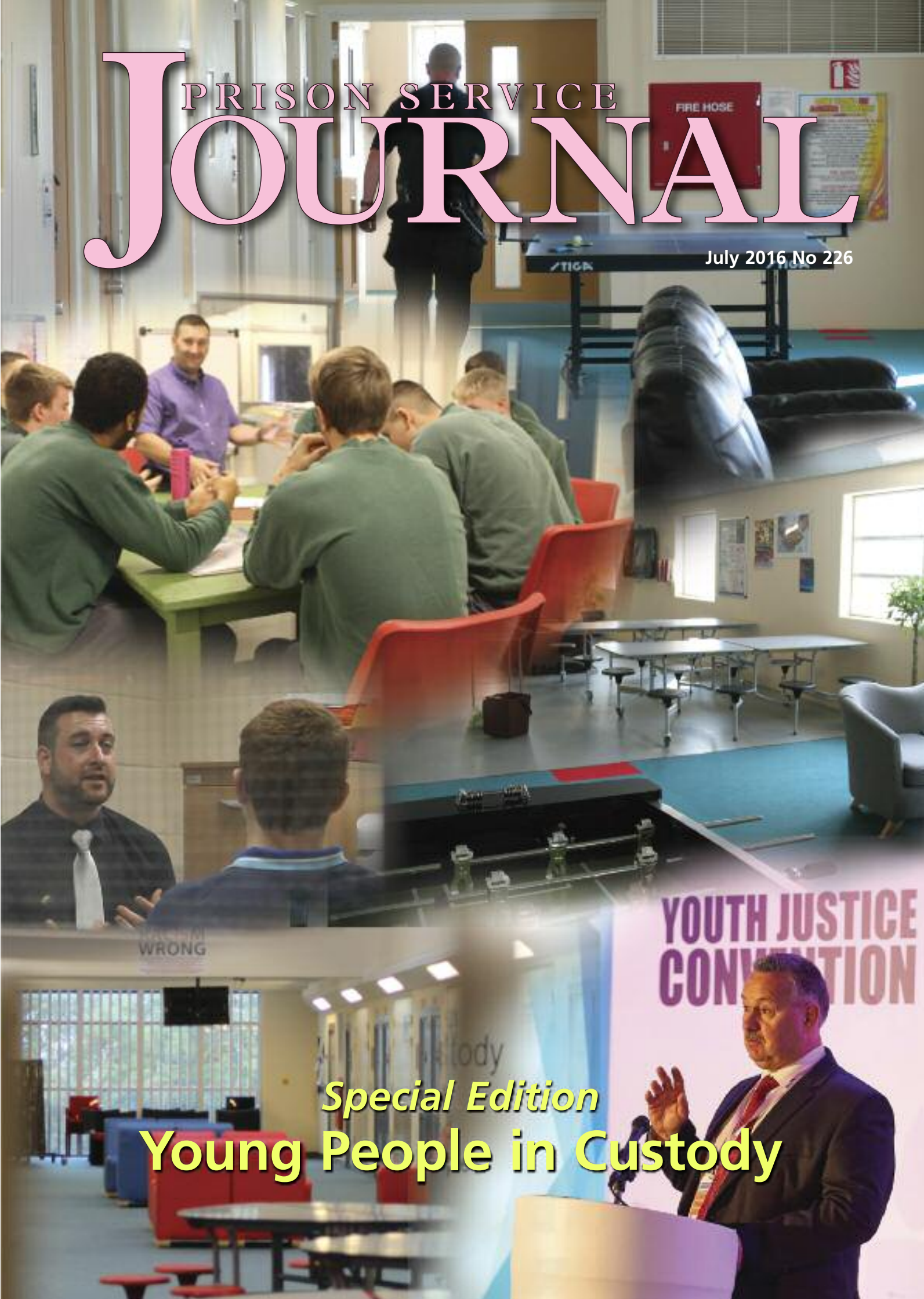


# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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CONVENTION

*Special Edition*  
**Young People in Custody**

# Interview: Dame Sally Coates

*Dame Sally Coates is a distinguished headteacher who is leading a review of prison education. She is interviewed by Dr Jamie Bennett, Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.*

**Dame Sally Coates is the most distinguished headteacher of her generation. She became an English teacher at Peckham Girls School in 1976 before moving to Sacred Heart Catholic School in Camberwell where she spent the next 20 years working in various posts including four years as Headteacher. Under her leadership, the school was assessed by OFSTED as being 'outstanding'.**

In 2008, she took up post as Headteacher of Burlington Danes School in West London. The school had been placed in special measures in 2006 due to its poor performance. Many of the pupils were from economically deprived backgrounds, with almost 70 per cent qualifying for the pupil premium grant. Over the next five years, the school was transformed, being rated as 'outstanding' by OFSTED in 2013, and with almost four out of five pupils attaining five GCSEs grade A to C. This achievement was recognised by the award of a Damehood in the 2013 New Year Honours List.

Since 2014, Dame Sally has been Director of Academies South for United Learning, a charitable organisation that operates schools in both the independent and public sector. She has also taken an active role in policy development, including chairing the Independent Review of Teachers' Standards in 2011. She published a book in 2015, reflecting upon her experiences, titled *Headstrong: 11 lessons of school leadership*.<sup>1</sup>

In September 2015, Secretary of State for Justice, Michael Gove announced a review of the provision of education in prisons.<sup>2</sup> Dame Sally was appointed to lead this. The review is to examine the 'scope, quality and effectiveness of current education provision...in particular...how provision supports learner progression and...successful rehabilitation'. It will consider domestic and international evidence and present options for future models of delivery. It is due to be completed by the end of March 2016.

*This interview took place in February 2016.*

**JB: Could you tell me about your background before you entered the teaching profession**

**SC:** I've been a teacher all my working life. I grew up in Maidstone in Kent. My father was a salesman and my Mum was a dinner lady. I went to a small independent, Catholic school. It was cheap and the education wasn't very good. When I was twelve my father died and after that we had no money, so my fees were paid by a charity.

I got a clutch of good O-levels but as my school didn't go beyond 16, I went to Maidstone Girl's Grammar. I sank as I went from a small school to an elite institution. I got a couple of A-levels and an S-level and went to teacher training college. I hadn't really wanted to be a teacher, I was doing it because I didn't get the grades to do law, which is what I thought I wanted to do. When I started teaching, I found that I loved it and I've never looked back.

I spent four years at teacher training college, completing a degree before my first job as an English teacher. This was in a huge girl's school in Peckham with 11 forms of entry. It is still a tricky area, but then it was an area where nobody had any control and I was thrown in at the deep end. Now you get mentored and get additional free time, but then, in the 1970s, I got thrown in with a full timetable and got the toughest class because I was the new girl on the block. It was quite a baptism of fire. I survived it and loved it. Even in difficult schools, you can create oases of excellence.

**JB: What was it you loved about teaching?**

**SC:** I loved the interaction. I was teaching A-level to 18 year olds when I was only 21 myself, so there wasn't much of a gap. As a teacher, when you close your door it's really special. You shut out the world and it's just you and the kids. There is a magic about interacting with thirty children or teenagers and being able to motivate them and make them love literature with as much passion as I have. I loved getting to know about them and their lives. At the time there was not much accountability in education, but seeing some people who came from a working class background go off to university was great. I remember some children that were so gifted and yet they left school at 16. I remember one boy in particular who went to work on the Tube because that is what his family always did. Some children you felt you lost, but others you gained, managed to keep them in education and change their lives. Seeing those children grow up and become adults, there's nothing like it. It's a huge transition in their lives. It can be very rewarding.

**JB: How did your career develop?**

**SC:** The school was big and then amalgamated with three other school, becoming bigger and mixed gender. By that time I had a lower management position like Deputy Head of English. I also had my first child when I was there. I wasn't ambitious, but I was frustrated by some of the incompetence above me. I moved school to become Head of English in a school in a similar type of area. I wasn't ambitious, but I was a good teacher and I've always been

1. Coates, S. (2015) *Headstrong: 11 lessons of school leadership* Woodbridge: John Catt Educational.

2. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-in-prison>

organised and competent, quick thinking, decisive, those qualities that made me want to take the lead.

The school I moved to, Sacred Heart in Camberwell, I stayed at for twenty years and eventually became the Headteacher. Staying in one place for so long, I loved that I taught children and then later their children. I had three more children so I took my career slowly. It can be difficult to keep your career ticking over when having so many children. I never stopped work, but took it slowly. I stayed Deputy Head there for a long time because much as it was a full-on job, you are never as accountable as the Headteacher and you can work hard in the day but then have more of a break in holidays. When my fourth child was about six, I became Headteacher. That was the right time as the older children were grown up.

That school became an 'outstanding' school under my leadership and the results went up. I was doing well, getting known. I stayed there for four years as Headteacher before moving to lead Burlington Danes, which I am best known for.

**JB: As a headteacher, how would you describe your approach? What was the culture you were trying to create? What was your leadership style?**

**SC:** I am direct and honest, I say it as it is. I've learnt that if you don't say things clearly to people then they don't get the message, so I'm clear. If I think someone is incompetent, then I will tell them, albeit nicely. I am a teambuilder, I bring people together and get the best out of them. I can be manipulative, for example I move people around if I think they are not doing a good job but could do better in a different role. In managing change, I recognise that people don't always like change and you have to be careful about how you do that. I plan what I am going to do and say, I have in mind the end result I want but I get people involved in getting to that same point.

In all of the schools I have managed I have tried to create a family culture. It is important that children love school. I'm not 'airy-fairy', there should be clear boundaries, people should know what the rules are and every detail matters. I am hardline about uniform, behaviour and manners. Children should line up in silence, everyone calls me 'Madam', they stand up when I come in the room. I am hardline about all of those ways that children should learn to show respect to their elders. These are old-fashioned traditional values I suppose. At the same time, I do believe in nurturing the individual and standing in other people's shoes. When a child arrives late and you yell at them and put them in detention, you should still be prepared, to understand their lives without allowing excuses. So, if they really have got themselves up and

missed breakfast, you might still put them in detention, but make sure the next day that they have a breakfast when they arrive in school. It is rigour with compassion.

With members of staff, if they have something going on in their life, I will happily grant extra time off. If you show goodwill, you get a lot back. I am rigorous of what I expect, I make people accountable, but I want them to love coming to work, I want them to want to work for me, but I understand that children come first, that is what it is all about.

**JB: In education you would have had to manage national changes including changes in the curriculum and resourcing. What do you see as an effective approach to managing change?**

**SC:** You have to be prepared not to do it. Sometimes you can't toe the line on absolutely everything. In education there have been so many changes that sometimes I have ignored them and done what I think is right. Most of the time, I haven't but sometimes I have. The curriculum has been continually changed and I have seen teachers sweating over yet another rewrite. I remember once with science, they rewrote it and I said look, let's stop and ignore this and do what we think is right, as long as in GCSE we are following the syllabus, I don't care what OFSTED say or anyone else will say, I won't have this any longer. Most good leaders do bend the rules and do what is right for

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their institution.

Managing change that you have to deliver, you have to make people feel supported. If they trust the leader they will sometimes go along with the change. You have to make it as easy as possible. Try not to make it threatening or be negative about it. If you are saying 'this stupid government they've done this', people automatically resent it. More often than not I will say this is what we have to do, this is how we are going to do it and I try to be positive. I will say it's going to be hard the next few months because we have to do this or that, but it will be better in the long run, I will give you time and support you. When you go into a failing school, as I did at Burlington Danes, it had had four Heads in four years, it was used to people saying they would do this and that, but nothing working. When I managed change in that school, I had to get people to believe and trust me that this time it was going to work. Sometimes you can only do that by the power of your oratory, and people buying into what you are saying and believing you. You have to be persuasive. You also have to be there and visibly support them rather than saying it and not really doing it.

**JB: How would you visibly support people?**

**SC:** By physically doing their job sometimes. Not being in my office, but being out in the school all of the time, looking into every classroom as much as I can, being a visible presence in the playground. At all the difficult times being there. Sometimes saying, look you go home, I will take your lessons today. Putting yourself in the front line rather than hiding away in an office, which some people do. Some people say they never see their Headteacher or they are too busy with paperwork, well paperwork can wait. Managing people is the key thing. Sometimes you have to go out to meetings, and meet people, but more often than not it was about being operational as well as being strategic. Being available to people, not difficult to see. Although it was difficult sometimes, I did have an open door policy, people could come in. I would try to see people as freely and quickly as I could.

**JB: Turning around an organisation like that often involves hard choices. Some people are capable of helping that change happen but others are not. How do you manage that, both people that will help you to realise the change and others that will not be part of it?**

**SC:** To be harsh, some people have to leave. In my first year at Burlington Danes, I moved 23 people on. I had discussions with them and they left. I wouldn't put anyone as a teacher if I wouldn't have my child in their class. That was always my rule of thumb. If I would be happy with my child in their class then they can stay. If I wouldn't then they have to go, or I have to improve them rapidly. Too many people put up with second rate because either person is a nice person, or it's difficult to say. There are all these reasons why it is difficult to have challenging conversations with people, such as is this the right school for you? Are you doing a good enough job? Explaining that you need to start doing X, Y or Z otherwise it is going to be a different sort of conversation. People often put off those conversations, but if you wouldn't have your child in that class, then no one else should have their child in that class. I will put up with performance that is not good enough for a short period of time, but it has to pick up very quickly. I expect a level of competence from teachers otherwise they have to leave my school. If you put the children first that is the way it is. You are not there just to pay people's mortgages and give them a nice little job to come into every day, it's about more than that.

I set out my stall very clearly. In Jim Collins's book *Good to great*,<sup>3</sup> he uses the metaphor of a bus. He says that sometimes people are sitting in the wrong seats or facing in the wrong direction and some people need to get

off the bus and some people need to get on. I use that metaphor when I take over a new institution. I say some of you may need to change seats, some of you may need to change direction, and some of you may need to get off. This institution is my bus and if you are not in the right seat or facing in the right direction, you will have to get off my bus.

**JB: You have recently undertaken a review of prison education. How did you come to take this on and what interested you in this?**

**SC:** To be honest, it wasn't something I was particularly interested in. I'd never really thought about prisons at all. I don't think many members of the public do. There was a pupil in my school, a 16 year old, who was put in Feltham on remand during year 11. He was a bright boy and I wanted to keep him in school. He was in care, had a bad background but he was able. I went to the bail hearing and spoke to the judge and asked him to be let out so that he could complete his GCSEs. The judge didn't accept that and I was dismayed about it. I couldn't understand why the judge made that decision. I visited the boy a few times at Feltham, which was during the time when you couldn't get books in. He couldn't get science revision books in, I had to send them and some didn't get to him. I felt frustrated. Then when it came to his GCSEs, the prison was in lockdown during his English exam, during maths there was

another reason he couldn't go, then a couple of others he was given the wrong paper. He ended up with nothing. Then in the end he wasn't even found guilty but was let out in June. I knew he was then going to go back to the streets. I felt that if he got his GCSEs, he would have gone on to college. As it was, he left with nothing and he was never going to do those GCSEs again. I don't know what happened to him in the end. I was really upset about it. I wrote to the Governor of Feltham but didn't get a reply. I happened to mention this to Michael Gove, who I know, and low and behold a couple of weeks later he asked me to lead this review.

**JB: How did you undertake this review? What process did you adopt?**

**SC:** As I can't do this full time, I asked for panel of experts, and they know a lot more about prisons than me. We've visited a lot of prisons, I have personally visited 12 or 13. The group all together have visited around 30. There comes a point where you're seeing the same thing, but we have tried to visit a range. We had a 'Call for Evidence', which produced hundreds of replies, all of which I have read. We have called witnesses to our panel. We have

3. Collins, J. (2001) *Good to great* London: Random House.



heard from experts in areas such as special educational needs, we've heard from all of the providers and we have had a Roundtable of Governors and another of stakeholders. I also went on an OFSTED inspection in a prison. Due to my lack of knowledge, I have tried to read and learn and talk to as many people as possible. We've also talked a lot to prisoners. At the prisons we've visited, we've talked to focus groups and more informally when visiting wings and in classes. I have tried to learn and gather as much information as possible and then identify the themes that come out.

**JB: The recent OFSTED annual report highlights the extent of the problem of education in prisons. The report says that prison governors are not prioritising education and as a result standards are declining with three quarters of inspections last year being rated as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'. What do you see as the role of the governor in achieving change?**

**SC:** The Governor, as leader, is essential to bringing about improvement. What I don't want to do is give Governor's more jobs as they already work extremely hard and have a lot on their plate. I want to shift the priorities so that education and rehabilitation becomes more central. I want Governors to have more accountability for this, but also more control over their own destiny. At the moment if I said you are responsible for the education outcomes then that would not be fair because you have no say over who provides it and the standards and quality expected. I want Governors to lead on this and focus on education not only in the classroom but in a broader sense including training for work, life skills, art and creativity. Education in its broadest sense should be more central but it is hard because it will take more resources, and with that level of accountability Governors will need more support.

I went into HMP Isis recently. It was a well run prison, but one of the things that struck me was how little remorse some of the men had. I spoke to one man who said, 'it is not fair, I have a business and I'm losing all my clients'. I said you shouldn't have got yourself into prison. I felt strongly, perhaps because they are young, that they have no sense of having done anything wrong. It was difficult to talk about rehabilitation because the first step is that they come to terms with what they have done and take responsibility for it, then look at how they can improve so that when they come out they don't do it again. At the moment I felt that they would go back to crime because they didn't accept what they had done was wrong.

**JB: Prisons have a challenging population — mental health problems, social disadvantage,**

**substance misuse, disrupted educational history, learning disability — does this constrain what can be achieved?**

**SC:** Those pupils in schools are difficult and their needs are not always met. It isn't ever going to be perfect. Prison is really too late because by the time they have got there they have missed so many opportunities along the way. All you can do is try to pick up the pieces and mend as many of the holes as you can. We can, however, do more than we are doing now.

**JB: Where will governors get the right advice and support regarding education? Heads of Learning and Skills has become a generalised role no longer requiring an education background and has been reduced in organisational seniority. Can this role still provide the expertise many governors require so they can be assured that the highest standards are being achieved and that learners are meaningfully progressing?**

**SC:** That is where Governors will need more resources and support. It is vital that the person who provides that support is an educationalist. I have been in many prisons where there person is from an administrative background without any educational background. There will be some early adopter 'reform' prisons, maybe we need to look at the structure and get an educationalist into that. If education is central to

I want to shift the priorities so that education and rehabilitation becomes more central.

what the prison is trying to do, then you need someone at a senior level who is leading on that priority. The prison inspectorate and OFSTED can also support this by making purposeful activity a limiting judgement on the prison. We are looking to change the focus of inspection so as to reinforce this priority.

**JB: Current curricula are constrained by OLASS funding rules. Is there a case for greater flexibility?**

**SC:** Absolutely. There has got to be greater flexibility, particularly where you have lifers and people on long sentences, you've got to be able to move beyond level one and two. There has got to be a case for being able to offer level three and access to degrees and even Open University degrees. There may be a case for relaxing the rule that student loans can only be given six years from release. I also hope there will be scope for more independent learning through the expansion of technology including in-cell technology. We have to relax to rules so that we can offer courses that are not just literacy and numeracy, business studies, but we can move into art and other areas that build self-esteem. For a Governor it is frustrating that prisoners keep doing level one and two. At Isis I met someone who had an English degree but was doing level two English because

that is the only way the providers can draw down the money.

**JB: Education and learning take place not only in the classroom but in prisoner workplaces and in other parts of the regime. How can this be formalised and developed?**

**SC:** The classroom has been somewhere that many prisoners have failed and they have bad memories of it. There is a place for it, but it is also important to embed learning within work areas so it can help prisoners get a job. More education on the wing such as reading groups can also promote learning. Accessing education can be difficult and getting it into workshops is what needs to be done.

**JB: There are many great teachers in prisons, but there is also sometimes a perception that teaching in prisons is outside of the mainstream. How can the best teachers be brought into prison teaching and those who work in prisons get recognition for their work?**

**SC:** Teaching in a prison never occurred to me. We would all probably know inside ourselves if we thought about it that education takes place in prisons, but it is never a career track that gets publicity. It is a hidden job. The first thing is to give it more of a career structure. In prisons there is little in the way of middle leadership so there isn't clear advancement. We need to publicise it and make it more attractive. There are lots of aspects that make it attractive, for example you don't take marking home. We have also tried to recruit 'teach first' teachers, who will go in as a secondment or a learning experience. We can market it, so it is more attractive. In particular, you are making a difference to some of the people who are most disadvantaged in society. If people have that sense of mission, then prison is a place where that can be achieved.

**JB: What kinds of partnerships should governors develop in order to improve education? Not only with contract providers but also with other potential sources of education for prisoners? For example, there has been positive reports on the Learning Together programme involving students from universities and within prisons undertaking joint courses.**

**SC:** That is excellent and has good results. We have heard many good things about Learning Together. With the local college, if they saw the prison as another part of their campus so there were more links including continuation after release then that would be a positive step. This can help prisons to be seen as part of the community.

**JB: Information technology is restricted in prisons and often seen as a potential source of risk**

**rather than an opportunity. How can this be developed further so as to enhance education? Is the security requirements of prison life always going to constrain and limit work in this area?**

**SC:** I have spoken to people who have been in the Prison Service for a long time and they say that this is the same argument that was made about telephones. Technology has many possibilities. There will be some people who will break the rules and manage to get through the firewalls put in place. We cannot, however, have a system that is built around the few people that might be able to circumvent the system. My recommendations include bringing Virtual Campus back to life. At HMP Belmarsh they can't use Virtual Campus as their broadband doesn't work. Isis and Thamesmead which are next door can use it. That's ridiculous. Every prison in the country needs to have it working and available. We will be moving towards better use of technology including in-cell technology. Where that exists there is no reason that there can't be access to an intranet including educational software. Eventually it might be possible for risk assessed prisoners to have access to facilities such as Skype in order to contact relatives. We have to bite the bullet and do it. More than anything else, technology can help to transform what happens in prison.

**JB: Prison education has the potential to change the lives of prisoners, the experience of staff and the institutional culture, but is often marginalised within the organisation. Can your review change this?**

**SC:** The Secretary of State and Prime Minister can change that. I have kept them in the loop of my emerging findings and what the review is going to say. I want to make sure that they will agree with what I recommend as there's no point if it is going to fall on deaf ears and nothing is going to happen. There are two big issues. First are the early 'reform' prisons with Governors having more autonomy over what happens including over budgets and education. The second is the inspection regime having teeth and people being accountable for what is found. Once you have that there is a change in behaviour. That is what happened in schools. There didn't used to be accountability in schools. In my first school there would have been about 3 per cent achieving grade A to C at GCSE if anyone had been counting. The minute league tables were brought in there was transparency, data was collected and accountability was clear. With Governors I know that there are problems with reoffending data because of prisoner mobility, but there are progress markers that you can put in place along that journey. The minute that comes back to the Governor, you will change things.