

Recognising good practice in prisons

Interview with Simon Shepherd

Simon Shepherd is Director of The Butler Trust and author of 'The good book of prisons'. He is interviewed by **Dr. Jamie Bennett**, Deputy Director in HM Prison and Probation Service.

Simon Shepherd has been Director of The Butler Trust, a charity celebrating and promoting what's best in UK prisons, probation and youth justice, since 2008.

Simon originally trained as a forensic psychologist and worked for the Prison Service for nine years, including at Glen Parva, Swinfen Hall, Featherstone, Holloway, Wandsworth and Prison Service HQ. He spent the next ten years in the drugs and alcohol field, first as Chief Executive of the European Association for Treatment of Addiction and then as head of the Federation of Drug and Alcohol Professionals. He has also served as an independent expert on the Scottish Accreditation Panel for Offender Programmes, and the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel for Offending Behaviour Programmes in England and Wales. And he has been a visiting lecturer at Kings College, London; City, University of London; and Birkbeck, University of London.

The Butler Trust was set up in 1985 to recognise and celebrate outstanding practice by those working with offenders, through an annual award scheme. The Trust is named after Richard Austen Butler (RAB), later Lord Butler of Saffron Walden, who was Home Secretary from 1957 to 1962, and introduced a series of reforms to improve the management, care and rehabilitation of offenders. During his parliamentary career, as well as being Home Secretary, Butler served as President of the Board of Education, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister.

Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal is the Trust's Patron. Each year she presides over the Award Ceremony, presenting Award Winners and Commendees with their certificates.

Since its launch the Trust has widened its scope to bring first probation and then youth justice within its purview, and increasingly focuses not only on recognising excellence on the part of staff and volunteers working in correctional settings, but also on helping to further develop the work of Award Winners and Commendees, and to share good practice more widely. The good book of prisons, published in 2019, is the latest initiative of Simon Shepherd and the Butler Trust to celebrate and promote the best practices.

The interview took place in October 2019

JB: What were the origins of The good book of prisons? Why did you want to focus on the positive aspects of prisons particularly? What were your aims? what did you hope that the book would achieve?

SS: If we want prisons to be as good as they can be, in terms of the welfare and rehabilitation of prisoners, and the safety and wellbeing of staff, it's important to know where standards are falling below expectations, but we also need to know what makes a positive difference in those areas, identify those prisons that do those things well, and share that more widely. There are plenty of others better placed than we are to look at what's going wrong, and there seemed little point us trying to duplicate their efforts, but people rarely look at what's going well and try to learn from that. We also wanted to show the public at large that, in spite of what they might read and hear, and despite the very real challenges, particularly in the last few years, there really are good things going on in every jail in the country, every day of the week.

JB: What was your approach to gathering the data for the book?

SS: I visited every closed prison in England and Wales from December 2017 to April 2019. I held three focus groups in each prison, most lasting between 40 mins and an hour, asking front-line staff, managers and prisoners, to tell me about the good things going on in their jail. In total, I held more than 300 meetings, with over 2000 people.

JB: You must have been told or observed negative aspects too, what did you do with that data?

SS: Though my focus was on the positives, it was no surprise that some of the staff and prisoners had negative things to say too; it would have been more surprising if they hadn't. In many cases their complaints concerned some of the less palatable, but unavoidable, realities of living or working in prisons. Occasionally, however, they appeared to reflect underlying issues which could potentially be addressed, and I fed those back to Governors and their senior management colleagues where appropriate.

JB: You travelled to every prison in the country, how did you do this?

SS: Well unlike John Howard, who relied on horse power when he toured all the prisons of the day back in the late 18th Century, I had the advantage of trains and taxis. It still took 17 months, and 17,000 miles, though, and quite a few overnight stays in hotels of variable quality.

JB: Did you reflect that the process of travelling to each prison would in itself tell you something about the prison, including its accessibility for visitors?

SS: It's quite surprising how difficult it is to get to many jails by public transport — and how expensive it is too. To get to Haverigg from London, for instance, takes more than 4 hours by train, at a £100 a pop, even with an advance ticket — and many prisons are a long way, and expensive taxi ride, from the nearest station. And yes, having spent so much time, and money, on the road, it really did bring home to me how difficult and costly it must be for many visitors.

JB: Did you speak you members of the public in the places you visit? Did that reveal anything about the place of the prison in local communities?

SS: I spent a lot of time in cabs, talking to taxi drivers, and they had many and varied responses when I told them what I was doing. By and large though, apart from the odd holiday camp comment, most of them had respect for prison staff and the job they do. Perhaps the most striking thing though was how little most of them knew about the jails in their area, even those drivers who often took visitors there. It really does seem to be a case of out of sight and out of mind for most people.

JB: Did your experience of each gate and entry process vary? How were you welcomed by different prisons?

SS: 102 prisons means, obviously, 102 gates — each of them different, many of them a challenge to negotiate even for someone who's been invited in by the Governor. How you're dealt with in a gate can have a profound effect.

Getting in to a high security prison, with the airport style checks, takes time, especially if you arrive just as the staff are returning from lunch — but that's not a problem in itself, it's a high security prison after

all. The problem is when the gate staff deal with you in an off-hand fashion, or worse, when they ignore you altogether. I once spent 15 minutes waiting while the gate staff inside studiously ignored me, though they knew full well I was there — and I have to say that very much coloured my whole visit. And if that's how they treat an official visitor, you wonder what it must be like for family and friends. Having said that, I received a cheery and efficient welcome in many of the jails I visited, and that has just as profound an impact, but in the opposite direction.

JB: What did your findings tell you about what prisons are doing to improve safety? What is there to be learned about this issue from your work?

SS: Safety is a really interesting and nuanced issue. On the one hand, prisons clearly became markedly less safe from around 2013. Yet in spite of that, and the fact that the data at least suggested that things were continuing to get even worse during the first few months of 2018 at least, I was struck by how many staff said they felt safe, and how many prisoners said the same. It wasn't everywhere certainly, but there was also a real sense that a corner was beginning to be turned, especially in the latter half of my tour, even in those prisons which had experienced the most difficulties.

The general feeling was that the extra staff¹ were really beginning to make a difference, although there was also a clear sense that it takes time to for new recruits to learn effective de-escalation skills. Keywork², which was being rolled out over the period, was seen as a game changer, helping to improve relationships between prisoners and staff, as well as the management of more challenging prisoners, and enhancing intelligence. Challenge Support and Intervention Plans (CSIP)³, which were also being introduced during my tour, were seen as a positive too; and the introduction of Violence Reduction (VR) 'reps', whose role in a number of establishments included confidentially mediating between prisoners, were singled out in a number of jails. In-cell phones were seen as a positive too, by helping to reduce one of the most significant causes of frustration for prisoners, and removing potential flashpoints in phone queues, particularly at 'bang up'.

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1. An additional 2,500 prison officers were recruited following the White Paper 'Prison Safety and Reform in 2016' see https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565014/cm-9350-prison-safety-and-reform-_web_.pdf

2. The additional staff recruited are being deployed to duties including 'keyworker', which provides regular support to prisoners. See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/789926/manage-custodial-sentence-pf.pdf

3. A formalised tool for managing people at risk of violence

JB: What did your findings reveal about relationships in prisons? Are there findings that you think are more widely relevant?

SS: Relationships was actually one of the issues that really stood out for me. In prison after prison, in spite of the many issues jails have been experiencing with deteriorating safety and reduced regimes, both staff and prisoners told me how good relationships were between them.

As I've already said, keywork in particular was seen to have had a positive impact here. Other positives highlighted by the people I spoke to include the use of first name terms, and joint activities between prisoners and staff. Touch screen 'kiosks' for handling domestic arrangements (such as apps, menu choices, visits and canteen), were seen to help in this regard also, by taking pressure off staff, and reducing prisoners' reliance on already-busy officers to get things done.

JB: What did you find that makes a positive difference in the lives of prisoners?

SS: As well as a safe prison, and good relations with staff, some of the many things prisoners told me made a positive difference to their lives include: a decent physical environment and greenery; good food; peace and quiet (especially at night); in-cell phones and family visits; electronic 'kiosks'; time out of cell and a wide range of purposeful activities; education and vocational training; libraries and the gym; peer support (like Listeners⁴, Prisoners' Information Desk (PID) workers, buddies and Turning Pages mentors⁵); and strong prisoner engagement (including wing representatives and prison councils).

JB: What did you find that makes a positive difference in the lives of people who work in prisons?

SS: Safety and good relations with prisoners, as well as greenery and a decent physical environment, were as important to staff as they were to prisoners.

Relations among staff, which were rated positively in most jails, were important too, and many staff described their relationships with their colleagues as having the greatest impact of all on their working lives. Unsurprisingly, the Governor was seen as having a huge influence on a jail and the experiences of staff working there — with staff valuing a No 1 who is highly visible, listens to and supports staff, and gives praise where it's due. They really valued personal touches, such as contacting all staff who've been assaulted to check their ok, sending flowers after a bereavement, and personalised Christmas and birthday cards, too. Formal staff consultation, and effective communication, including regular newsletters and briefings, were also seen as important, as was a culture of thanks, including both formal and informal methods of staff recognition (though not all schemes were equally valued).

Other positives included staff messes, especially if they were open in the mornings and at weekends, staff rest rooms and cooking facilities, and open days for family members to look round the jail and see where their loved ones work. Detailing⁶ was another important area for staff, though this was more often seen as a problem than a positive, especially where there was limited operational experience in the detailing office.

JB: How would you want the book to be used by different groups and individuals? Who are the audiences and how do you want them to respond?

SS: I think there are two audiences here: people working in prisons, especially prison leaders (Governors and their Senior Management Teams, Prison Group Directors and Headquarters leads), and the wider public.

I expect that most people in the sector will turn straight to the write-up on their jail and perhaps also other jails they've worked in — but we hope they won't stop there. The individual write-ups can only ever provide a brief, and partial, snapshot of a particular jail, based on what I was told in the short time I was there. But we hope the overall findings section, which draws on all 102 visits, and pulls together the findings from each, will be of real practical value.

We wouldn't expect the wider public to actually read the book, and its contents are not aimed at them, but we always hoped we could use the book to help challenge the overarching negative narrative about jails, if only indirectly, by creating some media interest and making use of the platform that would create. And I think we've had some success in that — I did more than two dozen regional radio and TV interviews at the time of the book's launch, and we managed to get a five minute film about some of the good work going on in prisons, on the BBC One Show.

JB: How are you disseminating the book and its content?

SS: We've sent hardcopies of the book to every prison Governor and senior management team in England and Wales, as well as to senior leaders across MoJ and HMPPS, and to the Head of the Scottish and Northern Ireland Prison Services. And everyone else can read the book's contents online, and download a PDF if they want to, at www.GoodBookofPrisons.com.

JB: What has been the response to *The good book of prisons*?

SS: It's been really positive. I think we've only had a couple of sarcastic comments on Twitter, but otherwise the feedback's been excellent. Most importantly though, there seems to be a real commitment from HM Prison and Probation Service to follow up on the findings, and to improve their sharing of good practice internally in future.

4. A support scheme in which prisoners are trained by the Samaritans see <https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/prisons/listener-scheme/>

5. A reading scheme for prisoners, see <https://turningpages.shannontrust.org.uk/>

6. This is the process of managing staff resources, including shift allocation and annual leave