

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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*Focus on Disability*

# Interview: Rob Owen

*Rob Owen is Chief Executive of St Giles Trust. He is interviewed by Jamie Bennett who is Centre Manager of IRC Morton Hall.*

**Rob Owen has been Chief Executive of St Giles Trust for the last four years. He joined them after two decades as an investment banker, looking for a leadership role that would provide him with the opportunity to work with people at the margins of society.**

St Giles Trust was founded in 1962 as The Camberwell Samaritans. Initially their work focussed on those with mental health and social problems in the local community. Then, as now, much of their work was directed towards cases that fell outside the remit of the State or that crossed multiple departments, bridging the gaps between institutions and individual. In the 1980s, the focus of their work started to shift as homelessness increased and they started to work with housing issues. In the 1990s they established a housing casework service in HMP Wandsworth to help stem the heavy flow of local prison leavers who presented to them in the community. This work started to grow and now St Giles Trust focus more of their resources and energy towards helping offenders resettle and change their lives.

St. Giles trust describe their mission as breaking the cycle of offending and their vision as creating safer communities by turning lives around and preventing the children of offenders becoming the next generation involved in the criminal justice system. Their services are based on what they describe as four key needs which, if they go unmet, greatly increase the chances of someone getting into or getting stuck in a cycle of offending. These key needs are a safe place to live, something to work for, positive relationships and support from someone who's been there.

In 2009-10, they spent £5.25 million delivering services to some 16,000 clients. They have been particularly noted for their peer advice work, which involves training prisoners or ex-offenders in order to provide intensive one-to-one advice, support and guidance to others. In 2009-10, they trained 318 people, over half of whom were in prison. They have also developed specific services to help released prisoners in the community including housing advice and the *Through the Gate* project, which provided holistic support to released prisoners. More recently, they have formed part of the consortium delivering the first pilot of the social impact bond at HMP Peterborough.

This interview took place in February 2011.

**JB: What is the purpose of the work of St Giles Trust?**

**RO:** We are in the business of breaking the cycle of offending. We have a unique way of doing that as we passionately believe in using reformed ex-offenders to deliver many of our front-line services. They are uniquely credible and uniquely persuasive with our client group and are very good at navigating the statutory systems because they are well trained by us. They go the extra mile and they become a role model with clients who have often disengaged with society.

**JB: Some charitable organisations focus on campaigning through lobbying or media, some focus on service delivery, some focus on grass roots empowerment. Where does St Giles Trust fit in there?**

**RO:** We are solely a service delivery agency. We want to be famous for helping offenders break their cycle of offending. I asked all my team recently what we want to be famous for as an organisation. The strongest feedback we got was that we want to be famous for our results. We want to engage with clients to create genuine behavioural change and help to address the inter-generational aspect of offending.

**JB: How are you funded?**

**RO:** We are 75 per cent statutory funded. We have 54 different statutory funding streams and they last on average 22 months. The other 25 per cent is from charitable trusts and corporate donations.

**JB: There has been an argument made by several commentators that the reliance of the charitable sector upon government funding has reduced their opportunities to develop an independent voice and has recreated them as a delivery arm of the state. How would you respond to that view?**

**RO:** I totally disagree. We are known as being a bit argumentative at times and a bit Bolshie — but I hope always in a constructive way. We have a view about what works and we are not shy about saying it. Statutory and Government agencies have to understand that there is a need for critical friends. Sometimes the insanity of the system needs pointing out. An organisation like St. Giles Trust should be proud of the fact that it is doing something that is not part of the mainstream but genuinely innovative, bold and gets results.

We are able to offer value when we come up with innovative services that are often pump primed by these charitable trusts and corporate investors. It is frustrating that when we have proved what works, it has not been pushed further into the mainstream. We need to fight tooth and nail to make sure they become part of the way things are done round here.

Our objectives are to give the best possible service to the 15,000 clients every year that we try to help. I don't have shareholders or any other group. All the resources I'm given go into trying to turn these lives around.

**JB: Your work highlights the inter-relationship between poverty, social exclusion and criminal justice. You clearly take on a role in dealing with the effects, but what do you see as your role in highlighting and addressing the fundamental issues of social inequality?**

**RO:** The issue I find most scary for society is the polarisation we are undergoing at the moment. Over the last couple of decades, the quality of life for most people has improved exponentially but there is a group that have been left behind and are falling further behind, not only in relative terms but also in absolute terms. The scary statistic for us is that the average prolific offender that we have in London has 4.3 children. These 4.3 kids are being born into a world with very few life chances. If we work with an offender and help them become better parents, then we are helping to break the inter-generational cycle. That is a great achievement to be able to help turn these people around now and impact on future generations.

**JB: Is there an argument for saying that whilst it is important to highlight those at the extremes of poverty, it is also important to examine those at the extremes of wealth? Is that an issue that you have a concern about?**

**RO:** We have some fantastic support from charitable trusts and some high-network individuals who have an understanding that there is a need to find pragmatic solutions to this polarisation. They are involved in some of the funding for our most innovative work. We are trying to crack that difficult nut.

**JB: Looking at the four key needs that the St. Giles Trust have identified, three of them are**

**widely promoted by the state and other organisations: a safe place to live, something to work for, and positive relationships. However, the fourth stands out and that is: support from someone who's been there. Why do you believe it is so important to have that kind of peer support?**

**RO:** That is the reason we get such persistently good results. The selection of these peer advisors is hugely important. It's not about academic rigours it is about their ability to be empathetic and strong-willed and give advice and guidance in a meaningful way. The training we then give them is to level 3 NVQ in advice and guidance. This enables them to understand and have specialisation in navigating the statutory systems that their clients have to face and that they may have faced in the past. Ultimately it is combining an intensive case management role with being a really positive role model. Clients often say that they have been promised things in the past but let down, what you get with someone who has been given a second chance is great loyalty and drive to not let their clients down.

One of the awards I am most proud of, and we have been given all sorts of awards, is that we were ranked 20th in our category of the Sunday Times 100 best companies in the UK to work for. That is because when you give someone a second chance and the equipment to do the job, they are dynamic and loyal. As an employer we have great success because we employ a lot of ex-offenders. They are uniquely driven to help these clients turn their lives around. It is a lesson to anyone who wants to give great service; give someone a chance to turn their lives around.

**JB: One commentator noted last year that although prisons place great emphasis on turning lives around and getting prisoners into employment, they won't employ ex-prisoners directly. From your view that doing so gives a more empathetic and effective service, there may be a lesson there for the Prison Service?**

**RO:** As well as the Prison Service, why not probation Service, local authorities or the NHS. Our advisors would be fantastic giving housing advice in local authorities for example. There is huge scope for someone who has turned their life around to work as

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an effective information officer or prison officer. One day I hope that will be an opportunity available to somebody who has demonstrated that although they have made mistakes, they have turned their life around and are able to help other people turn their lives around.

**JB: An example of how you have used this approach in prisons is your flag ship peer advice service. Can you describe this service?**

**RO:** This is our *Through the Gate* service, which has been built up from working in a couple of boroughs in London to 14 boroughs at its peak, helping 1500 high and medium risk offenders being released back into London. This was delivered in partnership with London Probation. They were having problems with high and medium risk offenders who had difficult lifestyles and had intensive needs for housing. Housing is our specialisation, so we were able to provide that service. It took all that was right about the charitable sector working with the statutory sector; it played to both of our strengths.

This project was evaluated by Pro Bono Economics, which is an organisation that was set up by economists in order to help charities evaluate their impact on the ground. We were fortunate to be selected as one of the first organisations to be evaluated. They were open with us and said that if we were destroying value then they would have to report that as aggressively as if we were creating value. This evaluation report was peer reviewed at the highest levels of Whitehall. It measured the outcomes for the 1500 offenders we worked with, using data from probation and the police. This showed that we were able to reduce recidivism by 40 per cent, which is a staggering amount. Financially, they also wanted to articulate the savings to society, including the reduction in the victims of crime. After much to-ing and fro-ing between ministries, they came up with a bomb proof narrative which showed that for every £1 invested in this programme, £10 was saved across all of the statutory services. That is a remarkable study that shows the real value created by the work of our peer advisors. It helped pave the way for an acceptance that if you support radically different ideas, it can generate radically better results.

**JB: As part of your peer advice work, you have opened a call centre at HMP Send, where peer advisors provide resettlement support to**

**women prisoners. How did the idea for this initiative come about and how was this put into place?**

**RO:** It came from an idea by one of our advisors. I love that we develop grassroots ideas. That is part of the DNA of St Giles Trust as so many of our advisors are ex-service users and able to provide insights into how our services should be run. We discovered a gap in the market. I approached the Charles Dunston Foundation in order to think about funding a call centre in a female prison as they are a foundation that specialises in telecommunications. We have always tried to find a win-win-win situation. Those people who operated the call centre would later be able to

find employment on release. The idea is that they do their training and become professional call centre workers, so they can then go on to find work in the future. We want to have phone lines going into every female prison so that we can offer every female prisoner practical advice and support from someone who understand the issues they are facing.

**JB: How was this introduced? There must have been hurdles to overcome regarding the security and public perception risks.**

**RO:** It was unbelievably painstaking. It was probably one of the most painful and hard fought battles I've ever experienced. Fortunately sanity shone through and we were able to overcome the hurdles that were placed in our way. At the top there was an understanding that this was being done for all of the right reasons. We managed to set up the call centre and we are now trying to roll it out into all the female prisons. We want all women prisoners to be able to get access to this groundbreaking advice and guidance helpline, so any prison governors interested in being connected please get in contact.

**JB: What was the process? Did you get senior level sponsorship?**

**RO:** Yes, we pitched this to the very top end of the Ministry of Justice and National Offender Management Service. We focussed on the fact that we give real skills to people while they are serving their sentences and these skills link to employment opportunities on the outside.

**JB: Is there potential for your work in developing innovations such as cell centres to become a vanguard, opening up opportunities**

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**that commercial companies can later exploit. What is your view of this?**

**RO:** I don't think that over the next few years there will be huge call centres opened up in every prison across the UK, delivering Barclays Bank or BT services. What we are trying to achieve is ensure that the money spent leads to meaningful work that helps people find a job on release. The call centre idea is spot on in giving people the right skills and experience to get meaningful work on release. Our advice and guidance work is all to level 3 as we know that is the minimum level that any employer needs to give someone a job.

**JB: It isn't a fanciful idea that there might be commercial exploitation of these opportunities, after all, there are call centres in US prisons and a prison in India has recently opened its first call centre. Internationally there are examples of this happening. Whilst the first example in the UK is for a charitable purpose, is potential for that to develop later?**

**RO:** It's about trying to give people the right skills when they are in prison in order to get them into meaningful work in prison and on release. The more that can be done in prisons to achieve that is a good thing. The applications for a call centre in UK prisons can be taken as far as you like. A corporate organisation training people in prisons to take them on as call centre handlers upon release could be an interesting concept.

**JB: The Government have talked extensively about what they describe as the 'Big Society'. What is your understanding of this concept and what do you see as your role in realising this?**

**RO:** I have views on what I would like the Big Society to mean. I would like it to mean a genuine and simple idea of intelligent partnership where it is recognised that each sector has its strengths. The Big Society should be about enabling each sector to work to those strengths and working together to create solutions for those that are at the extremes of society. For us working with some of the more chaotic offenders, we can work in tandem with statutory services, as we did with London Probation. Our specialisation was working with clients they were struggling with, particularly around issues of accommodation. We were able to put together the pieces of the puzzle, particularly where statutory

services were less able to engage with them. Some offenders have disengaged from statutory services, if there are any there, but our peer advisors are uniquely able to talk to them and gain their trust. That is what gives us the ability to get £10 of value for every £1 spent.

**JB: You are part of a consortium delivering services to prisoners released from HMP Peterborough using the new approach known as social impact bonds or payment by results. Can you describe how this contract will work and how it is being funded?**

**RO:** The social impact bond, developed by Social Finance, has taken even longer than our call centre to come to market, but we need to understand the enormity of this. It is the first of its kind in the world. It is a way of trying to pump prime money into services that will prevent offending. That is a revolution in itself. I am very proud that we are part of that. Social Finance deserves great credit for their tenacity in making this new model come to life. We were selected to deliver this work on the back of our Through the Gate work and our track record.

Payment by results and social impact bonds are slightly different models. It depends on who is taking the risk. With social impact bonds, the people taking the risk are the investors. The investors in this first social impact bond are predominantly charitable trusts using their capital base, or high net worth

individuals. They want to be part of something that creates social value as well as giving a return on their investment. It is a pioneering new asset class of investment that even Barack Obama is now championing in the US. The risk sits squarely with them. The payment by results model is simply that a supplier of services to the state takes on a huge financial risk. It's a slight difference in models.

Social impact bonds are a good idea because they create a win-win-win situation for anyone involved. For the clients it is a win situation because the clients are all serving under 12 months and they are the more chaotic end, with a high prevalence of repeat offending but with little support. For the first time, they are getting creditable, uniquely engaging and persuasive case management, a St Giles peer advisor working with them and helping to meet their needs, so they have a fighting chance of not going back to

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prison and breaking that ingrained cycle of offending. For us as an organisation, we are funded by Social Finance to deliver this work, along with the Ormiston Trust and YMCA. We have an intelligent partnership with Social Finance, utilising our core strengths to deliver the work that we are really good at. Society wins because by investing in this work you can create a greater saving when looked at across the range. I am most proud that our work will reduce the victims of crime and at the same time save the hard pressed tax payer millions of pounds. This approach works to everyone's strengths, we work with statutory providers and we are the glue that makes sure that the clients get the best out of the services that are available to them and helps them if they wobble and are at risk of going back to reoffend. This is a new way of doing it and can be really effective.

**JB: What services will you be providing in order to reduce reoffending amongst your client group?**

**RO:** Before release we will be assessing them and identifying the issues they need to confront and find practical solutions so that on address we can address the issues that are contributing towards their offending. The classics are around accommodation, family mediation, routes into sustainable employment, drug issues and so on. We will have someone there who will force the client to address the underlying issues and be the glue to help them navigate across the services. For example making sure that they can get to the benefits office, so they are not getting into offending because they haven't sorted that out, or getting them to the help they are entitled to with housing as we know stable accommodation is the foundation for reintegration into society. Once we have that, we can start dealing with the individual issues, so we can reduce the frequency of their offending and eventually stop. We also want to reduce the severity of offending.

**JB: How will your success and therefore payment be measured?**

**RO:** It is a complex model using statutory measures over a five year programme. We will compare with a predictive rate on an annual scale and there is a tiered payment scale for investors. As a provider we are not taking on a lot of the risk and we will not get a lot of the rewards. It is a complex measure that looks at the frequency of conviction, but not the severity. What they are doing is finding a way that measures reductions in offending and the only

way we can do that is to use conviction data. We have to be pragmatic about that.

**JB: It has been announced that there will be a further six pilot projects. Do you believe that there is sufficient market for social impact bonds in order to provide services beyond the pilots and potentially in 140 prisons?**

**RO:** We are at the tip of the iceberg in terms of the application of social impact bonds. This is a new asset class of investment and there is easily a capacity to create £50 or £60 million of bonds across a broad spectrum. Why shouldn't an insurance company be investing their capital in a social impact bond rather than treasury markets, as they are a natural investor in such projects? Why shouldn't a local authority that has a problem with 150 prolific offenders be pump priming a social impact bond to address the underlying problems of a small but significant number of people in their community? It is the start of potentially funding and pump priming preventative work.

**JB: What is your view on this commercialisation of the criminal justice field? How do you feel about your client group, socially excluded people, becoming a profitable commodity?**

**RO:** Crime is a hugely expensive problem in the UK and the rates of reoffending are very high, and there are all those ruined lives. What I would want to see is for the state to be a better allocator of its limited resources to deliver excellence and deliver something that makes a meaningful difference to the people they serve. It is frustrating that there are services out there that tick boxes and cost money but do not stop people from offending or reoffending. We know if we want to get someone housed we know we will have to take them down to the homeless unit and advocate on their behalf for the four or five hours necessary rather than giving them a piece of paper that says 'go to the homeless persons unit', which wastes the homeless persons unit's time because they may not be relevant to be housed and it increases the frustrations of the client which may make them more likely to re-offend, and you still have to pay that person who hands out the piece of paper. When you have someone who is motivated, understands the statutory silos and wants to get that result, then that is a good use of tax payer's money.

**JB: So you would be more concerned about the quality of the service rather than who profits?**

I am most proud that our work will reduce the victims of crime and at the same time save the hard pressed tax payer millions of pounds.

**RO:** Yes. I don't think there will be a lot of profit. If you were a hugely profit-orientated organisation, this isn't going to be a gold mine. We need to address the issue of directing the resources to the person who is best at doing it for that client. There is also the reverse cherry-picking nature of the work we do, in other words working with those who are most complex and most risk to society. We need to do what is best at supporting those who are world-class at focussing on those 16,000 who are the hard core, prolific offenders in the UK, who cost billions and pose the greatest danger. If there is a system that can be developed that rewards organisations like St Giles Trust who deliver excellence at turning people's lives around, then that is what we need.

**JB: What do you see for St Giles Trust in the future?**

**RO:** The secret of our success is using ex-offenders and I want to see that not as something that is peripheral, but something that is part of the mainstream of bringing down reoffending. I would love to see St Giles Trust seen as revolutionary in doing things radically differently and leading to radically different results. What I would love to see in the future is that every released offender is met at the gate by someone who is well trained, highly motivated, effectively managed as that will give them a fighting chance to stop their offending and for their children it will break the inter-generational cycle of offending.



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