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**Special edition: Responding to
the coronavirus pandemic**

The charitable sector: Adapting for the future in the middle of a pandemic

Ian Merrill is the Chief Executive of Shannon Trust, the charity unlocking the power of reading across the prison estate. He's interviewed by William Payne who is a Trustee of the organisation and a member of the PSJ editorial board.

Shannon Trust was established in 1997, following correspondence between its founder Christopher Morgan and a life-sentenced prisoner, Tom Shannon. Through Tom's letters, Christopher learned about prison life and low levels of literacy amongst prisoners. Inspired to do something about this, Christopher published the letters in a book, *Invisible Crying Tree*, which generated the initial income to establish the charity. The first reading programme began in HMP Wandsworth prison in 2001.

Since then, Shannon Trust has worked closely with prisons to make the reading programme available to any prisoner who could benefit, as well as training thousands of peer mentors along the way. In 2015, they introduced 'Turning Pages', a manualised programme developed specifically for adults within the custodial estate. Written by literacy experts, Turning Pages was designed to be used by anybody who can read to teach someone who can't and is not reliant on specialist literacy or education knowledge. Turning Pages was evaluated by the University of Birmingham¹ in 2016 and found to be effective at teaching people to learn to read 'regardless of age, learning difficulties, gender or race'. Shannon Trust's work expanded and is now underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with HMPPS, sitting outside the more formal Prison Education Framework, but recognised as an important pre-cursor to further learning.

At the heart of the charity's work is peer mentoring, and with a small staff team, ably supported by many volunteers across England, Wales and Northern Ireland providing everything needed for someone in prison to learn to read. This includes recruiting, training and managing volunteers who in-turn train and support prisoner mentors and staff to grow the reading programme's reach in each prison. Resources, including Turning Pages manuals, reading books, and publicity material are provided free of charge to prisons. The programme typically involves a

mentor supporting a learner for 20 minutes a day, up to five days a week, with each year Shannon Trust supporting around 3,500 prisoners to read and training 1,500 mentors.

This interview took place in November 2020 and provided Ian the opportunity to reflect on the charity's response to the coronavirus crisis and how this will shape developments beyond the pandemic.

WP: What inspired you to join Shannon Trust and what has it been like joining an organisation during a pandemic?

IM: I'm delighted to have joined Shannon Trust, albeit in unusual circumstances — I'm yet to meet many of my new colleagues or partners in person — so virtual meeting platforms have been very useful in allowing me to do my new job. My background provides part of the answer to your question. I've worked in the charity sector since the mid-90's in roles in substance misuse services (where I worked in a number of prisons leading substance misuse teams), criminal justice, homelessness and mental health, working at various levels from volunteer to CEO. After various senior roles in national charities I became CEO of Tempo, where I led the development of a social currency used to increase volunteering and social action across England and Wales.

In joining an organisation like Shannon Trust I'm excited that I can bring together my passions — mentoring, volunteering, rehabilitation and community development — with what I hope I'm good at — seeing the bigger picture, building teams, growing organisations and forming partnerships with others wanting to do the same. So, it's great to be here, even if my start in the job has been a little strange.

WP: What is Shannon Trust's organisational aim, vision or statement of purpose in normal times?

IM: Our vision today remains true to that of our founder Christopher Morgan — *every prisoner a reader*.

1. Hopkins, T. and Kendall, A. (2017) *Turning Pages, Changing Lives: An Evaluation of the Shannon Trust Reading Programme* London: Shannon Trust.

In practice, that means giving every person in prison with low reading skills opportunities to learn to read with a Shannon Trust mentor. It means inspiring people, giving them confidence that they can become readers. It also means equipping our mentors, volunteers, and prison staff to help others unlock the power of reading and working in partnership with HMPPS, education providers, and other charities.

It's a vision rooted in knowing that being unable to read is a barrier to taking part in all the things that support rehabilitation, such as education and programmes to address offending behaviour. And it's a vision that's as relevant today as ever, with 50 per cent of people in prison having a literacy level of a primary school leaver, and of those, around 20 per cent having much lower reading skills². Many of the people we support are in a cycle of exclusion and social disadvantage. They're more likely to be drawn from the most marginalised and most impoverished communities, live in poor-quality housing, have significant health problems, have experienced abuse, lack qualifications, and be unemployed³.

Reading the testimonials and letters from learners and mentors, leaves me in no doubt, that learning to read makes a real difference. Whether that's by making life easier to manage on a day-to-day basis, keeping people connected with the families, breaking the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy, or giving people the chance to escape into a book, stoke their imagination, or take part in education, we know the benefits go beyond being able to recognise the written word.

However, there are still many prisoners who don't take up the chance to read with us so we talked to prison staff, volunteers, current learners and mentors, and people not involved with Shannon Trust. It was a deep-dive exploring both the personal and logistical barriers to learning, and how they could be addressed. Much of this year's planned work was around putting those solutions in place and the good news is we've been able to move some of these plans forward during 2020.

WP: So, what were your aims during the coronavirus emergency?

IM: Responding to the coronavirus meant adapting our focus and priorities for the year. As the

crisis unfolded, we suspended volunteer visits, and soon afterward, face-to-face learning sessions stopped. The team was clear from the outset that we need to find new ways to support learners, mentors, and volunteers through the crisis and making sure we were ready to return to prisons as soon as it was safe to do so. Accepting the effect that the situation was having on individuals and the prison service more widely was important — supporting those prison staff who could stay in touch but understanding most could not; and being flexible with volunteers. Alongside the operational impacts, the funding landscape was also changing rapidly. As many funders adjusted their priorities to support the front-line pandemic effort and

others delayed funding decisions or cancelled funding rounds, our income stream became less certain. Generating income is always a priority for us, given we receive no money from HMPPS, but need to raise £750k annually to deliver what we do. However, the time prison staff time give to help us (operational pressures permitting) remains important.

So we had several aims. Firstly, helping learners and other people in prison manage isolation and boredom, supporting people who couldn't replace a visit with a letter because they couldn't read. Secondly, keeping in contact with our team — volunteers, prison staff, learners, mentors, and funders; sharing our plans with them and involving them whenever possible. Our third aim was, not surprisingly, financial stability. With a changing funding landscape conducting a cost-reduction process, applying for coronavirus specific emergency funding, and using the furlough scheme selectively were all needed to sure-up our financial stability through and beyond the crisis.

Finally, knowing the situation would end at some point, preparing for our prison return has been a constant feature of our response. Continuing volunteer recruitment, developing guidance for running socially distanced learning sessions, and providing prisons with delivery options to re-start Shannon Trust activity in a way that best suited their circumstances have been vital. We've discovered new ways to train mentors and engage with our volunteers, which will continue beyond the crisis. We've also invested time developing a pilot project in the community to enhance the support

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² An assessment of the English and maths skills levels of prisoners in England, Creese, 2015

³ Literacy Changes Lives 2014: A new perspective on health, employment and crime. Joe Morrisoe, National Literacy Trust.

we give to people leaving prison. A key strategic priority, the pilot will assess the potential for providing continuity of learning and providing others caught up in the criminal justice system in the community with the chance to learn to read.

WP: How prepared were you for the coronavirus outbreak? Did you have contingency plans in place?

IM: As a volunteer-based organisation working in prisons, it's sensible for us to have contingency plans to cover when volunteers move on from Shannon Trust or when activity in a prison falters. These have been tried, tested, and refined over the years. But, were we prepared for a national lockdown, either in or outside of the prison gate? No, there was no comprehensive plan to manage around a pandemic, but we did have two crucial advantages. With most team members already home-based, technology was in place to help our remaining office-based team members switch to remote working seamlessly. We also had well-established communication channels with volunteers, funders, and people working and living in prison. Using these meant we could communicate swiftly, confident that the messages were being received and understood. And we were able to build use of these channels into our plans, satisfied that they worked. Organisational governance adapted quickly too, with Board, leadership team and volunteer forums all becoming virtual very quickly.

WP: When did you start to consider that this may be a significant issue for you? How did the team feel at that time?

IM: Moving into March, it was clear that the situation was not improving, attempts to curb the crisis hadn't worked and it was becoming clearer that the impact was going to be more far-reaching than we had anticipated. Our response moved quickly from awareness and caution, to suspending volunteer visits and working remotely in a very short space of time. We knew coronavirus would be hard for everyone but we knew it would be even more isolation for people who can't read. With around half of people in prison having difficulty reading, the team's focus was on making sure non-readers weren't left behind.

WP: What specific actions did you take to support learners and mentors?

IM: Besides communicating across our team, the initial focus was on helping people manage isolation

and boredom. That involved creating activity packs for people to use in-cell — and by basing the packs on Turning Pages manuals it meant they could be used by our learners to practice and maintain new reading skills and by others with low reading skills to get started. Providing additional Turning Pages reading books to increase the number and choice of material available was also an important development. Early feedback from learners and mentors about the packs gave us confidence that we were producing something that was needed and useful; we went on to create five sets of in-cell packs.

Recognising the worries that were caused by visits not taking place and the increasing reliance on letters from home, we partnered with our friends at Prisoners Advice and Care Trust (PACT) to create Writing Home. We all know letter-writing can be a struggle at the best of times and for people who are new to reading and

writing, it can be pretty difficult. Encouraging people to write to loved ones, the pack gives letter writing ideas and tips to help them stay connected with family and friends. There's also advice on how to support people with low literacy skills to give writing letters a try.

Keeping in touch with learners and mentors has been key to navigating the pandemic. We've talked to them via prison radio and our newsletters.

Already having regular spots on prison radio gave us a way of talking to the prison community directly. We've used these to provide updates and inspire people to get involved, and to learn to read or mentor when they're able to. We've also introduced a regular mentor newsletter and have featured in the national prisoner newspaper, Inside Times. Our message to learners who've had to stop learning continues to be: please hang in there, what you learned before will still be there when you start learning again, you won't have forgotten it. To our mentors our message has been: thank you for your dedication and your patience — you are our biggest advocates and your role is vital.

WP: What impact did the crisis have on how you work with your volunteers?

IM: Our volunteers have been amazing. At an uncertain time in many people's lives, they've adapted brilliantly and sensitively to the situation. They believe passionately in our work and so it wasn't surprising that their immediate concern was for learners, mentors, and their prison contacts.

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Keeping up contact with them has been vital; we've been talking to them individually to understand how the situation impacts them and give them space to share any concerns they may have about volunteering with us or returning to prisons. And to keep the teams connected, we've become enthusiastic users of video calls. We've also created a series of new training sessions, some to refresh existing skills, others to share new ideas, and we've welcomed new volunteers to the team, again finding new ways to train them.

As I joined a number of virtual volunteer meetings in my first few weeks in post, the enthusiasm and commitment of our volunteers shone through to me, listening to how they had adapted during the pandemic was inspiring and bodes well for the future of Shannon Trust.

WP: Was there any Shannon Trust delivery during lockdown

IM: Yes, a few prisons were able to adapt and run very limited learning sessions with existing mentors and learners however, numbers were small. To put this into some context, during March to October last year, 2,196 people had started to learn to read with Shannon Trust. In the same period this year, the number was 159. I'm pleased to say though now, even in a renewed national lockdown, activity started to grow and learning of some form got going in many prisons. There was also lots of great stories we became aware of, and a few favourites were;

At HMP Bristol, a new 'menu of options' had an immediate impact: it came to light that 30 men on one wing had chosen the same meal for two weeks. Shannon Trust mentors then approached them and opened the conversation with 'Why do you always eat the same thing?'. Staff at the prison say they've seen men opening books who would never have opened one before.

The menu of options also changed how the reading programme runs at HMP Lindholme: once limited to the library, mentors started working with learners on the wings. Mentors on each wing had all been given the training booklet or CD along with books and activity packs for their learners. They are also work closely with Education to pick up any other men that may benefit from the programme.'

At HMP Haverigg learners and mentors were able to work together in a safe way during lock-down. For one mentor and his learner, this led to a remarkable

achievement: 'My learner had found it really hard to progress beyond the first manual. However, since the start of lock-down we have finished the fourth manual. This learner will stick in my memory, mainly because being able to continue offering this life-changing opportunity to a fellow prisoner during the challenging conditions of a pandemic, has made it all that little bit more of a special gift.'

WP: How did you try to mitigate the impact of the restrictions? Did you develop any new processes or use new technology?

IM: Shannon Trust is a programme that depended on people meeting in person, whether that was our team meeting with prison staff; our volunteers meeting with mentors to train and support them; or mentors and learners meeting up to work through Turning Pages. With none of that being possible, we switched meetings to video calls and focused our initial response on helping people manage isolation and separation. As the situation developed, finding a mentor training solution that worked in the absence of volunteer visits and the creation of bubbles or cohorts, providing mentors with knowledge and skills to support learners was crucial. The answer was two-fold, creating an audio version of the training available on CD and Virtual Campus 2 (an on-line

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facility available in prisons) and providing the same information in the form of a self-study training guide. The response to these from prisons and mentors was fantastic; they embraced the new way of training, meaning Shannon Trust activity restarted with confident, properly trained mentors.

These innovations are ones I want Shannon Trust to do more of post-pandemic. Part of the barriers to learning I mentioned earlier had already highlighted that some weren't ready to work with mentors. We came into this year wanting to create new learning pathways, exploring how digital self-learning could help. The pandemic has accelerated that aspiration and the first a Turning Pages manual has been digitalised forming part of an in-cell laptop trial — I'm looking forward to finding out how translating Turning Pages manual into a digital format works in practice and how learners respond to it. Alongside that pilot, we're creating a video version of Turning Pages for in-cell, self-study use. As with the digital option, we're interested in how learner's find this and other options.

Whatever the outcome of these developments, I'm clear on one thing — our mentor-delivered approach will always remain an important part of our work.

WP: How did you move on from the initial response and start the process of recovery?

IM: As restrictions began to lift in prisons, our focus turned to getting people learning again. This meant taking a pragmatic, flexible approach to Shannon Trust delivery. On a practical level, we shared guidelines on running socially distance learning sessions with prisons. Knowing restrictions would ease gradually and on a prison-by-prison basis, we provided a menu of options to help each prison find the delivery solution that best suited their circumstances. An unexpected result of the menu of options was that it helped some prison teams take a fresh look at how to run the programme with long-standing challenges such as where learning session might take place, in busy, socially restricted prisons.

Related to this, I should say that we have also developed plans to pilot our work in the community. Everyone reading this article will be aware of the importance of continuity when someone is released from prison, and that applies as much to learning to read as with anything else that is important to resettlement and reducing re-offending. We also know that addressing low literacy can help to prevent custody in the first place and this is something we are adapting our approach to incorporate. We have recently secured funding to pilot some exciting community based work and I'm keen to see this grow in the future, working in partnership with others across the country.

WP: How did the pandemic impact your relationships with the prison service?

IM: I think the obvious impact, was that our prison contacts were extremely busy dealing with very unusual and challenging circumstances. In straight forward terms, this meant that if we needed to talk to HMPPS staff, then we needed to be very clear and concise — no one had time to waste. My sense now is that helped us hone our external communications and that we retain excellent relationships across the prison estate, based on reliable and productive ways of communicating. Long may that continue.

WP: Is there anything you have learned from this that you will shape how you operate in the future?

IM: Absolutely, there are some important lessons that come out of the pandemic, particularly for a relatively small organisation like Shannon Trust, one that seeks to have a large impact with thousands of people across so many prisons. Firstly, innovation is something that needs attention all the time, not just in the face of a pandemic, so I'm determined that we will build on the

creativity that responding to coronavirus brought to the fore, and continue to find new ways of working when that will help us have better impact. Secondly, that relationships are critical; I've already mentioned the importance of clear communication but beyond that, ensuring all our stakeholders are fully informed about what we do, and how we do it, is vital; Shannon Trust does what it says on the tin, if you like. And lastly, this is often said but is no less true because of that; our team is our best resource and best chance of success, so as the pandemic recedes I'm very keen that we build on the learning and development opportunities open to our staff, volunteers and mentors because if we want to do more and do it better in the future, our team will be at the heart of that.

WP: What are you most proud of in the response to the pandemic?

IM: I know from the team they're proud of how the new resources they created such as the activity packs and the mentor training CD, and they made a real difference. In some respects, both were a leap of faith for the team — although they had the expertise to create something brilliant, it was a nervous time for a group who's used to testing and piloting every development with learners and mentors. And we're immensely proud of our volunteers too who remained committed and embraced change. I'm proud to be given the privileged to lead such an organisation and am excited by what we can achieve together, pandemic or not.

WP: Do you have a message for people reading this interview?

IM: I do and primarily it is 'thank you' to those who were involved in re-starting Shannon Trust activity or who were able to keep it going during the pandemic. Because of your support there are people in prison today who are reading letters from loved ones, managing isolation and boredom better, and have more of an understanding what is happening in the outside world because they've learned to read with Shannon Trust. Your empathy, understanding and support helps people to overcome the embarrassment of asking for help and this makes a real difference. Please continue to support Shannon Trust to ensure every prisoner can become a reader; I'm certain that we can do much more to address low literacy amongst people in prison, by develop a range of ways of learners can engage with us. I'm also excited to explore how we can develop our peer mentor training and support.

Beyond that, together with the Shannon Trust team, I'm looking forward to working with all our HMPPS friends and partners, as the pandemic hopefully subsides in 2021, building on what we've already achieved together and helping more people make positive changes through what we do.