

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

July 2011 No 196

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January 2011 No 193



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

Special Edition

Voices from the front line

Interview: Instructional Officer

Derek Shorthouse is an instructional officer at HMP Long Lartin and is interviewed by Martin Kettle who is a senior operational manager currently seconded to HM Inspectorate of Prisons.

Derek Shorthouse has been an instructional officer at HMP Long Lartin since 1989. Before that he served an engineering apprenticeship and worked in that industry for six years. He initiated the woodworking workshop at Long Lartin, which now makes garden furniture. Prisoners working in the shop achieve National Open College Network qualifications, and many of the products are sold, while arrangements are currently being made for Barnardo's to take offcuts from the workshop to sell in their own outlets.

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?

DS: Over the period of time I have been working here, there have been a larger amount of people coming in with a range of different abilities. Back in 1989 a lot of people were qualified, whereas now people are coming in with very little in the way of qualifications. So in the area where I work, in woodwork and the like, we are given that opportunity to develop their skills. But the population has had an impact on the regime, in terms of the numbers you're controlling. The workshop ratios have increased; there are more lads coming into the workshops than a few years ago.

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

DS: Occasionally, yes. But by the same token, we are finding that people who come from very good backgrounds have not got the level of ability, the level of education you might expect — not switched on, for want of a better phrase. We do try to encourage each person, but then again, you do have that 'broken society', where you can see that the support mechanisms have not been there — issues of family and background that have had an impact on their very survival plan, as it were. So their response has been to do other things, rather than get involved with trying to better themselves.

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

DS: Yes, with the type of courses that are made available; for example in the workshop areas, there are posters up about where they can go to try and address

the issues around their offending. We do it on a voluntary basis, when they feel ready to address the problems that they've had outside. But we can also be proactive in offering it to them. Because we're on the civilian side, they tend to open up a little. So they tell us a few issues, and we can then discuss with the various areas — maybe CARATs¹. Or we can just pass on information about what the concern may be — we may have found that they're just not settling, or they're not thinking — sometimes you find the tell-tale signs of drowsiness or whatever that just indicate there is a problem somewhere.

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

DS: I'd have mixed emotions about that, because I've actually experienced seeing people that have shown good signs of progress, and I've also seen the other side where it doesn't do anything, they're still in that same mode irrespective of who talks to them. It can be a bit of both. But by and large, I'd say the majority of those I've come across have shown improvement — not necessarily a fantastic improvement, but a real one. I think that is down to good teamwork. From the workshops, that is about prisoners speaking to the staff and then passing that information through to the various areas — you need that communication, and the connection with the prisoner as well.

When I started back in 1989, we didn't get involved in this sort of thing, whereas now we're getting more involved with the prisoners' well-being.

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?

DS: There's quite an odd balance here really. The only way to explain it is — they've got their own minds, and sometimes you can give them that advice to go straight, but at the end of the day it's their mindset. We're trying to rearrange it to suit ourselves, but in reality 70-75 per cent of their input is from themselves — we are the ones who are trying to grab an extra few percent off them, to try to direct them. We can help, we can support, we can do everything we can, but the majority is going to be within themselves.

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

I have spoken to some of the prisoners who have been on some of the offending behaviour programmes. You'll get a percentage who will say 'We'll give them the answers they want'. Others will say 'I realise what I did wrong. I should have done *that*.' Then it starts to take effect. I do happen to see occasionally prisoners that have come in perhaps two years ago, quite aggressive, and they have now calmed down, and they're actually saying 'I've got to remember to behave here, otherwise I won't get *that* later'. It's a matter of time.

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

DS: There are some basic practical skills we can give people. We could teach them how to repair washing machines and cookers. We can give them the belief that yes, we can do these trades. We should also focus on things that we do at home, just domestic chores like being able to clean out a cooker, learning how to put these things together and not be reliant on other people. It's confidence as much as anything. A lot of people haven't learnt that practical ability. Some of it is not that they can't do it; it is that they don't believe they can do it. We can give them that encouragement and the opportunity to learn those trades.

Work can also get people into a way of thinking. Outside we get up, we go to work at a certain time and come back. That is how they need to think rather than a couple of hours here and a couple of hours there. It's the discipline side. That is that they are there from morning to the end of the day and don't go anywhere in between. Getting into that discipline side is good.

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

DS: What you're looking at is the type of thing we're doing with the Barnardo's charity. The prisoners are doing something that's worthwhile, and it's going back to a charity organisation, they're actually putting back into the community. They're being paid to work, but not getting any bonus or the like for the extra they do, they do it for the love of doing it because it's going to a charity. That sort of thing has an effect on

a lot of people. To give you an example, I've got a prisoner at the moment who comes from a children's home and he's absolutely over the moon about producing work for Barnados and giving back to them. Maybe he's telling us that he wants to pay something back for what he didn't appreciate when he was younger. That's the way I'd be looking at it.

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

DS: There are a lot more opportunities for prisoners now than in years gone by. Under the IEP scheme², they're given a lot more now. Years ago it was a matter of 'No, you don't have that, you have this and this only'. Now there are options, the three different levels based on behaviour. It has become more discriminating, where before it was just 'you can or you can't', in simple terms. And prisoners understand more than they did in the past, about how things run.

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

DS: They have improved on the whole. In a workshop environment, because the staff are civilian there's more rapport, prisoners open up to staff, so you get information without giving them information. With officers that doesn't happen so easily, because of the barrier of

the uniform.

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

DS: Obviously things have changed, but basically what's happened is we have gone full circle a couple of times! It's gone from finding things easy to difficult to easy and so on. You can get down, and into a bit of a rut at times, and what perks you up is to find a challenge. I do the same with prisoners: if we can give them a little challenge, we see them change.

MK: What are the aspects of working in prison that people outside are least aware of?

DS: People don't know enough. I hear people saying that prisoners should have bread and water, and saying that it's like a holiday camp. They see the TV programmes, the series like *Bad Girls* and what not, and they believe that's how it runs. They are forgetting that these people are human, and we've got to treat them as humans. In general, prisoners are

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2. Incentives and earned privileges.

treated a lot better now than they were when I started; there is more respect in prison and on the whole prisoners treat staff with more respect.

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?

DS: The professional manner in which these people need to be managed and challenged needs a skilled organisation. It's not an everyday job that anybody could do. I've experienced people who have come for interviews, opened the gate, looked inside, and say: 'I can't come in. I don't like the sound of that gate shutting behind'. It's not as easy as people think. I think the public sector have got it under control. It would take a lot of effort to maintain that quality and it would be very difficult to step in and improve how things run.

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

DS: Morale has dropped. To a large extent this is due to outside factors like finances, pay cuts, budgets, and the unemployment outside. The job is more pressured, because the job has to be done correctly and the slightest mistake is not going to be missed. You are being watched, more so than you ever were in the past, and that adds extra pressure.

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

DS: Budgets is one of the biggest, because you're restricting yourself on how much effort you can put in to making sure you get the maximum from those prisoners. An example is prisoner ratios, where workshops are employing higher numbers of prisoners. That does cause some problems as the risks go up and staff can feel more isolated. It's a difficult balance between efficiency, safety and quality.

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

DS: I would like to get the staff on the same side and keep them together. We should be a team. Whether you're management level, or civilian level, or a cleaner — all should be at the same level. You're all working at the same place with your own bit of input, and all should be valued equally. The same with prisoners; it goes back to the old saying of 'treat people as you would be treated'. With prisoners, you're not always going to get every prisoner who's going to treat us well, and vice versa, so it's getting a happy medium, but the main thing is to get everybody on the same side. In all these discussions it always comes back to communication; that we all need to keep communicating.