

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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

*Special Edition*

***Voices from the front line***

# Interview: Worker for a small charitable organisation

*Caroline Edwards is a part-time volunteer for Shannon Trust. She is interviewed by Ray Taylor who is a prison officer at HMP Pentonville.*

**Caroline Edwards has for two years been a part-time volunteer for Shannon Trust<sup>1</sup>, working in local prisons to train reading mentors and support access to literacy amongst prisoners. She is currently working with staff and prisoners at HMP Pentonville and HMP Wandsworth in London.**

Shannon Trust runs the Toe by Toe Reading Plan, an award-winning peer mentoring programme that encourages and supports prisoners who can read, to give one-to-one tuition to prisoners who struggle to read. Several thousand prisoners have been taught to read with the support of the Trust. The organisation was founded in 1997 by Christopher Morgan, a farmer from Sussex who, having joined a pen friend scheme run by the Prison Reform Trust, was shocked at the levels of poor literacy among prisoners.

Caroline Edwards is employed full-time as the Community Investment Director of a City-based investment bank. Her work involves developing and implementing the bank's community programme including staff volunteer programmes and management of its UK charity partnerships.

**RT: 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?**

**CE:** I know this is a complex and multifaceted issue, but the upward increase in the prison population is unsustainable. Not to mention expensive. And do we really have so many more 'bad' people in society than 20 years ago when the prison population was around 40,000? Government statistics tell us that the crime rate is falling.

There has been a significant increase in short sentences for minor offences, and custodial sentences given to women, children and the mentally ill. Surely prison should be a last resort and for those who pose a considerable risk to others? If one of the responsibilities of the prison system is to rehabilitate offenders — as much for the victims as well as those in prison, and if almost two thirds reoffend within two years of leaving prison, then it strikes me that we are not doing this very well.

Many prisoners that I speak to seem to be going in and out of prisons for much of the time. The spell in prison is long enough to disrupt their lives and test their bonds with family and community, but too short for them to benefit from education or training opportunities

inside. Going back into society with a criminal record and insufficient life skills does not increase the chances of many prisoners to change their lives.

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

**CE:** I don't like the term 'broken society'. It has a kind of inevitability about it and locks people in. Does our society have problems? Yes, of course it does. My experience of London is that it really is a city of two halves where extreme wealth sits alongside grinding poverty. The life chances of many of the young people I meet in the poorest parts of London are significantly different from those of their counterparts growing up in leafier areas. It is often those from poorer backgrounds whose dysfunction and bad luck will come together in prison.

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

**CE:** I don't see prison as a solution to social problems, rather I see prisons as a mirror of our society, reflecting the fraught and tangled lives of, usually, young men, which have resulted from social instability, poverty, family breakdown and anti-social behaviour.

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

**CE:** I don't think there is a 'one-size-fits-all' answer to this question. The circumstances and actions leading to imprisonment are different for every prisoner, and the experience of being inside and how each one responds to the environment will vary considerably.

Being in prison obviously removes prisoners from the life and life style they were leading before conviction and it can be an environment in which to reflect on past choices and actions. Opportunities do exist in prison for personal development; access to education, counsellors and health professionals; all of which will contribute to making positive life changes.

But the high rates of reoffending, the 'revolving door' many prisoners seem to be locked into, suggests that many prisoners are not making lasting positive changes. Many prisoners will have come from chaotic lives which have lacked routine and purpose. Many will have low educational attainment and have not experienced good role models. I think the Prison Service

1. The views expressed in this interview reflect those of the interviewee and not necessarily those of Shannon Trust.

is doing its best to deal with these troubled and troubling individuals, and it can work if it is not over loaded and under resourced. Development of basic skills such as numeracy and literacy; the ability to self manage and awareness of how to live back in the community are essential skills every prisoner should have as they return into society.

**RT: 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?**

**CE:** It sounds good and I believe anything is possible. I do wonder what will be completely and radically different? I certainly hope that there is something we can do to reduce recidivism. We need to work with prisoners, support them in making better life choices while they are inside, so that they can act on those choices when they are out. Prisoners need greater support on release as they adjust to life on the outside. And, yes, charities can help with this working in conjunction with other statutory agencies. There is definitely a role for the voluntary sector. I am curious about how this will be achieved in the current climate of austerity.

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

**CE:** I know the Justice Secretary wants to end 'enforced idleness' in prisons, and introduce a regime of work. From my experience of HMP Pentonville, prisoners seem to spend an incredible amount of time locked up in their cells, and I understand the challenges prisons face in balancing time out of cells for prisoners with staffing levels and costs.

The links between skills levels, unemployment and crime are well documented. The introduction of work or training opportunities that will equip prisoners with skills that would lead to employment opportunities on release, has to be welcomed. The type of work would depend on the category of prison, the local area and physical constraints or possibilities of each prison's estate.

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

**CE:** I think we would all like a world with less crime and more justice. The doubling of the prison population over the past two decades suggests we are not

achieving these goals and stimulates the 'does prison work?' debate. I'm interested in the approaches of restorative justice and offender accountability in reducing reoffending and linking offenders with their communities. If we are working to rehabilitate and integrate prisoners back into society and reduce offending then we need to work with prisoners so that they are aware of the consequences of their actions. Studies both in the UK and abroad suggest that restorative justice programmes do have positive outcomes particularly with young offenders.

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

**CE:** Having only been involved for just two years I can only answer that from speaking to prisoners and from what I have observed of the staff and prisoner relationship. Prisoners tell me that things have improved greatly over the past decades and certainly the relationship with staff is much more positive and productive. I have observed little animosity between prisoners and officers, for instance. Relations seem to be very friendly. The environment itself seems to me to be quite unfriendly, the gates and the bars and security is what I would expect, but it can be very noisy, but then I have only been there during the day.

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

**CE:** Real prison reform requires political will and preparedness to champion penal reform almost in spite of public opinion. Politicians do not want to be seen to be too soft on crime but the vast majority of people never enter a prison and rely on the media for information about life on the inside. This opens the way to media exploitation of the public fear of crime and being afraid of becoming victims of crime. I wouldn't describe the environment I've seen in the two prisons I work in, as holiday camp.

**RT: 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?**

**CE:** I find the prisons and the private sector to be strange bedfellows. Prisons provide a service to society. We look to the state to provide certain key services such as health and crime prevention. Private companies are

Prisoners need greater support on release as they adjust to life on the outside. And, yes, charities can help with this working in conjunction with other statutory agencies.

by nature profit driven and I wonder how this will sit with the rehabilitation agenda. Prisons are expensive because they are all about people and security. To give prisoners more time out of their cells requires more prison staff to supervise them. Whilst I believe competition is healthy and that the private sector will introduce innovative practices, I wonder how performance will be measured particularly payment by results against rehabilitation metrics? It will also be interesting to see whether the private sector would be willing to take over some of the older prisons where the estate requires much greater resources to run a 21st century facility. Or is there huge potential for cherry picking and where will that leave the public sector?

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

**CE:** I think the biggest single problem is the size of the prison population. The rising population has put a great deal of added pressure on staff and resources, making it difficult to concentrate on the job of rehabilitation. Another problem is not making use of the time prisoners have on the inside. A lot of the time spent in prison is idle time. I know that it is in the nature of prisons to waste time, and I know that it is often due to lack of resources but I feel this is such a waste.

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

**CE:** The main obstacles to reform are the size of the prison population and the failure to break the cycle of offending. These coupled with the increasing squeeze on resources and the downward pressure on budgets will make it increasingly difficult to reform the system in the short term.

**RT: What do you think are the biggest problems in the prison system? If you could introduce one change what would it be?**

**CE:** If there is one thing I would change it would be levels of literacy. Nearly half the prison population have a reading ability below that expected of an 11-year old<sup>1</sup>. This is in a developed nation. If over 90 per cent of all employment in the UK requires employees to be able to read, half of all offenders leaving prison are unable to do this. I would love to think that anyone who entered prison not being able to read could leave being literate or having acquired an additional skill. This has the potential to make a significant contribution to the rehabilitation process. The Toe by Toe reading scheme, for instance, began in HMP Wandsworth prison in the late 1990s and through small steps we were able to introduce it to many prisons. When it comes to making real change, it's not just the big bold projects that count. Sometimes we need to do the small things to make bigger changes.

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1. Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-Prisoners*. London: Social Exclusion Unit.