



## Ep.4 Let's Go Further

**In the UK, we imprison more people per head of population than any other country in Europe. The financial cost of this is huge and reoffending rates are high – so what needs to change?**

In this episode, we look at how education can break the cycle of reoffending, focusing on the example of The Clink Charity, who aim to reduce reoffending by training prisoners in a restaurant setting.

Join us to hear from Yvonne Thomas, Chief Executive of The Clink, and John Gordon, a former offender who was helped by the charity.

This uplifting conversation will challenge your perspectives on prisoners, punishment, and rehabilitation. Let's explore how re-educating can prevent reoffending.

### **Who is Yvonne Thomas?**

Yvonne joined The Clink Charity in January 2022 having spent her career to date in public and private sector organisations including BT, The Ministry of Justice and Interserve. Latterly, she has been advising organisations including charities and community interest companies, particularly those who help find people good jobs and decent accommodation. Much of her career has been spent trying to find ways to support people in their rehabilitation journey. She is also a trustee of the national charity, People, Potential, Possibilities (P3).

## Transcript

### **Joe Mcloughlin 0:01**

Hello, and welcome to Series 2 of Let's Go Further, a podcast from the Skills and Education Group that challenges the way we think about skills and education. I'm Joe Mcloughlin, Foundation Manager at the Group. And in this series, I'm speaking to people from inside and outside the education sector, about equity, diversity and inclusion. In this episode, we're talking about how offenders can be helped to gain skills that might prevent them from reoffending. In a moment, we'll hear from Yvonne Thomas, Chief Executive of The Clink Charity, which aims to reduce reoffending by training prisoners in a restaurant setting. But first, I caught up with John Gordon, a former offender who was helped by The Clink Charity, and now works for a refuge for women. I started by asking him about his own experiences of The Clink.

### **John Gordon 0:47**

You go into The Clink, maybe unqualified, maybe have a passion for cooking, but once you leave there, you come out there qualified. So they've rebuffed you, they've, you know, regenerated you, so to speak. So that's what I feel that we- I do here at this residence, you know, just like how The Clink would do it, you know, they look after people, they re-educate you, see that you get into employment. I sort of developed that from that ethos of Clink, being able to transfer my skills to here. I'm very, very passionate about it, I would say I'm quite an empathetic person, I understand people's stories. So I don't look down on anybody. And I'll help anybody.

**Joe Mcloughlin 1:25**

What was your experience of education like prior to working with them?

**John Gordon 1:31**

Well prior to working with The Clink, I was quite good. I'd done well, with my maths, I'd done well, with my English, I always like to sort of like re-educate, myself, I'd done quite a lot of Computer Studies, computer programming, sort of like theory-based, whereas when you work with The Clink it's more practical, it's more hands-on skills, and I think you kind of learn much more, much more from it, you know, when someone's showing you how to fillet a bit of steak or fillet a...debone a chicken or, you know, fillet a fish. And when you're learning that and you watch it and I say 'Right do it again, do it a different way then,' you know, I think with me personally, you only have to show me three times if that and then I'll pick it up. And I was happy to do it, you know, myself, especially with all the different types of dishes and the different stations they had in The Clink as well. It's a very, very good experience. And you're not locked off from the public, the public can see you working. So it was really, really good. Being a vegan myself as well. It was amazing, because people say, 'Oh, would you cook meat?' I have no problem cooking meat. I did a couple of jerk chicken and Caribbean dishes in The Clink and showing everybody how to do it, you know, lot of porridges in the morning, they used to help me making Caribbean porridges.

**Joe Mcloughlin 2:46**

And so just so I'm clear, then you worked in Clinks across the kind of secure estate. So in a number of different prisons, how did they support you as you came up to release kind of what happened to you transitioning from restaurants on site through to, you know, restaurants outside? If that makes sense.

### **John Gordon 3:06**

Joe, let me tell you the support from The Clink is second to none. I do solely believe had I not had The Clink supporting me, I probably wouldn't be on on this call to you now it would be impossible. And let me tell you for why, I was in a bad place mentally and socially with my circumstances. And they just took me to one side. They tasted my vegan burgers. I think it all started...I think my success was the vegan burgers. That's what got Tanya, you know, interested in me, and you know how...and my presenting skills and working and serving. And I think that's what got her interested and then they helped me. And you know, upon coming out the support they gave me with housing, looking for jobs, I went for two interviews, which I got. I went for two job interviews in two restaurants. I got those hands down, hands down I got them, no problem at all. And I think that was really, really good work done by them, they do carry a lot of weight.

### **Joe Mcloughlin 4:14**

So John, can you tell us a bit more about how you felt supported by The Clink and what that meant to you personally?

### **John Gordon 4:20**

I think they got me on the right path. Not that I wouldn't be on the right path. But I think that just that extra phone call to relay because there was a lot of stuff getting lost in translation when I was looking for a place...my support worker from The Clink, Janice, presented my cases. Look, John has gone through a lot while he's been at The Clink. He's gone through this he's gone through that, all documented. So I think when they heard another person speaking on your behalf, from a professional capacity, Joe, it honestly it weighs very heavy on them helping you if that makes sense knowing that you've got someone there to help you. 'Right I want to get a job, can you help me?' 'Right John there's two jobs.' 'I want to get somewhere to live John can...' They even paid the deposit on my...where I'm living now, I'm currently living, still living there now. Clink, paid the deposit. You couldn't get any better help than The Clink. And I mean that from the bottom of my heart, what they've done for me...I'm getting a bit emotional, what they've done for me. Yeah, what they've done for me Joe. I couldn't, couldn't, it was very, very good. Yeah, very good. Very good. It really helped me a lot.

### **Joe Mcloughlin 5:33**

I'm just thinking then kind of because it sounds like you had a great experience with them. It sounds like you're really, really kind of thankful and appreciative.

More generally, what do you think is the sort of value of education in prisons like what would you what would you say to, I don't know, say if you got chatting to the Prime Minister one day or you got chatting to the Home Secretary one day, kind of what would you say to them about the value of education in prisons?

**John Gordon 6:00**

Joe, the value of education in any establishment is extremely important. So basically, if you help someone re-educate them, either practically, or theoretically, you know, where they can, they've got different ways of learning skills, you know. But if you do practical stuff with them - bricklaying, cooking, plastering, electrician, plumber, the basic things, that then stops that person from reoffending. Education is the way out of the system for good, as long as there's support there. So if I was talking to the Prime Minister, or anybody, I would say, you really need to spend a lot of money on re educating your offenders rather than reoffending. Not reoffending, re-educating. This, this is the message that I need to get across to them. They could have a property boom, right we need bricklayers, let's get them. They could build more railways, more tubes, right we need tube drivers, let's get them, you know, that sort of thing. Whatever is in the market, what they really need the most...nurses, how can you get maybe people that have committed maybe low-level offences into the nursing system, because they're crying out and for teaching, you know, maybe they can teach in prisons because they've had this experience. So Joe, education is very, very, very, very important within the system in any establishment. It's the best way to get them out of the system and not to re-offend.

**Joe Mcloughlin 7:28**

A huge thanks to John Gordon for sharing his inspiring story. Now, the award-winning work of The Clink Charity has been described as pioneering. So it was great to catch up with its Chief Executive Yvonne Thomas, who started by explaining to me how the charity came about.

**Yvonne Thomas 7:43**

So The Clink Charity was founded about 11 years ago, and started life in High Down prison, which is near Sutton, just outside of London. And it was the first fine dining restaurant where all of the cooking, serving and everything else is undertaken by serving prisoners who are trained by Chef trainers and general manager trainers in order to achieve NVQ Level City and Guilds qualifications.

**Joe Mcloughlin 8:13**

So you'd consider yourself as a first and foremost as a training provider, then a skills provider?

**Yvonne Thomas 8:19**

Yes, the mission of our charity is to help people to stop reoffending. And the medium we use to achieve that is education, skills, and allowing people in prison to experience a real work environment prior to release. We then support them after release, so that they have their qualifications. We match them with employers, and they then go on to work in the industry, the hospitality and leisure industry.

**Joe Mcloughlin 8:49**

And so could you tell us some of the successes you've had with this work then either in general, or if there's particular personal stories that stand out to you?

**Yvonne Thomas 8:57**

There are literally hundreds. I think if I look at it from an organisational perspective, some of the things that have been happening over the last 12 months, we were particularly pleased to be able to open effectively a commercial bakery in Brixton prison, which we opened in November. And that allowed us to train more people. So we can train up to 10 men at a time in Brixton prison in the NVQ in Patisserie, and it allowed us to add two new qualifications to our specialised portfolio. And that has been a really, really interesting journey for the men who are training in there. And for us as an organisation because it's such a specialist area, and it's really in demand in the hospitality and catering professions. I think the second thing that we're really pleased about - we have an events arm and it's run entirely out of Downview women's prison in Surrey, and it serves very high end venues in the City of London and Events was set up about five years ago and of course, with the pandemic coming along, the whole of the hospitality industry effectively closed our events arm really did struggle. In the last 12 months, the recovery has been so good that we've trained of the order of 15-16 women up to and including an NVQ Level Three standard, which is really high standard. But that business is now turning over a million pounds. Bearing in mind, everything is prepared inside a prison in our specialised kitchen. The surplus that generates helps towards the charity's sustainability. And so we're proud of it on a number of fronts. The first is the quality of the training that we undertake in Clink events is absolutely superb. Getting people in prison who don't traditionally come from a background of formal educational learning, in many cases, getting them to an NVQ Level Three standard is quite a big achievement both from the perspective of our trainers, but also the

perspective of the women in Bristol, who we are training. The other notable thing that happened this year from an organisational perspective was our restaurant that's open to the public in Brixton Prison was awarded a TripAdvisor Traveller's Choice Award. And that means it was rated in the top 10% worldwide of all of the TripAdvisor restaurants. Now again, this is men in prison who are cooking, preparing and serving all of the food under supervision from our chef trainers.

**Joe Mcloughlin 11:31**

Listen fantastic successes there for sure. Picking up on one of the points you made there about the challenge of getting learners to sort of Level Threes. I was just wondering kind of what are your thoughts on the level of education and skills offenders seem to have kind of prior to imprisonment prior to working with you, are you shocked?

**Yvonne Thomas 11:49**

People in prison on the whole without wishing to generalise have lower standards of educational attainment than for example, an FE College would see. Because of that we have to adapt our teaching methods, we have to work very intensively. We also have a higher percentage of people with learning difficulties. And therefore the whole background against which you are delivering the qualifications has to be very cognisant of the educational levels and of the possible challenges of the learners.

**Joe Mcloughlin 12:23**

Thinking about that, then, could you give us an example maybe of how your trainers would change their practice how they would amend their practice to kind of work with those lower levels?

**Yvonne Thomas 12:32**

Yes. So if we look at skills and basic English and maths, for example, we adopt a very practical and hands on approach to the way we teach. It's the nature of the qualification in a sense, but if somebody doesn't have a high level, or an adequate level of English and maths attainment, things like following recipes can be quite challenging. And therefore we adopt a way of teaching that is we demonstrate and explain once we then ask the student, one on one to go through what we've just explained. And we use, you know, the physical, practical ingredients, as the maths elements, we use the recipes as the English

elements. So we really, really ground the basic skills development in the practicalities of what they're doing in the kitchen, or out serving guests. They will by the end of that, of course be proficient enough in English and maths to be able to attain that qualification.

**Joe Mcloughlin 13:32**

And so thinking about that, that disengagement at school, or that kind of not getting the kind of that kind of education in school, what elements of your practice would you recommend to take into schools or colleges that you think could make a difference?

**Yvonne Thomas 13:44**

The men and women that we work with and train respond really well to the fact that they are doing something that is purposeful, they're doing something that has a point, and it has an end product, the end product, either being a meal, or a drink, or service or taking payments, so they can see the relationship between the skills that they're developing and the difference it makes. And I think the learning that I would take from that, is that because there are so many different ways that people like to learn, and the people that we train typically are people who respond very well, to a very practically grounded approach. And I'm not sure a traditional education model does that, you know, it is very classroom based, it can be very abstract. So I think when you have people who have not engaged in school level education, and that might be for various reasons, but I'm sure that one of the contributory reasons is they couldn't see the point and the way we teach you can see the point.

**Joe Mcloughlin 14:47**

Recognising that difference then recognising the kind of practical learning with an end goal in mind versus like the more abstract learning of schools and maybe parts of colleges, is The Clink looking to partner with schools and colleges? Is that something that you've considered or you're maybe talking about at the moment?

**Yvonne Thomas 15:03**

We have no plans to partner with colleges in the traditional sense, but we get great support from some of the specialist catering colleges, particularly in the London area. And we get great support from the industry in the sense of masterclasses, et cetera. So our partnerships tend to be ones that focus on the

people that we're training in prison, and how to support them best post release? I think, because our focus is reducing reoffending. I think that we will, going forward continue to focus where we are, which is in prisons, but we will increasingly look at trying to support people who could be at risk of reoffending in the community.

**Joe Mcloughlin 15:49**

What advice would you give to kind of any colleges or training providers who are looking to set up training schemes with sort of secure estate facilities?

**Yvonne Thomas 15:57**

The big piece of advice that we would have is, if it's hospitality, focus on the fact that it's hospitality, don't present it as training, make sure that what you put at the centre of the activity is the quality of what needs to be produced. And that allows the learners to focus on the outcomes. And it allows the learners to get really engaged in the experience that you're trying to create by running a training restaurant or a training cafe. And I think at whatever age people are, so young people who perhaps are in secure colleges, or the older learners that we deal with, I don't think there's a great deal of difference in what they would respond to. We would probably say, well actually use the restaurant use whatever canteen you have, and that should be the focus of where your training goes. So it's real. So get your students to run the facility, and train them to do it is a model that works well for us.

**Joe Mcloughlin 16:57**

There are currently pushes from dozens of MPs to standardise prisoner education and bring it all back under public control. Do you welcome this push? Or are you wary of it? Or do you see it as an opportunity?

**Yvonne Thomas 17:09**

I don't see the issues with education in prisons as being solely down to whether the provision is publicly provided or privately provided the challenges with education and prison from what we see day to day are very linked to the wider challenges that the prison system is facing at the moment, with low levels of staffing, high level of vacancies, that has a knock on effect into the ability to get people in prison into their education blocks, it has a knock on effect into the level of prison employment within the prison. And therefore, I think you could change education provision, and not make a material difference to the outcomes



that have been provided. So education in prison will thrive if the prison itself is able to run functionally. And unfortunately, at the moment, there are real challenges within prisons, you know, around all sorts of issues. So I think the temptation is to change the model, because clearly the model is not working. But I think if we look at the root causes of why the model is not working, it might lead us to the fact that maybe some other things need to be fixed before you start changing education provision models.

**Joe Mcloughlin 18:30**

Thinking about prisons in society, we hear an awful lot of soundbites about you know, being tough on crime, and it always seems to get positive headlines and be a vote winner, or at least would seem to be a vote winner. Kind of given your experience, do you think we've got the balance right between prisoners' punishment and prisoners' rehabilitation?

**Yvonne Thomas 18:49**

The statistics would tell us that prison is not rehabilitative, because the reoffending rates are still very high. So we lock up more people per head of population than anyone else in Europe. We're one of the highest in the world. And it's a very, very expensive exercise. So I guess I would say, okay, so this costs a lot, about £45,000 per year per place. It doesn't work very well, because the reoffending rates are very high. So I would question the efficacy of the system. I do accept, it's politically popular, but socially, when we have a cost of living crisis, we've got a government spending crisis, crime has been dropping year on year. So I don't understand why we continue to invest in yet more prison places to lock up yet more people to spend yet more £45,000 a year on each one of them, for them to come out and re-offend. That doesn't make very much sense to me.

**Joe Mcloughlin 19:54**

Just picking up on a point there of...that you worry there might be an assumption that people assume that the punishment is the rehabilitation, right as in this bad thing has happened to me, I've been denied my freedom. I won't do again, whatever led me here. To what extent do you think your work is about training the public, as much as it is about training prisoners?

**Yvonne Thomas 20:14**

We definitely have the ability to help people to think differently about people in prison. So, you know, the number of people who visit our restaurants - our three restaurants are all open to the public - many of them are coming into a prison for the first time. And they are encouraged to chat and engage with the staff in the restaurant who are all serving prisoners, and they walk away with a completely different perspective on the whole. So yes, I think we...part of our role is the advocacy for what people in prison can achieve if they're given some different options, some good training, and are treated like people as opposed to prisoners, they are people in prison. And it's the people bit that's important. The comments we get tend to be 'But it was just like a normal restaurant' and we go, 'Well, yes, it is'. So well, you know, what happens to those men or women, when they finish serving, you say, well, they go back to their cells, and they say 'Oh, right...and they stay there?' And you go, 'Yeah, they stay there till tomorrow, and then they'll come back to work again.' So it really does make people think, and I think, you know, if you haven't met somebody knowingly, who's been in prison, and you're meeting them in that environment, and you realise that the people you're talking to are far more like people, you know, than maybe the typical pen picture of what somebody in prison should be like. It really does help people to be more understanding, I think of the challenges that some people face.

**Joe Mcloughlin 21:49**

In preparation for today, I was looking over your website and looking over your kind of Impact Report, I was amazed by the...in your 10th anniversary year, you delivered around 320,000 hours of training to 441 offenders and saw 104 people graduate into release and work kind of from that course from those courses over that year. That's really impressive figures. I just...I'm curious; in a situation that you've already kind of alluded to, and spoken about where prison education is difficult, educating offenders is challenging, what do you think the appeal is of those more vocational qualifications and skills in the prison context, as opposed to the more kind of as you described, abstract subjects?

**Yvonne Thomas 22:30**

I think there are a number of different factors that make Clink training appealing to people in prison. The first is, if it's training in a restaurant, it occupies a decent chunk of the week, because prisons are very, very boring places. And there's often not enough work within the prison for the prisoners. So the first thing is it gives them meaning and purpose. We insist that they do two weeks on probation with us on trial. And then after the two weeks, we ask them to commit to a qualification. If they don't want to do a qualification, we say, well, we want to work with people who want to do qualifications. I think the first thing is the recruitment of people into the training is really important that everybody

understands what their obligations are on both sides. I think the second thing is it's an opportunity to interact with people in a different way. In The Clink kitchens, they will be interacting with their trainer, who they'll see probably two, three times a week, and also with their Clink support worker, who, when they're coming up for release, we'll start to work with them on things like a CV preparation, start to tease out of them what they may need to help them successfully reintegrate. And that's a massive benefit that our trainees and graduates really see. There is help beyond release, and we stay with them and support them for as long as they need us. That is seen as a massive benefit. The training is engaging, it's a lot better than doing nothing. The opportunities for post release employment are teed up prior to release and the support for all of the other things that you need to make a success of holding down a job is there. So support for accommodation support for perhaps ongoing drug treatment support for practical things like what happens if you've got a job, but you've still got to go and see your probation officer and the appointment's in the middle of your shift? What do you do? We help them with all of those types of things. And that's why we have a good employment rate post release because we match our graduates really carefully with employers, and we support the employer as well so they understand what allowances they may need to make for an individual. But word gets round with people in prison that with The Clink we'll always be there to support and help.

**Joe Mcloughlin 25:01**

So in January of this year, vacancies in catering and hospitality were reported at around 146,000. So, I mean, despite your successes, it's clear, it's clear that The Clink on their own can't fill those gaps. But what do you think catering colleges or employers could learn from your work on upskilling people and kind of getting people into the workplace?

**Yvonne Thomas 25:23**

We operate a really careful matching process. And we spend quite a lot of time with employers talking about what will work and maybe what won't work with the sort of people that we're likely to be sending along as prospective employees. So I guess that side of our work is like being a very personalised agency, really, we always make sure that if an employer is struggling with an employee that we've helped place that they know that they can come back to us and say, we're having a problem. And, and so it's very much a very supported environment. And again, it strikes me that if you've got young people, particularly who are entering the hospitality industry, or want to enter the hospitality industry, it's a tough world. And it's, it's a world that has over the years had a reputation for being quite difficult to work in, particularly in the kitchen side. And I think though, there is some really interesting work being



done by some of the leading chefs in the UK, to actually make the kitchen-based workplace a more supportive environment. And I think that colleges and employers are becoming really much more aware of that, but more campaigns around just because it's a kitchen doesn't mean to say it has to be unpleasant. You can't treat people any worse in that work environment than you can in any other. I think those types of messages need to be clear and consistent and workplaces where the right values aren't adhered to need to be challenged.

**Joe Mcloughlin 26:59**

Thank you to my guests, John Gordon and Yvonne Thomas, and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation and that it has got you thinking about the connections between offenders, education and wider society. You can keep up to date with the podcast on social media, follow us on [Twitter](#) @SkillsEduGroup or search Skills and Education Group on [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Do remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts and let's go further together.