

# 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: Senior Officer in Training Services

*Caroline Stimson is a Senior Officer working in Training Services for the Prison Service. She is interviewed by Maggie Bolger who is a Senior Manager in Training Services.*

**Caroline Stimson is Senior Officer working within the North West and Midlands Regional Training Team. She joined the Prison Service in 2001 in the private sector and transferred to the public sector in 2002. Caroline joined HR Learning and Development in 2007 and teaches a range of Offender Management training courses to both Prison and Probation staff.**

**MB: 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?**

**CS:** More people are ending up in prison and this can't go on for ever. Something has to give. I know that the Government is recognising this and is trying to solve the problem. Over fifteen years we have gone from around 40,000 to over 80,000. That is astonishing. High population numbers effects offenders day to day living, and staff trying to deal with them. There are not enough staff to go around and it feels that we are more short of staff than ever. The more prisoners there are to each member of staff, then it becomes more difficult in terms of safety; if you haven't got the staffing numbers you need, you won't be able to look after, control or manage the offenders on each wing. Also, the more prisoners that we have with the same resources, I believe that they are not going to get what they need. They are not going to be able to get on courses or the interventions that they need. Staff are not able to spend the time that they need with them either. We only have a finite amount of resources, time and money.

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

**CS:** I think that the term 'broken society' is a bit extreme. I certainly don't think that we are there yet. The term 'broken society' gives the impression that there is no hope for society. I still have hope. Society has its problems and some areas are worse than others. I would also say that in years gone by, people had respect for each other, families and communities pulled together but that is slowly disappearing, some people are becoming accepting of crime, alcohol, drugs, unemployment and this is a real shame. I have real admiration for those people who refuse to accept the 'norm' and who strive to keep communities safe, decent, respectful places to live. Rather than focus purely on the areas of society which have their problems and fostering this idea of a 'broken society', the Government, and the media, should focus

more on the success stories. Give people hope and something to strive for.

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

**CS:** It is easy to become sceptical, working in prisons. Working with the people that we do and listening to their life stories, it's clear that many don't know of any other type of society or background, other than the one that they are from. This can be rife with crime and unemployment etc. With this in mind, you would think that perhaps prison staff would be more inclined to believe in a 'broken society', but I don't think that this is true. Many of the staff that I have worked with feel very strongly about helping offenders to change their lives. They haven't given up hope, so why should the rest of society? Personally speaking, this gives me an incentive to work even harder to try and help offenders get back on track and turn their lives around. Staff working in prisons offer a wealth of experience and expertise to help offenders with the whole range of problems that they may face. If staff are given the time, training and most importantly money, then we are able to make a real difference in terms of helping offenders address their offending behaviour, offer them help and advice with problems that they face, help to teach them new skills and offer encouragement and support. For many offenders, prison presents an opportunity to turn their lives around. I have seen some real success stories in the past and that is what keeps staff going each day.

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

**CS:** Although I do feel that prisons are the ideal place to help with social problems, this can only happen if staff are given the resources with which to work their magic. Unfortunately, in the face of cuts to prison budgets, what interventions, services and help we can offer to offenders will be significantly reduced.

**MB: 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?**

**CS:** I'm not so sure about the term 'revolution', but we certainly need to do something about the rate of re-offending as a matter of urgency and find a solution that works. Charities and local people have worked with prisoners for many years with varying degrees of success. I believe that the good will is there and that this resource should be utilised wherever possible, but you can't rely on

good will alone. To make things work, to move forward with this plan of reducing re-offending we need to make sure that the people working with offenders are well informed, well trained and most importantly are financially well backed. Without a financial commitment things are done on half measures, without commitment and consistency, and this leads to failure as both key workers and offenders become disillusioned in the work that is being done.

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

**CS:** The work that we already do within prisons is of great benefit to offenders. However, there is more that we could offer. In terms of work, it is important to give offenders the opportunity to learn a trade or skill that they can put to use when returning to the community. So many offenders don't feel that they could get a job on release even if they wanted to and I am sure that this is made even more difficult in the current climate. I believe that offenders should understand that they need to contribute in to society and I feel that this could start in prison. I would support offenders paying some of their wages back in to the prison, as they would outside. This might help prisons to keep workplaces running and would help prepare offenders for a more realistic situation on release. In some prisons, many offenders 'outwork' during the day. Wherever possible this should be encouraged, helping offenders reintegrate back in to society, but with a similar form of contribution, either to the prison, victims or charities should be put in to place.

In terms of training, this is another critical area. It is vital that we provide offenders with the appropriate training to help rehabilitate and reduce the risk of serious harm. More specialist training and interventions need to be offered, in particular in areas such as alcohol, domestic violence and female sex offenders where there are a shortage of interventions provided at the moment. Although offering work opportunities for offenders is greatly needed, a greater emphasis should be placed on rehabilitation and reducing risk of serious harm first.

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

**CS:** Yes, I would. Nothing in life comes for free, everything has to be earned, be that money, security, respect or even forgiveness. This is a message that needs to be clear to offenders. This message isn't in an easy one to deliver, offenders need to understand the true meaning of

this message rather than going through the motions. Understanding that being part of a society or community means restricting their behaviour, being law abiding, and most of all making a contribution, putting something back in to the society that they live in. This could be a financial contribution, but other forms of contribution are also needed to help offenders realise that they can become a member of society. Unpaid work, is a great starting point and at least allows offenders the opportunities to get out in to society and pay something back, very often they can also develop skills that they need to help them secure paid work in the future. Restorative justice needs to be carefully managed and I have heard of many success stories. Very often offenders don't see or understand the effect that they have had on their victim and a greater appreciation of the long term damage that their offending can have on people's lives and families can help the offender as part of their rehabilitation process and can on occasions help the victims come to terms with what has happened to them

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

**CS:** From what I can see, we seem to be going round full circle. When I joined the service 10 years ago, the emphasis was on prisoner time out of cell, ensuring that they were engaging in purposeful activities. Staff were encouraged to spend time with prisoners, working with them, getting to know them. This is all changing, now we seem to be locking the prisoners up for

longer and not being afforded the time to work with the prisoners. The range of activities offered to them is also being reduced. This has to be attributed to cuts in funding again, Governors' budgets are being squeezed so tightly, things have to give.

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

**CS:** This is probably one of the biggest changes that I have seen in my time working for the Prison Service. When I joined the service we were encouraged to work with offenders to talk to them and get to know them, this is changing so quickly now and one of the main concerns that I hear when speaking to prison and probation staff is the lack of time that they now have to work with offenders. Positive working relationships between staff and prisoners is a really important part of daily life in a prison for a number of reasons. The most important reason is dynamic security, staff used to know their prisoners and spoke to them on a regular basis. This meant that staff knew what was happening in the prison, what the problems were and

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could try to do something about them. These relationships keep a prison safe and therefore go a long way to ensuring safe environments for staff to work in and prisoners to live in. Most prisoners want to work with staff, they don't want to live in a chaotic, violent, unstable place and both parties knew that by working together we were able to keep everyone safer. These days staff are under pressure to do more work in less time and the consequence of this, means that staff-prisoner relationships are suffering.

Staff-prisoner relationships also allow staff the time to work with offenders, to lead by example. Much of the positive work done with offenders is on the landings day to day. Prisoners are treated with respect and decency and they learn that these are earned by treating others in the same way. Once again, these are messages that are lost when staff are too busy.

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

**CS:** The biggest change has been what is now expected of the prison officer in their day to day role. As I have already mentioned, staff are expected to do more in less time. This particularly has an impact on the amount of interaction on the landings. There has also been an effect from the loss of the Principal Officer role and staff leaving due to the Early Departure Scheme. Staff that I speak to tell me that they are expected to spend more time office based, in front of computers or filling out paper work, rather than interacting with prisoners. Staff also tell me that they feel their job role has become diluted, their work is now more about meeting and achieving targets, rather than interacting with prisoners.

Staff have also told me that there is reduced team work as group working has reduced. In the past wings or departments have had a core group of staff dedicated to that area. This allowed staff to get to know their offenders and there was a sense of consistency and stability. Now staff can be detailed to work in all areas of the prison and this means that staff and prisoners work and live in an unsettled environment. This reduces the sense of ownership of their work and work area. There is also a sense of uncertainty that comes from privatisation, cost cuts, increased competition and threats to pensions. Even when I joined the Service I saw this job as a job for life and most importantly a career. I was proud to be a Prison Officer and felt a sense of certainty about my future. Now, I, along with many other staff work with uncertainty, this obviously effects staff morale and our working life.

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

**CS:** Strangely enough, the public and the media don't often get to hear about the successes, the end result of a lot of hard work and commitment by both the offender and the staff. I suppose that it is because these stories don't sell papers, make good viewing on the TV or win elections. If we did focus more on successes then society would change their perception of what they consider to be normal.

**MB: 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?**

**CS:** As a public sector prison officer my immediate reaction is that I am not in favour of the private sector running our prisons, certainly not in the majority. However, I have tried to think about this rationally. The introduction of private prisons has certainly required the public sector to 'up it's game' as it has introduced an element of competition. If this makes our public sector prisons rethink the way that they operate and implement more efficient and effective measures then this can only be a good thing. I am not for doing things a certain way, just because they have always been done that way. However, I don't believe in making money from the business of keeping offenders in custody and if making a profit is the overbearing objective, then the focus is less on the rehabilitation of offenders; it's more about how they can do a 'good enough' job for the least money

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

**CS:** The increasing prison population for all of the reasons that we have already discussed, the reduction in budgets, the reduction in suitable and yet critical interventions available to offenders, the increasing uncertainty surrounding staff's careers and futures. The list is endless and I am sure that I have missed many other issues that affect staff and prisoners every day.

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

**CS:** The media and public perception are our biggest obstacles to prison reform. The public want to see us deliver a hard line on offenders and this is encouraged by the media. The public understand less that it is about rehabilitation and working with offenders to challenge their beliefs and change their behaviours, it's not about locking offenders up 24 hours a day.

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

**CS:** I have given this a lot of thought and I am just not able to come up with one thing above anything else that would improve effectiveness. Better communication amongst managers and staff, between agencies and departments is essential to improve effective practice, including less duplication of processes which can appear unnecessary and most of all are very time consuming. Time to allow staff to do their jobs to the best of their ability is also important along with support from management. Less uncertainty about the future of our jobs and the Prison Service as a whole will let staff get back to focusing on what is important, their work and engaging and working alongside prisoners to provide a safe, stable and decent environment.