

Is West best?

Not necessarily, according to Karen McKeown in a fascinating illustrated account of her three month placement within Kenyan prisons at this month's PJG meeting.

We might not have been surprised to hear that prisoners did not have much of what they would get in a British prison. Prisoners are reliant on charities or local goodwill to provide mattresses, so most sleep on the floor, including children who stay with their mothers until the age of four. They have little access to telephones and, because of poor public transport, contact with families is often impossible. Sentences are long, anything less than four years is seen as 'short'. Life means the rest of ones life is behind bars. The death sentence is still on the statute book, but has not been used since 1987.

Yet we saw spacious prison buildings, with prisoners free to move around and mix and socialise, and with the opportunity of fresh air, activity and support. Self harm and suicide seem unknown.

Prisoners are encouraged to develop their education, ideas and skills. Some from the maximum security prison had studied to university level and gone on to become lawyers, vets and doctors on release. Perhaps this has something to do with the absence from Kenyan prisons of some of the problems that beset our prisons here.

Karen described a refreshing lack of the bureaucracy and obsession with security that makes life for those working in prisons here so frustrating. While in Kenya, Karen used her experience of good practice in the Five Valleys to set up a project for older prisoners, including setting up a walking football and boules group and a weekly social group. The meeting collected £35.40 to buy wool for this group.

The meeting was followed by a very brief AGM. As PJG has been unable to find a new secretary, this will probably be the last meeting, but all were invited to the final committee meeting on December 10th to agree how and when to finish.