

SHANNON TRUST

A case study of volunteer involvement in the Shannon Trust Reading Plan

June 2016



**Valuing
volunteers
in prison**

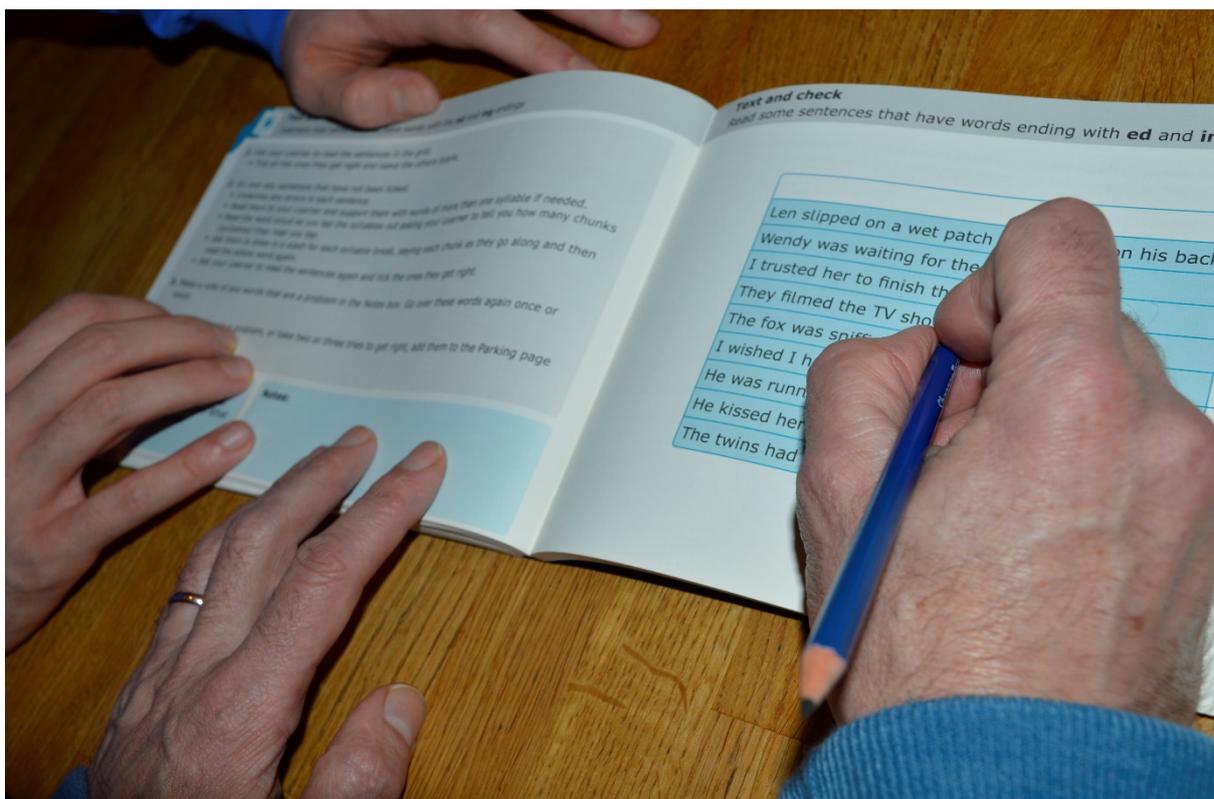
Summary

Shannon Trust is a national charity supporting prisoners who can read to teach those who cannot. This case study will be especially interesting to readers who wish to:

- structure a large-scale volunteering programme to work in partnership with prisons
- establish and manage a service operating in multiple prisons
- develop a regional volunteer recruitment and management infrastructure.

Shannon Trust – every prisoner a reader

Shannon Trust is a national charity supporting prisoners who can read to teach those who cannot, through one-to-one mentoring. The Shannon Trust Reading Plan (STRP) uses a phonics-based reading programme, Turning Pages, and currently runs in 124 prisons across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Over 140 volunteers are attached to the programme.



Founded in 1997 as the result of a correspondence between Tom Shannon, a life-sentenced prisoner, and Christopher Morgan, Shannon Trust launched its first Reading Plan in HMP Wandsworth in 2001. The reach of the charity continued to grow and in 2011 an independent

review of the operating model by BearingPoint (funded by Impetus) led to an organisational restructure, introducing 3 paid Regional Managers and developing the role played by volunteers.

With a revised operating model in place, the CEO and the Chair of Shannon Trust approached Michael Spurr, the CEO of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), with concerns that the significant changes and efficiencies facing the prison service might limit the reach of the Reading Plan going forward. As a result of this initiative, in 2013, the Prisons Minister launched the National Reading Network, a partnership between Shannon Trust and the Prison Service.

The purpose of the Network is to embed the Shannon Trust Reading Plan across all public prisons in order to give every non-reading prisoner the best possible opportunity to learn to read. A standard delivery model for the Reading Plan has been adopted by the Prison Service and in each establishment an officer (the Reading Plan Lead) is allocated 6 hours a week to facilitate the running of the Reading Plan. The Reading Plan is championed in each establishment by a member of the Senior Management Team. A Memorandum of Understanding with NOMS enshrines this agreement. Shannon Trust also extends the principles and operating model of the National Reading Network to private prisons, with a small number of prisons having local agreements with Shannon Trust.

A national network of volunteers

123 of Shannon Trust's national network of volunteers are Local Prison Representatives (LPRs). Their role is to nurture the growth of the Shannon Trust Reading Plan in their designated prison. They offer advice, guidance and support to the prison staff member facilitating the Reading Plan and prisoners who mentor. They attend monthly meetings with the Reading Plan Lead (typically a prison officer) and Mentors, at which they jointly review progress and make plans to extend the reach of the Reading Plan in the prison. They also train prisoner Mentors, arrange award ceremonies, liaise with the Prison Governor, and make presentations to prison staff.

Each of our LPRs is part of an area cluster run by a volunteer Area Coordinator and an Area Secretary. These 17 Area Coordinators have a key role in the recruitment and induction of new volunteers in their area and provide the first point of contact for advice and support to their team of volunteers. They play a pivotal role in coordinating and building a pro-active and solution-focused team ethos within their area. Area Coordinators receive their own induction from Shannon Trust and ongoing support from their Regional Manager. As senior volunteers they are regularly consulted and contribute to new developments within the trust. The Area Coordinator role is a substantial volunteer role which suits someone who has experience of people management, is confident to deliver

presentations, and has good interpersonal and communication skills. The Area Secretary provides administrative support to the Area Coordinator and area team.

Area Coordinators are supported by 1 of 3 Regional Managers and a national Operations Manager who are part of the national staff team. Area meetings take place 4 times a year for all volunteers and Area Coordinators meet up quarterly. The remaining 5 members of the staff team provide support for resources development, distribution of stock, marketing, recruitment and training of volunteers.

“I enjoy the regional team meetings and have enjoyed getting to know the individuals better. I feel a sense of loyalty to the regional team.”

(Shannon Trust volunteer)

LPRs submit monthly monitoring activity reports outlining what has been happening in their Reading Plan, complimented by the corresponding data summaries from the Reading Plan Leads. The National Reading Network allows the use of P-NOMIS to record participation and process in a Shannon Trust Reading Plan.¹ One of the important benefits of using P-NOMIS is the ability to track Learners and Mentors as they move from one prison to another, making it easier for them to continue taking part in the Reading Plan at their new establishment. However, data has to be entered by the prison, and use of P-NOMIS to record Mentor and Learner Reading Plan activity is patchy. This is an area that continues to be a development focus for the National Reading Network partnership.

By prisoners for prisoners

The Shannon Trust Reading Plan reaches out to prisoners who can't read or are struggling to read. Participation in the Reading Plan is voluntary, and there are a number of ways prisoners are referred, including self-referral. Non-reading prisoners are often identified by their peers, trained Mentors who look out for signs that someone is having difficulties. It's not unusual for someone in a prison to ask for help reading a letter from home or filling out an application. Difficulties might also be picked up through Education, by a Mentor on an induction wing or a prison officer for example. LPRs, Area Coordinators and Regional Managers periodically attend full staff meetings and SMT meetings in order to engage staff and raise awareness of the Reading Plan across the prison. It can be particularly effective if a Mentor or Learner is able to accompany them to the meeting and talk about how effective the Reading Plan is from their perspective. Because of the high turnover of prison staff, it's important for communication about the Reading Plan across the prison to be an ongoing process.

Shannon Trust has an ethos of “By prisoners for prisoners”, so LPRs use regular Mentor meetings to help participants identify ways of recruiting new Learners and addressing solutions to localised

¹ P-NOMIS is the prison database containing prisoner records.

challenges. These meetings also lead to suggestions for operational developments to be taken back to Shannon Trust area meetings and staff team.

Annually, Shannon Trust undertakes a snapshot survey over a 2 week period, to give both Learners and Mentors an opportunity to give feedback about their Reading Plan and their involvement. In 2014, 778 Learners and 855 Mentors took part in the snapshot survey, helping to shape service development and delivery in 2015.

Learners:

- Improved their reading skills (9/10)
- Improved their communication skills (6/10)
- Improved their self-confidence (7/10)
- Felt more positive about the future (6/10)
- Felt encouraged to go on to more learning (6/10)
- Had their life made easier in prison (6/10)

Mentors:

- Improved their communication skills (6/10)
- Improved their self-confidence (5/10)
- Developed new skills (6/10)
- Understood others better (7/10)
- Felt it had been a good use of their time in prison (8/10)
- Felt more positive about the future (4/10)
- Felt encouraged to do more learning (3/10)
- Improved their teamwork skills (4/10)

Feedback from snapshot surveys helps to flag up issues important to Mentors and Learners, and aids the national staff team to further develop materials for Mentor training, and the toolkit used by volunteers and Reading Plan Leads to support delivery in prisons.

Prisoners were also fundamental in the development of Turning Pages, a reading programme developed specifically for adults in custody. Prisoners took part in trials, focus groups and two prisoners wrote content for the accompanying reading books.

Safety and security

Volunteers meet with Mentors in a group with a member of the prison staff present. The vast majority of Shannon Trust volunteers are not key holders. They are met at the gate by the Reading Plan Lead and accompanied to the room in which the Mentor meeting is taking place. Shannon Trust's position on key holding is driven by the need to minimise risk and maximise safety for our volunteers, Mentors and Learners. The small number of volunteers who draw keys do so because

they are key holders in another capacity, or at the specific request of the prison and after consideration of risk by Shannon Trust management.

Because volunteers work inside prisons they obtain security clearance from their allocated establishment. The time taken for a volunteer to be vetted can vary considerably, which can delay the start of their active involvement in supporting a Reading Plan. Whilst volunteers are alerted to the chance that delays might take place, it can be frustrating for someone who has recently completed their volunteer training not to be able to put their learning into action. Forms to be completed for the vetting process can appear daunting and complicated and on occasion forms have been completed by volunteers only to find that the paperwork has changed and the process needs to be repeated. Where possible volunteers awaiting clearance are encouraged to visit Reading Plans in other prisons to observe Mentor meetings and training.

Volunteer recruitment

All volunteer roles are advertised through Do-it.org, Charity Job, the charity's website and other appropriate online platforms. A series of short videos on our website give an initial idea about the different volunteering opportunities at Shannon Trust and how to apply.

There is a quarterly recruitment cycle during which application forms are submitted, initial conversations take place with a Regional Manager, and candidates are interviewed, typically by a Regional Manager and an Area Coordinator. The quarterly recruitment cycle was introduced in 2013, and it allows for better planning and makes the best use of staff and volunteer time. However, there remains some flexibility for people to make applications outside of the list of current vacancies.

Shannon Trust volunteers need to have very strong communication and interpersonal skills as building relationships is key to all our roles. They have to be comfortable that this is a support role rather than a teaching role – a common misconception Shannon Trust has worked hard to address. Additionally, they are required to have good IT skills and be able to manage their own time and workload. In particular, being a LPR requires patience, enthusiasm, determination and an ability to adhere to boundaries. There is an expectation that LPRs will be able to give 7 to 14 hours a month across 2 to 4 days for a minimum period of 2 years. For Area Coordinators, this is around 30 hours a month and for Area Secretaries on average 14 hours a month.

Volunteer training

All LPRs attend a one-day induction training, followed by a one-day How to Train Mentors training

course. They receive a toolkit of resources and support materials and have access to a wider range of resources online via an intranet. LPRs are accompanied on their initial visits to their allocated prison by another LPR, their Area Coordinator, or on occasions a Regional Manager. This gives them an opportunity to become comfortable with the environment in their prison and to have someone else model how to manage Mentor meetings and the training of Mentors.



For new volunteers, shadowing a more experienced LPR is important. The general public has a limited understanding of what life is like in a prison. New volunteers often have questions such as what to wear or when they will be able to go to the toilet, and raise concerns about what it might feel like once they are inside the prison gates. Whilst such questions are addressed during training, having the chance to shadow a fellow volunteer helps to build confidence and gives a supported introduction to their individual prison. Additional training is also provided for volunteers at some establishments by the prison, particularly those classified as high security.

“A really good session. Thanks trainer James and all my co-participants.”

(Tweet from a volunteer after induction training)

All volunteers sign a written volunteering agreement after a successful interview and before training days take place.

Working in partnership

As Shannon Trust works in such a large number of prisons it's difficult to talk about how establishments approach volunteering in general. However, each Shannon Trust LPR will have a

named Reading Plan Lead within their prison. This is generally a prison officer but might also be a librarian. Their role is to work with the LPR to support operation and development of the Reading Plan. Many Reading Plan Leads go out of their way to champion the Reading Plan and communicate successes, and also liaise with the LPR about operational difficulties and organising Mentor meetings and training. If problems cannot be resolved by the LPR and Reading Plan Lead, there are opportunities to involve Area Coordinators, the prison-appointed SMT Lead, and Regional Managers to work through issues.

As each individual prison has its own character and constraints volunteers are encouraged to keep lines of communication open, be solution-focused in their conversations, and have an understanding of the often difficult environment in which prison staff work. An overview of prisons in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is given during Shannon Trust induction training, with the caveat that every prison is different.

The value of volunteers in delivering the Shannon Trust Reading Plan



Volunteers are fundamental to the success of Shannon Trust Reading Plans. They bring skills, experience and independence to the role, which are valued by the Mentors, Learners and prison staff. The Shannon Trust Reading Plan sits outside of the formal education delivered by OLASS providers. This is valuable because many prisoners who are struggling to read will not engage with learning in a classroom environment. Shannon Trust volunteers are trained to encourage Mentors to take ownership (within the boundaries of the prison regime) of their Reading Plan and to value Mentors' views and the solutions they bring to issues. Communication and empathy are vital parts

of the equation when looking at the value of volunteering, as is a level of professionalism, allowing a culture of respect to exist between volunteers and members of the prison team.

“Having a person from outside the prison environment take an interest in individual prisoners and offer encouragement and praise is often something they really appreciate and value – especially as some have experienced little by way of encouragement or praise in their lives to date.”

(Shannon Trust volunteer)

The importance of good communication

Good, consistent communication with the Reading Plan Lead is important, but also vital is an understanding by staff across the prison of what volunteers are doing and why. Wider awareness of the Reading Plan can help Mentors and Learners to be unlocked for sessions and meetings, and for people struggling to read to be identified and referred to a Mentor. With many prisons still experiencing staffing shortages, not knowing about Shannon Trust and what Mentors do can lead to staff being reluctant to unlock Learners and Mentors for their 20 minute sessions.

Clear communication also means that if a Reading Plan Lead leaves, moves to a different role or is not available for a period of time there are others within the prison who can liaise with the LPR; it does not just depend on the engagement of one person. Delays in appointing a new Reading Plan Lead can affect the Reading Plan in a prison, resulting in cancelled Mentor meetings, reduced numbers of Learners or Learners and Mentors not being able to have their daily session. Typically, the LPR will continue to liaise with the SMT Lead in the prison for Shannon Trust, keeping up the support for the Reading Plan.

Volunteering in a challenging environment

The varied nature of the prison estate means organisations such as Shannon Trust with volunteers operating in a number of jails face a range of different challenges, depending on the particular circumstances of each establishment.

Even with time allocated for prison officers to engage and liaise with volunteers, the ever-present need for security to take precedence over a pre-arranged Mentor meeting can be frustrating for volunteers. Low staffing levels, the movement of prison employees into new posts, and high numbers of newly trained prison officers (in effect a churn of prison staff) can result in having to continually build new relationships and disruption to the ‘business as usual’ of a Reading Plan. However, prison staff who have been involved in a Shannon Trust Reading Plan in one prison often carry their enthusiasm with them when they move to another establishment.

“I have learnt that everything takes much longer than you would imagine, both in and outside the prison. There is a surprising amount of jobs to do, emails to answer, material to read in 'non-contact' time so it is not simply visiting the prison.”

(Shannon Trust volunteer)

Another key factor contributing to successful volunteering in prisons is training, both from Shannon Trust and the prison. Even if someone has experience of working or volunteering in a prison, each role and each establishment is different. Questions and concerns regarding going into prison for the first time arise frequently during Shannon Trust training sessions. At an individual establishment level, prison orientation sessions can help to alleviate concerns.

Our learning about volunteering in prisons suggests it is helpful for volunteering programmes to be carefully structured, supporting both the volunteers and the establishments in which volunteering takes place. As part of the rollout of the National Reading Network, workshops and briefings took place across the country for Shannon Trust volunteers and prison staff. Reading Plan Leads are encouraged to attend periodic area meetings with Shannon Trust volunteers, and volunteers and members of the paid staff team attend full staff briefings and SMT meetings in prisons to disseminate information about the Reading Plan. Role descriptions are in place for SMT Leads and Reading Plan Leads, as well as access to the organisation's intranet and a range of resources including the Reading Plan toolkit.

Clear guidance and assistance in completing vetting paperwork might go some way to reducing delays to clearance for volunteers. It is the experience of Shannon Trust that robust recruitment processes, training and support to ensure volunteers have a clear understanding of the context and operating environment of their work is vital. It is also crucial that there is whole-prison awareness of the work of volunteers, which helps to facilitate Reading Plan activity and also encourages engagement and participation.

There may be challenges to volunteering in prisons but having a national volunteer network allows Shannon Trust to take tangible steps to making the vision of 'every prisoner a reader' a reality.

“It is not just volunteering but realising that what I can do can have life-changing effects on others. This in itself carries a responsibility to do the very best that I can.”

(Shannon Trust volunteer)

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