

# Should charities run prisons?

**The question of what role charities should play when working with private prisons is a hotly-debated topic. Here, we ask two charities in the prison sector for their opinion.**

At the end of last year, Nacro, the national criminal justice charity, made waves when it became involved in a bid to run prisons, in partnership with a private security firm, GS4. While NACRO was ultimately unsuccessful, another partnership between a private company and two charities, Turning Point and Catch 22, did win the contract.

We asked Juliet Lyon, the Director of the Prison Reform Trust, and Jackie Worrall, Director of Policy and Public Affairs at Nacro for their perspectives on the issue.



**Juliet Lyon,  
Director of Prison  
Reform Trust**

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is concerned that prisons should be just, humane and

effective. They should be reserved for the most serious and dangerous offenders, freeing up investment for more constructive community solutions to crime. A major reservation we have about introducing the profit motive to prisons is that it necessarily creates a strong vested interest in what some see as a growth market, namely increasing the number of people held in custody.

Voluntary organisations have a vital role to play in the care of prisoners, whether they are held in public or private institutions, and in their resettlement on release. PRT understands some of the potential benefits of charities being involved in designing, planning and managing a prison. However, collaboration of this sort with the private sector, particularly at the bidding stage, does raise a number of questions.

As partnering with charities undoubtedly improves the image of a private company, and arguably its profitability, should a charity provide this cloak of respectability for an enterprise that is ultimately answerable to its shareholders for the profit it makes? Should charitable funds be used to help generate profit for a partner organisation? Will charitable aims be distorted by the interests of the dominant partner? Being tied in to contractual relationships for many years may produce benefits for each partner, but the risks to the charity's identity, and ultimately to its charitable status, aims and impact, also need very careful consideration.

**'Should charitable funds be used to help generate profit for a partner organisation?'**



**Jackie Worrall,  
Nacro**

Nacro has a long history of working in prisons providing services to prisoners and prison staff. We currently work in

around 40 prisons, both public and private, providing resettlement help and advice. When the opportunity arose to bid to run prisons, it made sense for Nacro, which has a vast amount of expertise in rehabilitating prisoners, to be part of a consortium involved.

We are strongly committed to providing high quality services to prisoners and reducing offending, so we believed it would have been in the interests of the whole community for a charity like ours to be involved in shaping and designing a well-planned regime. Nacro has never proposed to start building prisons or managing security. As a partner our role would have been to provide an effective and constructive resettlement regime that would have supported prisoners during sentence and after release.

We do not believe in any way that our involvement in prison bids would compromise our ability to lobby or criticise private providers or government policy. We remain opposed to the Government's strategy of expanding the prison system. We would like to see newly built prisons replacing old or badly-located prisons, rather than extending the prison estate. But we would be failing in our mission if we allowed criticisms to deflect us from providing resettlement help to as many prisoners as we can in every type of prison. The best way for Nacro to ensure that prison regimes and resettlement services are of a good standard is to get into prisons—public and private—and work to improve the regimes by participating in delivering them.



**'We would be failing in our mission if we allowed criticisms to deflect us from providing resettlement help to as many prisoners as we can.'**