What if you can't actually read the time, date and location of your appointment with Probation?

Illiteracy affects around 50% of people in prison and in this article Ian Merrill explores some of the implications for probation practice and outlines how Shannon Trust is seeking to tackle the problem.

It seems that the criminal justice system is back under the microscope as central government places a renewed focus on reducing re-offending, and the latest re-organisation of probation services is driven through. For those working in and around probation services – and for people who have offended and are in contact with such services – this must generate mixed feelings; on the one hand it is more change, another set of initiatives, more re-structuring and further upheaval – and on the other, it is the opportunity to test out new ideas, to explore new partnerships and ways of working, and ultimately a chance for lives, and communities, to change for the better.

When it comes to working with and supporting those who have committed crimes, there is broad agreement on what makes a real difference in attempts to reduce the likelihood of further offending taking place. If people have decent accommodation, can access effective physical and mental health services, as well as impactful drug and alcohol treatment, engage in quality education, relevant training and even get paid employment then, with a following wind, life can look much better. All of this underpinned by good, supportive relationships of course.

If you are reading this article and thinking that there are elements missing from that list of relevant factors, then you are correct – the list isn't comprehensive and we could add to it for sure. However, how many revised lists would include 'ability to read'? Typically, research studies into criminogenic risk factors do not tend to flag the importance of literacy amongst the complex array of factors involved in offending and rehabilitation. Education and employment do

Ian Merrill
Chief Executive
Shannon Trust

appear in such lists of what is important; however, the opportunity to learn new skills, acquire knowledge and secure a job are significantly improved when the ability to read is part of one's tool kit. So, how many people does illiteracy affect?

Illiteracy affects around 50% of people in prison

Data from the prison estate is fairly easy to come by, and is an indication of the size of the issue. By any standards, the scale of illiteracy amongst people in prison is eye-watering; at least 50%¹ have some degree of difficulty with reading and are assessed as below 'Level 1' which equates to GCSE grade D-G.

¹ [An-assessment-of-the-English-and-maths-skills-levels-of-prisoners-in-England2.pdf](#) (nrdc.org.uk)

Prisoner literacy levels

An accurate picture of the number of people with literacy issues in contact with Probation and related services is harder to come by, but it is reasonable to assume that illiteracy levels amongst Probation clients will tell a similar story to that of the prison population. To put that in straightforward terms, a Probation Officer's caseload could include 50% of people who either cannot, or struggle to read. And the inability to read causes lots of problems, for all those involved.

The inability to read creates everyday difficulties and can hinder life chances

At Shannon Trust, we hear stories every day about the challenges of illiteracy from people

living and working in prisons across England, Wales and Northern Ireland; problems that affect people when in prison – and when they are released. Hearing these stories highlights the lengths people often go to, to hide their inability to read and the human ingenuity in finding ways around the issue. After all, illiteracy continues to carry much stigma. Some examples from day-to-day prison life, trying to build family ties and taking up education and training can demonstrate this.

In terms of day-to-day prison life, an inability to read throws up a number of challenges. For some non-readers choosing food from the menu is difficult; non-readers often memorise the appearance of one menu item, and as a consequence end up eating the same food for much of the time.

Furthermore, prison life tends to revolve around snippets of written information on pieces of paper or wall posters, and this includes requests to do almost all prison-based activity of any kind. Non-readers will find many 'workarounds' to navigate daily life and get things done, but will still miss out in many ways.

For many people in prison, maintaining or re-establishing links to family is an important part of wellbeing and can be a significant factor in successful reintegration once released. Building those family relationships whilst still in prison clearly has its limitations, so reading and writing letters remains an important part of this. However, those unable to read or write may have to rely on a cell-mate or another prisoner to help, and this is not always possible or perhaps even safe. For this reason, one of the personal goals of a reading learner is often to be able to read a letter from home, and then write a reply.

Few would disagree that access to education and training for people in prison is an important factor in the productive use of time, successful

reintegration upon release and the prospects of reduced re-offending. However, for the 50% of the prison population that struggle with reading and often have negative experiences of education as a young person, taking up classroom-based courses can seem well out of reach – the inability to read and the resulting lack of self-confidence are powerful barriers to learning.

Addressing illiteracy in prisons

Shannon Trust's work across prisons aims to address the issue of illiteracy. Our work has been trauma informed for some time: the model takes into consideration the damaging impact of school exclusions and undiagnosed Learning Disability & Difficulty by providing informal, peer to peer learning in short bursts. We don't try to push people in prison back into the classroom – quite possibly where the trauma occurred. We recognise that many of our potential learners have had Adverse Childhood Experiences, often part of the reason why they never learnt to read in the first place.

The phonics-based reading programme that Shannon Trust has developed - Turning Pages - is a tried and tested tool² used to train Peer Mentors - people in prison who can read - to help those who cannot read to learn to do so. More recently, COVID19 has changed much about prison life, and we have adapted to the reality of social restrictions by adding the ability to train Mentors remotely and we continue to develop more self-study options to promote greater learner choice and to meet the challenge of prison regime changes.

By learning to read with Shannon Trust - and through building self-confidence that comes with acquiring that new skill - many of the people in prison we work with develop or rediscover an appetite for more education. This is evident through the positive stories we hear and the further take-up of classroom-based training and education opportunities that are crucial to improved life chances and the reduction of re-offending³. However, for many people in prison, learning journeys don't start or are often interrupted because they are released into the community. So, what can be done about continuity of learning post-release?

Turning Pages in the community

In recognition that the vast majority of people in prison will be released in the short-to-medium term, Shannon Trust are now piloting use of Turning Pages in community settings; a number of Probation services and drug & alcohol treatment providers such as WDP are [taking part](#).

The pilots are testing how our approach can be adapted so that as well as peer-to-peer mentors, others can act as a 'reading coach', whether that be community agency staff or volunteers. Our aim here is to make Turning Pages available to many more people who would benefit.

Ultimately, getting true scale in the number of those learning to read this way - and meeting the high level of need - will require the development of digital access to Turning Pages, and to that end Shannon Trust and its digital development partner Yalla - supported by initial funding from the Ministry of Justice Prison Leaver Innovation Fund - are now working on the digitisation of our learning resources. Our intention - during 2022 - is to bring Turning Pages to Probation and community services across the UK - as an important tool in work to reduce re-offending.

If you are a Probation Officer or a member of staff in a community agency, it might be time to re-look at your caseload and assess whether illiteracy is an issue for anyone you are supporting. Would learning to read help those people to address their offending behaviour? If you are a service manager, does your team actively consider illiteracy as an important factor? As we have seen, learning to read can be a critical first step towards a very different future for the people caught up in the criminal justice system, once we recognise the foundational importance of being able to read.

For more information about how Shannon Trust can help, go to www.shannontrust.org.uk

² Turning Pages, Changing Lives: An Evaluation of the Shannon Trust Reading Programme Turning Pages, Birmingham City University, Faculty of Health, Education & Life Sciences 2017

³ Shannon Trust annual survey data indicates around 85% of learners go onto other prison education courses