

## **Quakers in Criminal Justice Conference 2024** **“Gateways to Rehabilitation”**

The theme of rehabilitation was explored across the weekend through expert and experienced speakers, by participants with ‘lived experience, and via workshops and discussions.

**“Freefalling: Addiction, Recovery and Criminal Justice”**. Starting promptly on the Friday evening, David Harries shared his knowledge of the 12-Step Rehabilitation Programme for alcoholics and drug addicts. This is a robust programme, with built-in support, which also has a spiritual ethos. David now uses his own life experiences to help others. Brixton Prison has 7 weekly meetings, on four wings, and there are 700 meetings per week – just in the London area – all of which are free to attend.

**Session 2 was titled “Rehabilitation and Reintegration into the Community – whose Responsibility?”** given by, **Fergus McNeill, Professor of Criminology at Glasgow University and Chair of the Howard League**. Although Fergus said ‘Everyone needs rehabilitation; everyone needs a way back’, he described the present system as being in a “Fankle” – a wonderful Scottish word (but not such a wonderful description) as it means a state of confusion/a befuddled concept. Our present methods of rehabilitation and reintegration unfortunately fall very short, with those with a criminal record facing exclusion, being denied a job, even denied worship and being put in a box and seen as ‘other’. Society does not readily accept a person can transform, live differently and be restored to society.

**Kate Nickels, a member of the Parole Board** was the speaker for Session 3. Some details and facts were surprising. 1) Although called a ‘Panel’, very often just one person makes this momentous decision as to whether a prisoner receives parole. 2) During 2022/23, out of 22,082 applicants for release or move to an Open Prison, 11,466 were refused. 3) Prisoners very often do not attend their own hearings because of the presence of victims and/or the victim’s family. Friends at the conference, with experience, commented on the anxiety surrounding the outcome of these decisions, which adversely affect family and friends as well as the prisoners.

I attended two of the three workshops.

**“Tackling Reading with the Shannon Trust” – Elizabeth a Trust facilitator at HMP Birmingham and Charlotte at HMP Nottingham**. Working within prisons, at present in contact with over 5,000 prisoners, the Shannon Trust trains prisoners, who can read, to teach those who can’t. Mentors work on a one-to-one basis with their learner in short sessions and at their own pace. Why is this needed? The average reading age of many of the prisoners is 7 years old; everything in prison is done by the written word! Think about that!! From the moment of going inside all information is in written format – instructions, new information, rules and changes which are usually pushed under the door of the cell, letters from home, signs, notices and menus.

*(Attached are 2 pieces of writing which give a little insight into how it must feel to struggle with the written word. Some of you will easily decipher these, because you can already read – imagine if you cannot. The ‘translations’ will be sent out after Area Meeting, so that you are not too frustrated!).*

What are the results of the Shannon Trust’s work?

- Day to day life is easier – in prison filling in forms is the usual way to apply for a course or job in prison, request to move cells and selecting one’s meals.
- Life is safer – reading enables people to read signs and instructions.

- Learning to read is often the first step to rehabilitation with 9 out of 10 Shannon Trust learners seeking out further education.
- It reduces reoffending, improves family relationships and reintegration into the community.

**Jonathan Lamb's workshop "Tackling Housing needs and the Prison Protocol in Northern Ireland"** left us in no doubt of the effects of homelessness for prisoners, prison leavers and their families. This NI prison protocol is a model of good practice, trying to ensure that prisoners do not lose their homes in the first place and have a home to go to on release. This system works amazingly well in Northern Ireland but, Jonathan explained, could not work in England because of the numbers of prisons, divisions of agencies, divisions of councils and so on.

An example is - a woman given a 5 month sentence and being the named tenant, would have lost her home during that time and her adult son and daughter would also have been made homeless. Housing Rights stepped in, negotiated with the landlord, and other agencies, and the woman's home was there on her release. In England, this would have ended with a very different outcome.

Before this protocol was set up, a prisoner would be released without any checks that they had accommodation to go to. Now, in Northern Ireland, some accommodation is found, however temporary. Prisoners even wait in the prison reception on release, until Housing Rights let them know a place has been found. As you can imagine, this prevents a lot of re-offending – how can one rehabilitate out on the streets, without security, food, warmth and a roof over one's head?

A Special Session was held when Liz Bridge, ex-Quaker Chaplain at Wandsworth, spoke to us about the appalling, unsanitary and inhumane conditions within that prison. You can catch up on this from the article in The Friend, her interview on Channel 4 News and the much fuller interview now available on YouTube. Liz now has a core group of six and a much larger support group of nearly 40, many of whom are the mothers of sons in HMP Wandsworth. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRxPW-FgKow> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcsGfXOkn5I>

The final session of the weekend was a round table of those with 'lived experience' of the criminal justice system. In an honest and frank discussion we heard of the many and varied ways, their past criminal convictions and prison sentences had (and still have) a huge impact on how Quaker Meetings 'welcome' them, or, sadly, don't. This is an ongoing concern which the membership of Quakers in Criminal Justice will return to during the year for a wider conversation.

I cannot finish without a quick mention of our Epilogue on the Saturday evening. All weekend we had been accompanied by the wonderful new tapestry panel made by some of the men in Long Lartin prison, called "The Silence Inside". We sat with this tapestry in front of us whilst the Long Lartin Quaker Chaplain read some words from the prisoners \*\* who have attended Meeting for Worship within the prison. Following this, one of our main speakers, Fergus McNeill sang a soulful and beautiful song he'd written, accompanying himself on the guitar. No further Ministry was needed and the silence in that room was deep and also much needed by all participants in what was a very intense and meaningful conference.

*\*\*"Stepping into the circle feels like stepping past the wall. Moving from bars and bullies to a better place for a short time. A place my heart can return to when I need it."*

*A short exercise to see how hard it is not to have reading abilities.*

**Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at Cmabirgde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttar in waht oredr the lttters in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat lttter be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatll mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter, but the wrod as a wlohe.**

*The first four lines of a poem:-*

**Soaesn of mtiss and mleoelw ftisnflurues,  
Csloe boosm-feinrd of the mrtuniag sun;  
Cnponsiing wthi him how to laod and besls  
Wthi friut the viens taht runod the tahtch-eevs run.**

### Silence Inside

This tapestry was made by some of the men at the Quaker Meeting in HMP Long Lartin. One of the prisoners was a talented artist who captured the ideas and transferred it onto the calico lining. Sessions were held to learn the stitches and then some men would take it in turns to have the tapestry in their cells to stitch.

