

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

July 2011 No 196

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

January 2011 No 193



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

Special Edition

Voices from the front line

Interview: Worker for a large charitable organisation

Kelly Ewers is European Social Fund Project Manager at Nacro. She is interviewed by Michael Fiddler lecturer in Criminology at the University of Greenwich.

Kelly Ewers was recruited into the position of European Social Fund (ESF) project manager at crime reduction charity, Nacro, in March 2010. Prior to that she had worked for Welfare to Work Organisation and a charity called Women in Prison. In the latter position, she began as a volunteer before moving up to a front-line worker role and then became a specialist projects manager.

Her current role finds her overseeing ESF funded projects with particular reference to young offenders. She manages a team of resettlement brokers working in Young Offenders Institutions across the South region. She also has an employer engagement remit allied with collaborating on a pilot project commissioned by the London Mayor's Office. This involves encouraging employers to provide paid employment and work placement opportunities for Nacro's clients.

MF: 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?

KE: My experience of prisons, over the last few years, echoes a lot of what was said in the Green Paper. For me, the biggest thing is that the current system clearly does not work. Re-offending rates have been stuck between 49 per cent and 60 per cent over the last decade. That is a clear indication that the system is not providing rehabilitation and is not giving people the opportunity to move out of the cycle of crime. So, it is very apparent it is a flawed system. Increasing numbers of people in prison will inevitably mean greater levels of social exclusion and we're creating an on-going cycle that left without action we're not going to be able to break.

We need to move away from this debate around whether or not 'prison works'. Instead, the Green Paper is a really good opportunity for the Government to look at how we can turn this around and make the required changes.

At the moment we don't have a rehabilitation strategy that includes a really co-ordinated approach to resettlement. There are pockets of things that work really well. So, in some prisons, you'll have a really good housing department that is very effective at providing housing on release. In others, you may not. Or you might

have an effective housing department, but you might not have an effective Job Centre Plus. So, someone might be put in housing, but there's no support to get them on the right benefits and then that has a knock-on effect as they can then lose their housing through rent arrears as the correct housing benefit has not been arranged. What I would really like to see, to make resettlement more effective, is a rehabilitation strategy that joins up all of those services and is much more holistic. A strategy that looks at prisoners as individuals and looks at the journey that they need to go through to get the right resettlement for their needs as opposed to fire-fighting certain issues.

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

KE: The fact that really hit me when I looked at this question was this whole thing about 'different world'. For me, prisoners don't live in a different world. To describe where they come from as a different world, I have a real issue with that. I think sometimes people use that as an escape from really looking at the issues affecting those people. It's almost like 'Othering', it's not our problem so let's not worry about it. That's quite sad because we're in a society and we have a responsibility to those people. The big difference is that it's not that these people live in a different world, but they don't necessarily have access to the same choices as the rest of us. I just pulled up a few statistics¹ to show that some of the things that don't change and have never changed since I've worked in prisons: 67 per cent of male prisoners were unemployed before they went to prison; 49 per cent were excluded from schools; 72 per cent suffer two or more mental disorders. 66 per cent had drug use in the previous year before custody; and 52 per cent had no qualifications. That for me just demonstrates the sheer level of social exclusion these people experience. The main thing to remember is that prison doesn't make those problems go away. What inevitably happens is that prison exacerbates them and further compounds the social exclusion.

At the moment, what prison doesn't do is look at whether this person (for example) has got an issue with unemployment. If so what are we going to do? Are we going to upskill them? Are we going to build their

1. Prison Reform Trust (2010). Bromley Briefings: Prison factfile. Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/uploads/documents/FactFileJuly2010.pdf> (accessed 19th April 2011).

confidence? Are we going to give them a vocation? They don't do that. Instead we've got this kind of really archaic resolve just to lock a door and hope that gets rid of the problem. My experience is that it doesn't. It just makes it worse.

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

KE: Certainly all the experience I've had and all the research that's looked at the population of prisons shows that these problems are significantly over-represented across the estates. That's whether you go into the young people's estate, the male estate or the female estate. There are always more people with those issues than there are not. So, clearly, it can be used as a means to support these problems. I think the problem is, at the moment, it's not. It's just used as punishment. The whole point of prisons in this country was that they were supposed to be rehabilitative and if they're not, we have to question why they're there. If we must lock people up, if that's what we decide as a society that's what we need to do to, then we need to use it as an opportunity to address those problems. So, put in the right support package so they don't come back.

In addition, we also have to consider the impacts for future generations. It is estimated 160,000 children are affected by a parent going to prison every year.¹ Only 5 per cent of children whose mother goes to custody stays in their family home, and for 85 per cent of mothers custody was the first time they have ever been separated from their children from any significant amount of time. Yet we take no responsibility as a society to protect these children and more often than not they often receive little or no special support. It's estimated that out of 205 Local Authorities, 188 made no direct reference to children of offenders in their Local Children plan despite government directives to say they should. Yet we know that offenders who receive visits are 39 per cent less likely to re-offend, with an estimated saving of £15,071.00 per year for each offender². Yet services to link prisoners with their

families and children are inconsistent and patchy. This is a prime example of how we are recreating cycles of social exclusion, instead of putting the right interventions in place to protect vulnerable groups of our society and provide an opportunity for offenders to tackle the root causes of their offending behaviour.

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

KE: At the moment, all we can say is that it doesn't work. The Green Paper suggests that re-offending is at 50 per cent, but, depending on where you look, the number can be much higher. In the young people's estate, for example, it's 86 per cent. That's a lot. How do people re-offend so quickly within one year of leaving custody?

I'm just going to use the project that I manage, called *In Touch*, as an example, and it's aimed at 15 to 19 year old offenders. When we designed it, it looked at addressing some of these issues. We looked at research that highlighted that low confidence, self-esteem, family structures and negative educational experiences were really significant barriers in young people being able to access employment and education. Now that obviously has a massive impact on their lives. It limits the financial resources they have access to. It limits their opportunity for social mobility. So, because of that, the project that we put in place looks to try and stabilise all

If we must lock people up, if that's what we decide as a society that's what we need to do to, then I think we need to use it as an opportunity to address those problems. So, put in the right support package so they don't come back.

of those factors and provide resettlement support that links them to sustainable employment and education, while almost establishing a wall of support around their vulnerability. For me, that's a much more effective way of tackling the root cause of crime because we're looking at the social problems that lead to that person committing crime, rather than just saying 'you've done something bad, so let's just lock you up.'

Of course, it's a hard sell. It's not easy. It's not like we walk into the prisons and they're all biting our arms off for the service. It's difficult and there's not a lot of trust in statutory and voluntary sector services. A lot of people feel like they've heard it all before. In particular, with the young boys that we work for, it's difficult

1. See Glover, J. (2009) *Every Night You Cry: The Realities of Having a Parent in Prison*. Ilford: Barnado's.
2. de las Casas, L., Fradd, A., Heady, L., and Paterson, E.. *Measuring Together: Improving Prisoners' Family Ties; Piloting a Shared Measurement Approach*. London: New Philanthropy Capital.

because we have to invest a lot of time building the relationship, developing trust with them, ensuring that they understand that there is some consistency on our projects. We are dependable. We're not just going to be in one day and gone the next. They need to know that they can rely on us. It takes time to facilitate that relationship and I guess that you can see it through the work that we do. It takes time to actually get to a point where we know what their support needs are. I think the biggest thing to achieve is demonstrating consistency and being able to prove that you are trustworthy as a service.

MF: 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?

KE: The first thing we need to remember is that if we want to support prisoners to make a positive change beyond the punitive aspect of just locking them up. We have to invest in them as members of our society and provide effective resettlement programmes that provide them the opportunity to contribute to society in a meaningful way. Specifically, the things that I would really like to see are a reduction in short, ineffective sentences. Secondly, enhanced resettlement support for young offenders and early intervention projects. So getting them before they go into prison.

That's crucial in young offenders. Also, gender specific services across the estates that accommodate the different resettlement needs of male and female members. Female prisoners face extreme marginalisation by being part of a prison system that was designed by and for men. We need to ensure that resettlement programmes are tailored toward their gendered needs. I would also like to see more services that aim to link offenders with their families and children, fostering more stable family relationships.

There should be more funding for through the gate resettlement services so that services that go into prisons really support offenders in custody and then bring them through the gate and support them after that. We can track where they're going and provide support when they wobble a little bit.

Finally, a comprehensive rehabilitation strategy that addresses all of this and offers the chance for joined up communities that offer services across boroughs, across

geographic splits, but also across service users' needs so that they don't have to go to one place for benefits, another place for housing, another for education support etc. and relive their story all the time. Somewhere where we can join all that up.

I know this isn't necessarily about prisons, but I think it comes under 'rehabilitation revolution', but a reform of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act is really required, it has not been revised since 1974. It's completely out of date. It makes it very difficult for offenders to move on and get on with their lives. There must be a better way to manage risk than simply saying, you know, you have to disclose for 7 or 10 years. What aids that disclosure? What are people

managing risk against? A lot of the time it's just used as a way to discriminate against people.

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

KE: Resettlement support focussed on sustainable financial independence. What I mean by that is actually looking at the cognitive process of what it means to earn money. So, typically with a lot of offenders you get the response to 'why don't you do this job?' 'well, I can go out and make £2000 a day selling drugs, for example. Why do I need to do this job for £150 a week?' It's actually that process of asking 'what's the longevity of that career? How many old drug dealers do you see? Not many. How many years are you going to spend in prison?

How many hours do you need to work for that money?' Working out their per hour rate, a lot of them end up really shocked at the fact that they earn less than the minimum wage the vast majority of time. It's going through that process. It's almost like a cognitive change and acknowledging that you might get these weekends where you make loads of money, but in between there's a lot of scratching about and not really having much in-between. So that I think is really important.

Mentoring is a really effective means of providing support. We use mentoring here and it is volunteer mentoring. So the mentors don't get paid. That says a lot to the people that they're mentoring. Those people think 'why do you want to help me? You're not getting paid for it. I don't really understand'. It helps to demonstrate the importance of taking responsibility for your society and wanting to support other people. It's somebody that they can depend on, build a personal relationship with and can provide emotional support.

Female prisoners face extreme marginalisation by being part of a prison system that was designed by and for men. We need to ensure that resettlement programmes are tailored toward their gendered needs.

Finally, more vocational training that really links people in prison to the labour market, financial stability and independence is often the cornerstone to mitigating against the risks of re-offending.

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

KE: For me, I would rather see a focus on providing offenders with the opportunity to tackle the cause of their offending. Stopping or reducing reoffending would have a greater positive impact on communities and victims. You know, for a victim, meeting the person that attacked them isn't necessarily going to bring a sense of closure, but maybe they will feel reassured if they know that that attack is not going to happen again or it's far less likely that it's going to happen again. Reducing crime is a much better solution than simply saying that we need a load of orange boiler suits out doing some gardening. I don't really know what that would achieve. I am a fan of restorative justice, and I think that can work, but like I said, I would rather have an emphasis on resettlement support that stops the reoffending.

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

KE: It's quite sad actually because I don't think it's changed that much. I still think prison remains a hugely, hugely ineffective means of rehabilitation. We've got to get away from saying 'this type of prison doesn't work, so let's try a different type of prison' because clearly prison in itself is not working. I think the saddest thing for me is that even after all the massive reports that have come out — you know, this Green Paper is obviously very recent, but before that we had reports on sentencing, we had the Corston Report³, we've had the Bradley Report⁴ on mental health — what I still see when I walk around prisons is extreme desperation, extreme social exclusion and, without wanting to sound over-dramatic, people that are really institutionalised by offending and by our

I think there are some really, really positive prison staff that are trying their best to come in and offer effective resettlement programmes. Unfortunately, there is also this legacy of old-school workers that are trapped in this sort of punitive approach.

prison system. I find that really sad. So I hope that this Green Paper is an opportunity for the Government to overhaul this system, really be brave in the choices that they make and to test out a new rehabilitation strategy that really does look at how we're going to support these people to stop crime and look at the root causes of crime instead of repeating the same old mistakes.

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

KE: That's tough because I think historically the prison system has got a real legacy of recruiting from certain places — ex-police, ex-army — so it definitely had a regimented feel. Which is what some people would argue is what it needs. What that did cause for a long time was a massive divide between 'them and us' for the prisoners and the prison wardens. The Prison Service tried to do lots of things to change that. So they've tried to improve their diversity strategy. They tried to recruit from more BME communities. They've tried to increase the number of gay and lesbian prison staff. They've tried to look at the age ranges and try to bring in younger people, but I do still feel that unless you're in a London prison then the staff will not represent the clients in there. In Young Offenders, for example, black young men are hugely over-represented, you can see it as you walk around. Yet, as soon as you come out of London, you can really see a divide just in terms of cultures, where people come from. I think there are some

really, really positive prison staff that are trying their best to come in and offer effective resettlement programmes. Unfortunately, there is also this legacy of old-school workers that are trapped in this sort of punitive approach. So, for every really positive example of someone trying to support offenders, you've got a line of maybe 10 who are doing the opposite. I still don't think, prisoner and prison warden relationships have improved drastically, but I do think the Prison Service has at least attempted to increase diversity. The main thing for me is, I guess, lack of diversity when you come out of London prisons.

3. Corston, J. (2007) *A Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System*. London: Home Office.

4. Bradley, A. (2007) *A Review of People with Mental Health Problems or Learning Disabilities in the Criminal Justice System*. London: Department of Health.

MF: How has the experience of working in prison changed in recent years (37.51)?

KE: The big thing for me is that prisons have become a lot more risk averse, particularly around big publicity that's come out. So, in Holloway there was that Halloween party that hit all the press. There's been lots of media attention around arts-based projects. So, because of that, two things have happened. One, security procedures to get in prisons are a lot harder which limits the amount of ex-offenders that can work in custody. That's really a shame because a lot of the staff that I've got are ex-offenders and do an absolutely amazing job and are living proof to our client group that change is possible. I think the other thing is that it's affected the types of projects that are allowed to go into prisons. Art-based projects, for example. Now that's a real shame because I've seen some fantastic art-based projects — be it paint-by-numbers or drama — that really, really help to tackle some of these deep-rooted issues. There was an arts project that helped perpetrators of domestic violence and it explored anger management and how you deal with that. Now that is clearly an effective means of rehabilitation in getting people to be able to cope with their feelings, but because there is media pressure around 'offenders do art', they've stopped the courses. So, I think it has a negative impact on what we're doing and it's the same with the Holloway example and the Halloween party. That sort of

negative press attention makes prison governors really risk averse. Then the final issue with that is that they become so risk averse that they don't want to let people out on release on temporary licence. Now, when you're looking at resettlement, release on temporary licence is fantastic. For example, the women from Askham Grange working in a local hotel. You can get an offender out for the day, get them to go to a housing appointment, get them to go to the job centre or maybe go on an interview. That's a really great way of trying to slowly introduce them back into society, but, because there was so much negative press, that's kind of stopped and now it's very, very difficult to get a release on temporary licence.

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

KE: It is the vulnerability of offenders. Everybody sort of views offenders as these big monsters. They're the Fred Wests of the world and that's what people see

as an offender. I'm not saying that there aren't violent, psychologically dysfunctional people. Of course there are. There are people like that. So while I understand there is a place for prisons and we do need to keep people safe, I think what people don't see is the amount of people that go into prison for non-violent crimes and don't have viable alternatives. So, I think the big thing for me is vulnerability of offenders and how quickly people can be institutionalised by crime. Not institutionalised by prison, but by crime. It is very difficult to break the cycle once you've started going down that road. Lack of choices, lack of viable alternatives, lack of suitable housing, substance misuse management, employment — those things that the rest of us take for granted — it removes people's choice or limits their choices. I don't think the vast majority of people out there are aware of that and are aware of the sheer depth of social exclusion that you can see in prisons.

MF: 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?

KE: The benefits are — if they use specialist agencies, like Nacro, who have got a proven track record of providing high quality effective resettlement services — that you have an agency there that can provide

real support and that is reflective of the needs of the client group. We believe that, if we put the right tools in place, we can help an offender stop committing crime. So that's a very different standpoint to a statutory body that is going down a punishment road. So, whether it's Nacro or another voluntary sector organisation, organisations coming from that viewpoint and that are focused on providing support have a different emphasis.

We're commissioned to do projects, attract funds and our money goes back into our client base. I do feel there are a lot of benefits to having a mix between statutory and privately funded prisons.

MF: What do you think are the biggest problems in the prison system (48.51)?

KE: I wrote a long list! The thing for me is the emphasis on punishment versus rehabilitation. Every time we launch a new community payback scheme, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* goes wild with

We believe that, if we put the right tools in place, we can help an offender stop committing crime. So that's a very different standpoint to a statutory body that is going down a punishment road.

'Murderer Gets to Work in a Cinema' or something really ludicrous and they don't really unpick the story behind that. Ultimately, if we stop people committing crime, we've got safer societies and isn't that what we want rather than these big full prisons and people with no chance of ever changing?

A lack of resources reminds me a little bit of primary care trusts. Depending on where you live will depend on what medical services you get. So, it's a bit like a postcode lottery. Some prisons are really well resourced, really well managed. Others have nothing. I think there's a real disparity. Depending on where you go will depend what your likelihood is of coming out and reoffending. So some consistency would be good.

Also there are ineffective education departments. Yes, maths and English are great and we do need to have literacy and numeracy, but if we've got someone who never did that at school, why do we think they're going to do it now in prison? Look at alternatives, give them qualifications that they can actually use to go and work outside. There are really good examples of where that can be hugely positive. I know in Portland they do a bricks qualification attached to some sort of CORGI registry. Yes, they teach them maths, but they don't know that it's necessarily maths!

There is a lack of support for the families of offenders, particularly in the female estate. A woman can be miles away from her child. In the male estate that not every prison will have family visits. How do you maintain a relationship with your child? We know that children of offenders are more likely to end up in prison. So we need to make sure that his children are supported as well so that we're not creating another generation of offenders.

Having worked with children of offenders, they are at such risk and they have such issues. They feel guilt. They feel resentment. They feel anger and so there has to be a way for them to explore those feelings and support them through that. There are some really interesting projects out there for prisons and families. We have visits with specialised workers that support those discussions. That's really important.

72 per cent of male offenders suffer from two or more mental disorders⁵. Now for me, that's staggering. They're not always picked up or managed in the same way and what typically happens is that they'll be picked up in prison once it's got to a psychosis episode. So where's all the management before that?

Finally, as I keep saying throughout this whole thing, is that prison as it stands just does not address the root cause of crime. What are the real triggers of crime? Is it economic? Is it a social problem? Is it psychological? What is it? Let's try and put some support packages in place to stop it happening again.

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

KE: Negative media attention and the example I always give of this was the big media furore that came out when one of the papers reported that Travelodge was recruiting women from Askham Grange Prison. It was all over the papers. You know, 'Local Hotel Recruits 3 Murderers'. Travelodge got all these complaints about the fact that people were coming to stay in a hotel where there might be convicted criminals working. If we gave people the opportunity to work and build up savings for when they're released, they would be more independent on release. They would not be reliant on welfare and so they've got more of an opportunity to move on with their lives. So, for me, that was an innovative, pioneering project that should be championed and celebrated and it just got ripped to shreds in the papers.

Also, negative public perception towards rehabilitation programmes and community sentences — which are often described as soft options — is really damaging to trying to offer a system that rehabilitates and offers people the opportunity to change.

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

KE: The thing that I've kept saying all the way through would be a resettlement strategy that really looks to address the root cause of crime, puts in support to address that and allows offenders a chance for change. I guess, finally, reform what I can only describe as a fundamentally failing system. It doesn't work. Why do we keep spending money on it? I just really hope that a lot of the findings in this Green Paper suggest a need for a solid resettlement strategy and the need for alternatives. I just hope that the government are brave enough to stand up to the *Daily Mail* readers and, you know, start putting some of those systems in place. The proof will be in the pudding!

5. See note 1.