham to be kept there. This experience left little to live for resulting in repeated suicide attempts in numerous different ways, all causing great amusement amongst those working there. [...] Self-harm and self-mutilation are and always have been at the highest levels of anywhere within the entire prison system at the CSC. Suicide attempts are routine with nothing but further unofficial punishment given to the victims by the CSC staff. It was not that long ago that CSC prisoner Lee Foye struggled so much with the extreme environmental stress that he began hearing voices & severed his ear off, then six weeks later was encouraged to cut off [the other] which like the first was done with razors supplied by officers.”

We want the C.S.C.s not only “closed” but in ashes, though for us the struggle against one prison must comprise a single part of the struggle against all prisons, at all times, and everywhere.]

There has for some time been serious concerns about the treatment of prisoners held in the so called ‘Close Supervision Centre’ (CSC) at Woodhill prison in Milton Keynes, and once again the segregation and isolation of what the prison system labels as “difficult” prisoners in a control unit environment has led to serious abuses of human rights and unlawful behaviour on the part of those “supervising” the CSC. That unlawful behaviour now threatens the physical safety and even lives of prisoners held in the CSC. An incident recently engineered by staff operating the Woodhill prison CSC where a mentally ill prisoner was encouraged to attack another prisoner in what is a supposedly “closely supervised” environment indicates that a “divide and rule” strategy is now being officially applied in the CSC that threatens the lives of these prisoners considered especially “difficult” and “challenging” by the CSC staff.

Douglas Gary Vinter is a prisoner serving a natural life sentence, which means he is unlikely to ever be released. His “difficult” behaviour, which usually took the form of smashing up his cell in impotent rage and despair, led to his being “selected” for the Woodhill CSC, despite a judicial review ruling that his prolonged segregation was unlawful because it was contributing to his deteriorating mental condition.

Lee Newell, also serving a natural life sentence, was “selected” for the Woodhill CSC because of his constant complaints about the behaviour of prison staff, who, he claimed, had targeted him for bullying and intimidation. Both prisoners after experiencing a CSC regime of solitary confinement, psychological abuse and the ever present threat of organised staff violence, repeatedly requested transfers on the grounds that their mental health was seriously deteriorating; their requests were denied by the “multi disciplinary management team” operating the Woodhill CSC.

The “multi disciplinary management team” at the Woodhill CSC are responsible for carrying out “risk assessments” on the prisoners held in the CSC and deciding what level or intensity of “supervision” they require, I.E. the number of staff, often in full riot gear, required to “supervise” the prisoners movement outside of his cell, and whether the “settled behaviour” of a prisoner can be rewarded by allowing him to share his one hour exercise period in a small outdoor cage with another CSC prisoner.

Claire Hodson, the “population strategist and specialist units manager” of the CSC and a member of the CSC’s “multi disciplinary management team” had recently confirmed that a significant proportion of the prisoners in the CSC suffered with serious mental illness either prior to being selected for the CSC or whilst confined there and subject to its extremely psychologically punishing regime. Joanne King, a psychologist employed in the Woodhill CSC, apparently is content to oversee the mental destruction of prisoners held in the CSC and was fully aware of the pleas of Douglas Vinter and Lee Newell to be transferred out of the CSC because of their inability to mentally cope with the brutal “behaviour modification” regime operating there. Clearly, the so called “multi disciplinary management team” exist simply to legitimise a regime in the CSC that is intrinsically cruel and intended to completely disempower and dehumanise prisoners perceived as “troublemakers”. The psychological consequences to those prisoners is obviously of no concern to those managing the CSC. For the uniformed staff actually enforcing the CSC regime, who operate with little or no real accountability in a hidden environment, an occupational culture has developed that prioritizes control and obedience of prisoners by any means necessary, and this has began to take the form of encouraging the most “difficult” and mentally disturbed prisoners in the CSC to vent their anger and rage upon each other.

After suffering the cruelty of the CSC regime for 3 months Douglas Vinter could endure no more and told the staff enforcing the regime that unless he was transferred soon he would express his despair in violence. A senior prison officer called Bowen is then reported to have said to him *“Don’t hurt one of us. If you’re determined to use violence why not hurt Lee Newell”*. He was assured that the consequences to him of physically attacking another prisoner would be far less serious than were he to attack a member of staff. Fomenting violence amongst the most mentally disturbed CSC prisoners had become a tactic employed by “front line” staff in the CSC to deflect and manipulate the rage generated by the regime they imposed. The senior prison officer Bowen assured Douglas Vinter that both his and Lee Newell’s supervision level would be reduced in order to allow them to share an exercise period in the outdoor cage, and in an unprecedented swiftness of time the “multi disciplinary management team” carried out a “dynamic risk assessment” on both prisoners and reduced their supervision level, thereby allowing staff to place them in the exercise cage together. Officers were then heard to be taking bets amongst themselves on who would prevail in the inevitable fight between Vinter and Newell; following the murder of a young Asian prisoner by his racist cell mate in Feltham Young Offenders Institute a number of years ago evidence [came out] that officers at the jail had organised and provoked fights amongst inmates [*ed. – regular ‘gladiator’ fights*] and then taken bets on the outcome.

On the 27th November last year Douglas Vinter and Lee Newell were taken from their cells and placed in the small outdoor cage, where Vinter attacked Newell and beat him unconscious. An ambulance was called but delayed for an hour at the prison gates while the prisons security governor Angela Curtis insisted that its access to the CSC was made subject to various “security rules”. Lee Newell lay unconscious in the CSC exercise yard for almost two hours before he was handcuffed and strapped to a stretcher, and then guarded by six prison officers in the ambulance; his supervision level was again increased to its usual “high risk” level.

Because of numerous skull fractures, bleeding of the brain and swelling, he was immediately placed into an induced coma on arrival at the hospital. He remains in that coma. It’s likely that he will die but if he does emerge from the coma he will inevitably suffer with severe brain damage.

The CSC management committee at prison service headquarters, composed of segregation unit managers from each of the high security prisons from which most of the CSC prisoners are

selected, have decided that despite Lee Newell's critical condition his placement in the Woodhill CSC remains appropriate. They have also attempted to suppress all information to the media regarding what happened to Lee Newell, and also refused to inform his family of what happened to him.

Following his attack on Lee Newell, Douglas Vinter told prison officers who surrounded him in the exercise cage – *“This is what happens when you torment and wind me up. I told you I was going to do this and you didn't care or listen. I told you I was deteriorating mentally and needed a transfer out of here but you ignored me. I am serving a natural life sentence, so what are you going to do now? Give me another life sentence?”* He then walked of his own volition to a separate unit and was placed into “special accommodation”, a sensory deprivation cell where he is now held in clinical isolation. Claire Hodson and Alan Parkins, the Woodhill CSC governor, say that he will remain in “special accommodation” indefinitely, which means he will be denied all human contact, be fed through a small hatch in the cell door, sleep on the cells concrete floor, and be handcuffed through the hatch in the cell door before being allowed to leave the cell for a shower, during which he remains handcuffed, and one hours exercise each day. Each time he leaves the cell he is surrounded by seven guards all dressed in full riot gear and holding shields. Alan Parkins has told him that he will remain in the sensory deprivation cell indefinitely, but reassured him that if or when he goes completely insane he will be able to plead diminished responsibility for the attack on Lee Newell when he stands trial for it. Parkins is determined to create the narrative of an irrationally violent prisoner who attacked another prisoner without reason or warning, thereby concealing the role and involvement of CSC staff in what took place.

Prisoners in the CSC who have voiced concerns about what happened have had their risk and supervision levels arbitrarily increased in an attempt to silence them, and the “multi disciplinary management team”, which includes a member of the supposedly “Independent Monitoring Board”, Mary-Anne Dixie, have given this their blessing.

The police who attempted to gain access to the CSC in order to interview prisoners in relation to the matter were prevented from doing so by Alan Parkins who has insisted that he must personally monitor all interviews and communication with prisoners.

All CSC staff [were] in some way involved in what took place; basic grade prison officers, governors, and the entire “multi disciplinary management team” have personally reviewed the CCTV and camcorder footage of the incident and held a number of group discussions to decided on a version and account of their role in what happened, thereby prejudicing any future legal proceedings.

If he dies Lee Newell will be the second prisoner that died in the CSC last year [*ed. – after weeks chained to a hospital bed, left missing an eye and with permanent brain damage from the attack, Lee lived*].

Following the attack on Lee Newell the regime in the Woodhill CSC has been significantly hardened and made even more repressive, and the same officers who encouraged and facilitated Douglass Vinter's attack on Lee Newell are now telling the CSC prisoners that they should blame Douglas Vinter for the total lock down of the CSC regime.

What happened in the Woodhill CSC on the 27th November last year suggests a descent into plain criminality on the part of those “supervising” and managing the CSC and an inevitable consequence of the regime that allows those enforcing it to disempower totally those in their custody. The effective de-humanisation of any group absolves those enforcing it of any conscience, and recognition of the humanity of those over whom they exercise an almost omnipotent degree of

power, and the relationship of power that characterises the treatment of prisoners in the Woodhill CSC will always be inherently and intrinsically abusive and render the lives of those prisoners extremely vulnerable.

Close the CSC now!

ed. – The comrades of Bristol Anarchist Black Cross also published a two-part series on the Close Supervision Centres in particular prior to this, available to read online.

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