

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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**Where does the prison  
system go from here?**

*Special Edition*

***Voices from the front line***

# Interview: Prison Officer in a High Security Prison

*Christine Thomas is a prison officer at HMP Long Lartin and is interviewed by Martin Kettle who is a senior operational manager currently seconded to HM Inspectorate of Prisons.*

**Christine Thomas joined HMP Long Lartin as an Operational Support Grade before becoming a prison officer. Recently she has been working in the programmes team, facilitating the offending behaviour programmes.**

**MK: From your perspective, what are the effects of the fact that we are locking up increasing numbers of people in prison? What are the consequences for you of prisons being full?**

**CV:** To be honest I have not noticed it much here, yet. We have two new wings, so we are busier, but we have had more staff to cover that. We have been reprofiled, so we are feeling the changes in terms of staffing numbers being cut; but not perhaps as much as some other prisons. Perhaps in future people's workload will increase and their safety may come in to question.

**MK: Politicians often use the term 'Broken Society' Do you think this describes the world that the prisoners you work with come from?**

**CV:** Certainly not all of them. Some of them will say that they had a really good upbringing and didn't want for anything; but for some of them it would describe it — people who didn't complete their schooling fully, or many never have gone to school at all. A lot of it I suppose can be to do with the area that they've come from, the peers they've been surrounded by, their upbringing and family life — a lot have said that they have been brought up in care — so, a mix. But I'd say more come from what politicians call the 'Broken Society'.

**MK: Do you think prisons can help with social problems like unemployment, drug use and family breakdown?**

**CV:** To some degree. For those with drug use problems, there are a lot of programmes in place now, help with detoxes, support from CARATs<sup>1</sup>, treatment programmes, and now the Integrated Drug Treatment Service. With unemployment, they've got many education opportunities, though how far this will stand them in good stead on release — if someone's going for a job and they have two candidates, one of whom has been in prison for 15 years, it is going to be difficult for them to get jobs. In terms of family breakdown, there are a lot of things like the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme, and family visits, but for many it

is difficult not least because of the distance for the family to visits them. So I'm not sure how much prison helps.

**MK: Does imprisonment make it easier or harder for prisoners to make positive changes to their lives?**

**CV:** It can be harder in some respects if there are lots of things outside their control; and some people may have many pro-criminal attitudes being reinforced in here, being surrounded by like-minded people. But there are a lot of opportunities in prisons now, in ways that have changed even since I have been in the job. They are away from certain risk factors on the outside, and have opportunities in the workshops and education, if they can attend them.

However, it can be a bit of an artificial environment. You can measure changes in behaviour to some degree, from their wing behaviour and whether they manage to progress. And it depends on the kind of sentences they're doing — some people are coming up for release, and some have got years and years and years, so that it's difficult to measure what impact it has after they get out.

**MK: The Government wants to achieve what it is calling a 'rehabilitation revolution'. From your point of view, what are the areas where more could be done to help prisoners go straight on release?**

**CV:** Perhaps more interventions in terms of more specific programmes; more contact with people outside, probation and the community — which probably does happen much more in low-category establishments; more one-to-one work, more adapted programmes for those with learning difficulties. There are some gaps in provision, for example, the Focus programme (a drug and alcohol programme) is very high intensity, a six-month course; there are people who don't fit that need profile, who need a programme in the middle ground that is less intense. There are some shorter programmes, about two weeks, but maybe some things in the middle are also needed. Others may need more intensive input, for example for offenders with a lower IQ, we are always looking at ways we can facilitate programmes — whether it can be adapted, or if it's a matter of working with Education first before the programme — we might be

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1. Counselling, assessment, referral and treatment for substance misuse.

able to make it more specific — but it's very difficult to do at the moment.

It is also important that there is a link back into the community through probation. When we do post-programme reviews after offending behaviour courses, Probation staff are encouraged to come, and we do a fair amount of teleconferencing where they are too far away to attend. It is less easy in high security, where often a prisoner may not know who their probation officer is, or it may change quite often.

**MK: What kind of work or training do you think could be introduced to prisons?**

**CV:** What they are doing could be more meaningful in terms of work on release. There are some things here, like the brick shop, where they are learning trades, but not all the workshops are like that. And although they go to work, it's of course a completely different environment; it could be made more realistic, more appraisal and feedback processes, to make it more meaningful for them and more like real life — but that would take resources.

**MK: Would you welcome the opportunity for prisoners to pay something back for their crimes, either financially, through some kind of unpaid work, or by meeting their victim?**

**CV:** I don't think that meeting their victim would be a good idea, unless the victim thought it would be beneficial for them. The victim awareness courses are good, where the victims are willing to discuss it, but it should be considered a lot more from the victim's perspective and how they would feel. I imagine many victims wouldn't want to meet the perpetrator. It could be very difficult for them, especially if the person didn't feel much remorse for what they had done. Though in victim awareness courses it does have more of an impact on the offender when they hear a victim directly about what the effect can be — but maybe not from the victim of their specific crime. I know there's talk about a prisoners' earnings bill — I think that could be a good scheme for them, as well as the unpaid work and community service.

**MK: How has the prisoner experience shifted in recent years?**

**CV:** While I have been here there have been extra incentives under the IEP scheme<sup>2</sup>. Some prisoners say it

is easier for them, and they maybe don't see it as a deterrent any more. And I think there are more issues now to do with drug use, and issues have arisen around religion, which for some is a positive thing, although where there is pressure it can be seen as a negative.

**MK: How have prison-staff and staff-prisoner relationships changed in recent years? How do you think they could be improved?**

**CV:** There's a lot more communication now; the personal officer role has developed. It is checked that contact is made at least weekly, and the entries are updated. There is a need for consistency — everyone has the same training but they do things quite differently. The personal officer scheme is a valuable one — I have helped people read letters and write letters, about things which people probably wouldn't feel comfortable asking every officer on the wing to help with. It's a first port of call — though there are teams of other officers they could go to.

**MK: How has the experience of working in prison changed in recent years?**

**CV:** With the reprofiling of staff there has been a lot of changes. There are more staff in some areas but less in others, so there does seem to be more in the programmes and healthcare departments, less in psychology, less in certain areas of the jail. I

think morale is changing in prison — it's lower than it has been, perhaps with all the changes coming in at once, or the prospect of being privatised. Now that that's happened to one jail<sup>3</sup>, it's something that people maybe thought would never happen, but now it's started to happen — it's the uncertainty.

**MK: What aspect of working in prison do you think people outside are least aware of?**

**CV:** Perhaps when there are serious incidents — I'm not sure the public are aware of the sort of things that can happen. And also the opportunities that prisoners do have — that they're not just locked up all the time, they can go to education, to workshops, to the gym. And then the fact that staff talk to prisoners — many people seem to think that you don't speak to them, when you can have normal conversations, have a laugh and a joke with them, while keeping the boundaries clear. Because they have the television, you can talk about things that are going on in

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2. Incentives and Earned Privileges.

3. This refers to the announcement in March 2011 of the outcome of a competition to operate HMP Birmingham. This is the first time that a prison operated by the public sector has transferred to private operation as a result of competition.

everyday life — they've seen the Royal wedding, and events like that.

**MK: An increasing number of prisons are potentially to be managed by private companies in the near future and there will be potentially wider opportunities for the voluntary and charitable sector. What are the benefits and risks of these changes for you?**

**CV:** I'm not sure about me specifically. There may be some more opportunities if the voluntary and charitable sector is involved — but there's a real risk that people may lose their jobs, and if staff were to be cut you'd be questioning the safety of staff and prisoners on the wings. You may not have people who are as specialised, with roles like the programmes, the gym, the search teams. I'm not sure whether it would be the same training, and you might struggle to recruit and retain staff if it was in the private sector.

**MK: What do you think are the biggest problems in the prison system?**

**CV:** The lack of resources available, and the lack of staff. It's very difficult to complete the checks and keep an eye on everything that's going on on the wing — everything moves at a fast pace, there isn't time to slow down and have a good look. Also prisoners do have a lot of rights and entitlements now, and that can cause problems when things are not fulfilled exactly. For example the prison shop — if there are problems with orders, it can lead to

problems which may be unnecessary but can escalate from a small issue.

**MK: What are the things that get in the way of prisons being more like you would want them to be?**

**CV:** The changes that are made need to be reviewed more thoroughly after they're implemented — it seems to take time. We've just had a number of changes in recent times: some things may be working well, other things are not working as well, and they could do with reviewing more quickly. There has been a lot of consultation, but it's a question of how much of that was taken on board when the changes were implemented. And perhaps some more specific training opportunities. There is a lot of training happening now, but more variety would help — I'm not sure a lot of people can see where their career is going in terms of the opportunities available higher up, given all the changes that are coming in.

**MK: If you could do one thing to improve the effectiveness of the prison service, what would that be?**

**CV:** I haven't got a pat answer to that, but I think more staff is one of the biggest things. Everything seems to have to be done to a time limit, whereas if you had more staff, things could be done really thoroughly, with more staff on the landings for the prisoners, although I know we probably have a lot more staff than lower-category prisons.