CILIP Briefing Paper

Rehabilitation through Literacy and Learning: The role of Prison Libraries

June 2017

In May 2016, the Ministry of Justice published Unlocking Potential: A review of education in prison\(^1\), the outcome of a review and inquiry led by Dame Sally Coates. The Coates Review stated:

"Let there be no doubt. Education should be at the heart of the prison system. My career has been about offering excellent education to the most disadvantaged in society to give them a decent chance in life.

Prisoners are in prison because they have done wrong. But once they have served their time, it is just to them and in the interests of their communities that they have the same decent chance. The chance to re-enter society successfully, to find work, to live fulfilling lives. If education is the engine of social mobility, it is also the engine of prisoner rehabilitation."

The Coates Review acknowledged the central role of the Prison Library as a place not only of literacy and learning but as a ‘separate space’ – away from the normal run of prison life – in which prisoners can develop their skills and social engagement and benefit from time to reflect:

"I want to build the capacity of all who work in a prison to recognise the educative potential of their interactions with prisoners, at all times. That includes teachers, of course, but also extends to officers on the wings, instructors in the gym and workplace, and peer mentors in the library. It is only through a truly prison-wide vision of education, with all staff engaged, that we can drive change."

Regulations for Prison Library provision

Prison Libraries are one of the few parts of the publicly-funded library sector for which there is specific legislation. The 1999 Prison Rules\(^2\) state that:

"A library shall be provided in every prison and, subject to any directions of the Secretary of State, every prisoner shall be allowed to have library books and to exchange them.

In line with Prison Rules, all prisoners must be allowed access to library books. The frequency of access will fit establishment need, but library visits should be of a minimum 30 minutes’ duration and as often as is practical."

The recognition of the importance of libraries in Prison in legislation is, in part, a recognition of the importance of literacy in rehabilitation and reducing reoffending. Evidence shows that approximately 30% of ‘new arrivals’ into prison fail basic (Level 1) literacy tests and c.40% of the prison population had already been excluded from school prior to incarceration.

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Activities supported by prison libraries

Prison libraries are normally managed as part of the overall Public Library Service, offering a range of activities and services specific to the needs and population of each prison. These include:

- Book loan (including inter-library loan from the public library network)
- Reading groups\(^3\)
- Author visits and readings
- Activities to connect prisoners and their families through reading
- DVD and computer game loan
- Literacy support including learning to read
- Support for prisoners suffering from dyslexia and dyspraxia
- Events and challenges, such as the *Six Book Challenge* (now ‘Reading Ahead’\(^4\))
- Support for prison staff including reading groups and activities
- A space for social interaction
- A space for learning and self-directed study
- A ‘quiet’ place for prisoners to spend time in reflection
- Support for the Prevent strategy in prisons
- Support for reintegration including information about jobs and post-prison life

Current challenges confronting the Prison Library sector

Despite the requirements in the Prison Rules 1999, there is strong evidence that many prison libraries are currently under-staffed, closed, or only accessible to prisoners for very short spaces of time. Key challenges facing Prison Libraries include:

- Lack of visibility and recognition of the value and impact of a Prison Library among stakeholders
- Difficulty of recruiting paid professional librarians to work in prison libraries
- Under-staffing elsewhere (eg. officers) limits access to the prison library
- Lack of adequate staffing may put library staff at risk

A 2015 report *Big Question*\(^5\) by the CILIP Prison Libraries Group found significant challenges in terms of staffing and the availability of prison staff to enable prisoners to make use of prison services.

Opportunities to develop the Prison Library sector

While often less visible than their counterparts in public and school libraries, prison librarians are amongst the most committed, creative and innovative information professionals in the sector. They have learnt how to stretch limited resources, to build relationships with prison staff, to harness the power of volunteers and to implement creative programming which keeps the library offer fresh and appealing for often transient populations of prisoners.

In a recent article, CILIP identified 3 opportunities to promote the interests of the prison library community:

1. Raising awareness of the transformative work that goes on in the prison library in the outside world;

\(^3\) [https://prison-reading-groups.org.uk/](https://prison-reading-groups.org.uk/)
\(^4\) [https://readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/reading-ahead/](https://readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/reading-ahead/)
2. Supporting the recruitment of professional librarians into prison and promoting prison librarianship as a career choice;

3. Ensuring that Governors are informed about the value of a strong prison library and empowering them as champions of the role of the library in prison life.

**Facts and figures**

There are a number of studies into the value and impact of a prison library. A selected digest of relevant statistics is provided below:

- Literacy levels in prison are very poor compared with outside prison\(^6\)

- Using the Skills for Life definition of ‘functional literacy’ (those with Level 1 or level 2 literacy skills) in prison just 50% have these skills compared to 85% of the general population;

Based on research conducted by Brian Creese of the Centre for Education in the Criminal Justice System at UCL Institute of Education in 2012:

![Literacy - all prisons cf SfL 2012](image)

Creese’s research also looked at the gender split in prisoner literacy (overleaf):

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\(^6\) [https://www.cilip.org.uk/blog/prisoners-literacy-numeracy-levels](https://www.cilip.org.uk/blog/prisoners-literacy-numeracy-levels)
The difference a Prison Library makes

Prison libraries have provided a platform for a wide range of initiatives and activities which promote literacy and learning, support rehabilitation and promote empathy. A number of these are described in the short case studies below.

Case Study 1: Cell Workout

At the age of 23, following what he describes as a ‘moment of madness’, L J Flanders found himself in prison. Well-educated and literate, but lacking in direction, he decided to embrace fitness as a way of filling his days.

Within a relatively short space of time, Flanders qualified as a gym instructor, and found that his fellow inmates wanted him to write exercise routines and guidance for them. He wrote and ultimately published *Cell Workout*, a manual for in-cell fitness.

On his release in 2012, he set about working with prison libraries to get *Cell Workout* stocked on prison shelves. Through his work on this, he has become a champion for prison libraries because

"People go to the library for different reasons, to research, to learn, or through the power of reading, be transported to another world. Prison libraries are like a hub, where inmates can be amongst others, attend book clubs, author visits and even do the occasional cell workout!"

*Cell Workout* has gone on to be a successful publication and Flanders has managed to build a career for himself post-prison based on public speaking and encouraging people to embrace fitness.

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7 [https://www.cilip.org.uk/blog/what-once-felt-end-was-maybe-just-beginning](https://www.cilip.org.uk/blog/what-once-felt-end-was-maybe-just-beginning)
Case Study 2: The Shannon Trust’s ‘Turning Pages’ reading scheme

According to a recent Guardian article about the Shannon Trust:

"Inside the Shannon Trust’s cramped office in south London, chief-executive Angela Cairns tells me a startling statistic: 50% of prisoners in the UK are functionally illiterate. This means half of the 85,000 people currently incarcerated have a reading age of 11 or lower – with 20% falling well short of that mark. Many prisoners are completely illiterate."

The Shannon Trust are responsible for Turning Pages, a UK-wide reading initiative that is supported through the libraries of 124 prisons. The initiative puts 2,000 ‘reading mentors’ (prisoners with reasonable levels of literacy) in contact with 4,000 prisoners who have relatively low levels of literacy. Through the mentoring scheme, with the support of prison librarians, the initiative has succeeded in teaching thousands of prisoners to read for the first time. In the words of one participant:

"I have been in prison for over five years and, until about 12 months ago, I just blagged my way through this reading thing. I would say things like 'I’ve forgot my glasses’ or 'My vision is a bit blurred’ when I was asked to read. When I was with other people, I would pretend to read letters just to make me feel normal – but then I found out one of my friends was a mentor."

Other examples of initiatives and activities in prison libraries include:

- **Books in the Nick** – a joint initiative from the charity ‘Give a Book’ and the Metropolitan Police
- CILIP supports the **Prison Libraries Group**, a CILIP Special Interest Group which brings together prison librarians from across the UK.

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8 Guardian article on the Shannon Trust (15.06.2017)