

Crime and rehabilitation: one woman's story

Kenneth Clarke, the justice secretary, will this week unveil plans to keep people out of prison. Many Tories do not agree with the policy, but it can work – and save Britain millions

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Victoria Twiddy was 17 when she was first convicted – for shoplifting. Far from acting as a deterrent, the resulting community sentence was the prelude to her life of crime. During the next decade she was arrested more than 20 times, amassing 11 convictions, five for theft, three for assault, two each for criminal damage and breaching a court order.

"I was going out shoplifting to make myself look nice, constantly reoffending," she said. "A little bit of assault now and then, criminal damage constantly from age 16, kicking a window in, that sort of thing." For those who believe the penal system is failing, Twiddy's rate of recidivism provides compelling evidence that something needs to change.

Ken Clarke is one of those people. On Tuesday the justice secretary will unveil his green paper on sentencing and rehabilitation policy, proposals which promise one of the most radical reforms of how Britain deals with criminals. Leaning heavily towards a liberalisation of penal policy, his paper will suggest an end to many short prison sentences and more community-based punishments. Fewer people will be incarcerated.

Clarke's primary motivation is tackling Britain's reoffending rate: more than seven in 10 inmates commit a crime within a year of release. Central to his solution will be plans to offer ex-offenders better help in the community – an extensive support network to deter them from returning to crime. If anyone can testify to the strengths of such a system, it is Twiddy.

Now 28, the formerly prolific reoffender has not been arrested since July 2009, the longest period of her adult life without contact with the law. Hers is a story of successful rehabilitation. But it is also that of joined-up community action, of vast overlapping amounts of resources, time and manpower required to turn a life around. The concerted efforts of at least seven people in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, have spent the last 20 months coaxing her further from the cycle of reoffending.

A brief scan of Twiddy's diary lays bare exactly what is required in terms of upfront investment for her rehabilitation to hold and strengthen. Monday starts with a visit to Diana Swan, support worker with the Children and Families Enterprise project (Cafe), an award-winning scheme run by St Giles Trust, a charity which helps ex-offenders complete their community sentences.

Swan began working with Twiddy three months ago following a referral from Tunbridge Wells probation team, who help to fund Cafe. Twiddy, 16 weeks pregnant at the time, was preparing for the pressures of single motherhood without a job or real prospects. Their relationship has evolved; they chat about anything concerning Twiddy – money issues, old boyfriends, anything

that might jeopardise her rehabilitation. Recently Swan managed to acquire her a baby starting kit.

The following day, Twiddy meets officials from her local health service to discuss drug issues, a weekly appointment designated to help her avoid resuming her heroin habit. She was a heroin user for two years, an addiction exacerbated by a heavy alcohol problem which in turn followed a period of domestic violence by an ex-boyfriend. Twiddy committed a spate of offences when hooked on the Class A substance. Keeping her off heroin is central to preventing her from reoffending.

On Thursday, Twiddy usually meets a support worker from Tunbridge Wells borough council to discuss housing issues. Living in a one-bedroom flat she has experienced problems paying rent on time and it is deemed vital she retains a stable home, another critical variable in attempts to prevent reoffending.

On Friday, Twiddy undergoes weekly drugs testing at the local office of KCA, a charity that tackles substance abuse and mental health issues. Compulsory testing for traces of heroin and alcohol to ensure she remains clean forms part of her last community order for shoplifting. Her drinking has stopped and her last heroin hit was six months ago. Twiddy believes she will never go back, especially with a child on the way.

"I have found it very helpful, I'm really engaged this time, I really feel like I'm on the mend," she said.

Later on Friday, Twiddy meets her probation officer at the service's Tunbridge Wells office. Her assigned officer is frequently rotated and over the years many of the town's team, including Barry Lee-Thomas, Tami Paterson, David Coley, Jackie Denton and Mary-Ann Vernon, have helped to guide her through a plethora of community sentences. "They are a very good team, sometimes they push me quite hard and I break down and snap and that helps me come round a little bit," she said.

Twiddy attends Skills for Life, an education programme run by nearby West Kent College and another vital component of her rehabilitation: the more skills offenders acquire, the more chance they have of employment, itself a significant step away from a criminal lifestyle. Tuition is intensive, usually one-to-one, with classes a maximum of three. Twiddy has reached level 1 adult literacy.

"The help I've been given has really made me think, all the people who have put in such an effort," she said. "I want to thank them all because I wouldn't have stopped reoffending without their support. I feel really grateful for everyone, always there every week when I turn up. To be honest, I was in a real mess; I'd call a drug dealer just to see someone. I don't think I'll go back to that life."

Swan has noticed a profound improvement in Twiddy, as with many ex-offenders: "You can see the build-up of confidence. We have seen people move on, get a job and not reoffend. It's about becoming more employable, but also a lot of it is having a relationship with an adult."

Swan and Twiddy have bonded so well that Twiddy feels she can call Swan for a chat anytime. Her baby is due at the end of January and Swan will effectively assume the role of her partner.

The Cafe rehabilitation programme is all about fostering an intimacy between ex-offender and support group. Swan helps Twiddy calculate her budget, honour bills and pay previous court costs.

Clarke's green paper is also shaped by financial concerns; reducing the number sent to prison will help meet his target of £2bn in budget cuts. There is a perception that serious rehabilitation costs serious money, but schemes run by St Giles Trust provide a model indicating Clarke's proposals can reduce reoffending and save money. Its less intensive rehabilitation projects cost about £1,000 per individual and yield reoffending rates of 35%. Programmes similar to Twiddy's cost around £3,000 a person. The Tunbridge Wells scheme boasts a reoffending rate of one in 10.

Potential savings are enormous. Reoffending costs the economy £11bn a year, with the human cost unquantifiable; keeping someone in prison costs £45,000 a year. Studies calculate the combined cost of convicting and imprisonment for a year at £165,000.

Such statistics are why Clarke wants charities to perform a key role in his "rehabilitation revolution". St Giles Trust is among those involved in the government's "paid by results" scheme that could earn investors millions of pounds if it stops short-term prisoners reoffending after release. A pilot recently began targeting inmates from Peterborough prison, aiming to cut reoffending by more than 7.5%.

But the rightwing press is predictably agitating over the locking up of fewer convicts, the prospect of dangerous offenders on the streets. Rumours of tension between No 10 and the Ministry of Justice abound, the former concerned about how curbing shorter prison sentences will play with the electorate. Former home secretary Michael Howard's assertion that "prison works" still has plenty of followers within Tory ranks. Commentators point to David Cameron's "tough on crime" manifesto at the last election, its promise to increase prison "capacity as necessary".

Clarke, by contrast, wants more community sentences, perhaps enforceable by the withdrawal of benefits, to create prison alternatives perceived as credible by the public. Twiddy has never been to prison and certainly never would under Clarke's vision.

She believes community sentences can work, but in terms of reoffending she cites the support to wean her off drugs, improve her education, secure a home and smooth her financial quandaries as the catalyst for change.

Twiddy appreciates that rehabilitation is fragile by nature. Over the years she has attended numerous probation courses including anger management groups, drugs and alcohol courses and even received treatment for mental health issues, but says receiving the intensive personal support from Cafe was pivotal.

Swan said: "It's about empowering the person we are working with, trying to build some self-responsibility, developing their skills until the person can go it alone." Soon, after her baby is born, Twiddy hopes to go it alone. Already she plans to resume her hairdressing course at college: "I sort of let myself down a bit in the past, but now I'm back."