



THE EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF  
PRISONS AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

## EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

### Colin McConnell

EuroPris talks with Colin McConnell, Chief Executive  
Scottish Prison Service

Colin McConnell first joined the Scottish Prison Service in 1982 as a Prison Officer, before being selected for the fast-stream Assistant Governor Training Programme. After training, Colin served at Glenochil Prison, then as Management Development Officer at the Scottish Prison Service College. In 1992, he transferred to HM Prison Service for England and Wales, developing his qualifications and experience through a number of both operational and policy roles. In 2010, he was seconded to the Northern Ireland Prison Service as Director of Operations and appointed Director General in January 2011. Colin was appointed Chief Executive of the Scottish Prison Service in May 2012.



**EuroPris:** How many Prison establishments do you oversee?

**Colin McConnell:** 13 public sector prisons and 2 private sector contractor-managed prisons.

**How many prisoners are in prison at the moment in Scotland?**

7,800

**How many staff do you manage?**

4,400

**What are in your opinion the required attributes and qualifications of someone wanting to be a prison officer?**

Qualities of a Prison Officer: integrity, self-confidence and personal resilience; commitment to see things through; believe in the equal value of others and believe in the capacity of others to positively change; believe that 'I' can make a telling contribution and be the catalyst for life-changing, life enhancing development in others.

Skills of a Prison Officer: highly developed inter-personal abilities including relationship-building and advocacy; clear and convincing communicator; negotiation and problem-solving; and making connections, building networks and promoting well-being.



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Qualifications of a Prison Officer: entry as a Prison Officer need not require a degree-level qualification but should require a good standard of secondary school achievement. Career-long professional development to first degree-standard should follow, made up from modules related to the criminal justice sector and more specifically the penal environment. Modules should include penology, psychology, sociology and criminology as well as law, political science and human growth and development. Through initial training, education and testing, Prison Officers should attain a 'professional licence to practice' without which sustained employment in the field is not possible. The 'licence' should be subject to periodic renewal by way of CPD and personal practice supervision. Pathways to further qualifications, including specialising in a particular area of offender-related work, could also be made available and encouraged.

**What is the biggest concern with regards to security in prisons in your country?**

Security concerns in our prisons generally reflect those internationally. The prevention of escapes both from within prisons and when prisoners are being escorted from location to location remain our top security priority. The prevention or detection of illicit and prohibited items being transited into the prison environment is also a day-to-day challenge.

**What do you consider to be the biggest achievements for your service in 2013? What challenges you had to overcome?**

The publication of our Organisational Review, *Unlocking Potential: Transforming Lives*. The report was over a year in the making and drew on reflections, knowledge, learning and experience from both within and out-with the Scottish Prison Service. A new paradigm for the Service has emerged, re-positioning the traditional narrowly focused 'prison service' to that of a connected, networked and integrated 'citizen recovery service'.

**What are the challenges for your service this year?**

We have committed to a change programme which is designed to realise the new vision of the Scottish Prison Service. The change programme is set out in our published Corporate Plan, which spans the next 3 years and our detailed delivery plan which sets out what we will achieve by the end of March 2015.

**In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for the European prison and correctional services at the moment?**

Developing a common and valuable discussion/project agenda which can drive inter-agency and inter-jurisdictional learning and perhaps inspire multi-jurisdictional initiatives. Ensuring each jurisdiction has a strong voice and impact with EuroPris is a challenge too.

**What benefits do you see being linked as a Member to an organisation such as EuroPris?**

EuroPris brings with it the capacity to contact and connect and to build relationships and networks that can be leveraged for mutual benefit. This is a real and perhaps under-appreciated strength.



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**Do your prisons engage with NGO's / Charities?**

Yes. SPS has a wide range of partners in both the funded and not-for-profit sectors. Our work would not be as effective without these partnerships and influences and we seek to develop co-produced solutions where ever and whenever possible.

**What are the most important personal satisfactions and dissatisfactions connected with your occupation? What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying? Most challenging? What do you like and not like about working in the correctional field?**

This is a quite remarkable environment to work in. I believe there are no direct comparators and nothing, in my view, quite so challenging or demanding anywhere in either the public or private sectors. Our work involves caring for some of the most troubled and deprived citizens from our communities; and of course those who have, by their actions, caused hurt and distress to others (and in some cases to the extreme). And yet for all of that, our work is to seek to help and to support and to help to heal and make good the communities that those who pass our way come from and inevitably go back to. This is a tremendously complex and difficult challenge to address and yet, as I have said, there is no other job role that can have the same transformationally positive impact for so few and yet so many all at the same time. I simply would not swap it.

**If you could be remembered for one thing whilst being in charge what would it be?**

Reducing the stigma attached to those who are sent to prison and replacing it with a publicly acceptable view that being sent to prison is punishment enough and that through a period of imprisonment, a debt owed to society for a wrong done is then paid in full. Everything that follows publicly and politically acknowledged to be aimed at helping a citizen in prison to build on whatever talents they have, as means toward them growing in confidence and contribution, making our communities and our country as a whole, safer and stronger.