



# **“It’s not just a slogan”: Deeds Not Words, a transitional employment co-operative**

**Mick McKeown, Ashley Mayoh, Victoria Ecclestone, and The Women of Deeds Not Words**

*Deeds Not Words* is a new co-operative established for women who have had substantial mental health difficulties, coming out of prison and residing in an approved premises. Two important contextual dimensions have been influential. First, the co-operative is based in Preston and its development has been supported as part of the broader development of the so-called Preston Model of community wealth building. Second, the women have been engaged with Psychologically Informed Planned Environments, a form of democratised therapeutic support. This article describes the context and process whereby the co-operative has been set up and some of the experiences of women who have been involved. We argue for the value of such initiatives as a form of transitional employment for a marginalised group and comment on the congruence between the care and treatment model and co-operative principles and practices.

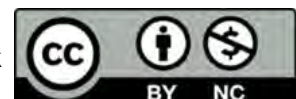
## **Introduction**

In this article we reflect upon a new worker’s co-operative, *Deeds Not Words* (DNW), established at Edith Rigby House (ERH) residential facility for women coming out of prison on the way to living independently in the community. The article has been co-authored by staff and women from the co-operative and allied academics. The text is based upon conversations amongst the authors, as well as recollections and reflections on the development process, gleaned from contemporaneous notes. Meetings informing the writing have included the women involved in DNW discussing their experiences in the co-operative and how they see its importance. We then used this material to form the basis of a draft article, which we have circulated amongst ourselves for feedback and redrafting. The finished piece offers a descriptive and reflective account of the context and circumstances leading to the creation of the co-operative, with observations on its successes and aspirations for future impact.

## **What is Deeds Not Words?**

ERH in Preston is an approved premises operating as a Psychologically Informed Planned Environment (PIPE). The co-operative harnesses the artistic and creative talents and energies

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of women residents to produce design ideas which are then translated into saleable products such as clothing, Christmas baubles, and stress-busting colouring books (<https://www.deedsnotwords.net/>). Edith Rigby staff and residents work together within the co-operative to coproduce designs and sell products at local markets and online. The garment making and printing is outsourced. Co-operative members are also engaged in broader activities to promote the co-operative and engage people in consideration of the social value of this work.

PIPEs exemplify a commitment to the democratisation of pathways through the criminal justice system, emphasising intensely relational practice. This approach arguably complements the democratic and empowerment principles of co-operative businesses. These values are also reflected in the naming choice of the approved premises and the new co-operative, called after the locally celebrated Preston suffragette and the famous women's suffrage slogan respectively. This emancipatory heritage is further manifested in the products created and sold by DNW, which often incorporate radical messages and imagery within their designs. We refer to DNW as an emergent co-operative business, as it is arguably not yet a fully functioning co-operative sustainable without grant funding; though this is the longer-term aim.

## **The Operating Context**

Arguably, DNW has been set up within an opportune operating context that combines a local imperative to support co-operative development and a growing interest in modelling new initiatives at the intersection of mental health and criminal justice services that are relational and democratic. This brings together critical thinking and investment associated with both the Preston Model of community wealth building and efforts to organise and sustain PIPEs.

PIPEs trace a lineage back to earlier therapeutic communities (TCs) (Bolger & Turner, 2013; Preston, 2015; Turley et al., 2013). These were noted for organising inpatient mental health care in democratic, respectful, and dialogic ways with a commitment to consensual engagement and permissiveness, ideals often lacking in more mainstream services (Pearce & Haigh, 2017). This ethos connects with wider thinking about how best to organise democracy across society as a whole (Winship, 2013). The approach is labour intensive, and professionals must be skilled facilitators of communication. Interestingly, within a TC everyone becomes everyone's therapist; a patient is as likely to be encouraged towards positive and prosocial behaviour by a fellow patient as a member of staff, and patients can challenge staff about their actions. Set piece democratic dialogue is organised in community meetings, but all encounters are encouraged to be democratic and mutually enhancing. In this way, TCs are essentially co-operative environments, and it is this co-operation that proves to be healing, promoting personal psychological growth.

In the classic TCs, people would take time to realise such benefits and arguably such models of practice are not a good fit for modern, neoliberal psychiatric systems, driven to reduce length of stay and beset with low staffing levels and high staff turnover. PIPEs can be seen to represent part of a rearguard action to defend TC principles and practices, and also capitalise upon the fact that criminal justice settings often do have the luxury of extended time to sustain such relational models of care and support. In the wider mental health system, precious few TCs have survived, but there has been a resurgence of interest in notions of relational and restorative practice, especially in recognition of the ways in which decades of austerity have coincided with increasing levels of compulsion and coercion in services (Lamph et al., 2023).

## **Early Efforts**

Important envisioning for change was initiated by Victoria Ecclestone. Having worked in His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service male estate for a number of years, a real drive to get men into employment was acknowledged but the same offer was not available for women. Recognising the additional complexities women face in the carceral system, Ecclestone wanted

to create a business founded by women for women to offer employment opportunities for all not just the few. Initial funding was provided by specialist secure care commissioning channels and a grant from the Open Society Foundation (OSF), administered by Preston Cooperative Development Network (PCDN). This enabled consultancy input from Co-operative and Mutual Solutions (CMS) worker co-operative. The local context of co-operative development exists within the Preston Model of community wealth building (CWB), an increasingly successful place-based approach for addressing economic justice, built upon procurement practices of anchor institutions. This keeps wealth in the local economy, increasing employment and supporting decent work, raising living standards through commitments to a real living wage, and creating worker co-operatives to fill gaps in the local economic ecosystem (Manley & Whyman, 2021). Co-operative development connects with an aspiration of CWB to boost democratic participation, explicitly within the democratised governance of co-operatives but also hopefully extending into other realms of civic engagement and mutuality (Beveridge & Koch, 2022). The context of the Preston Model confirms Gordon-Nembhard and West's (2025) observation that supportive ecosystems are important for the genesis of incarcerated worker co-operatives.

The architects of the Preston Model want further growth in co-operative development to include diverse and marginalised communities, previously excluded from mainstream labour markets or subject to the vicissitudes of precarious, low paid employment. Economic analysis shows Preston has improved employment in comparison to similarly situated towns, benefiting previously marginalised groups such as disabled people (Rose et al., 2025).

In January 2020, the local university's Criminal Justice Partnership (a network of researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers), convened a symposium bringing together key actors in the local and regional context. This event was introduced by Mick McKeown, Rex Haigh, and Nick Benefield, prominent in calls to develop a relational practice movement alongside underpinning critical thinking, including relational and restorative practices (Haigh & Benefield, 2023; Spandler & McKeown, 2017). Participants included specialist commissioners of secure mental health services, who fund the local PIPEs, and Preston Model stakeholders. Workshops foregrounding mutual interests in democracy and co-operation began to coalesce ideas to form a co-operative to realise commissioner and practitioner objectives to support the employability and community re-entry of prisoners and ex-prisoners. It was immediately grasped that the democratised organisation of worker co-operatives was neatly congruent with the organising principles of the PIPEs, and people already progressing through the therapeutic PIPE regimes could possess a strong foundation for contributing within a co-operative. Likewise, participation in a co-operative could extend the positive social and psychological benefits of the PIPE experience. This could offer incarcerated individuals opportunities to assume the positive identity of worker rather than carry the stigmatised identity of offender, and this could support desistance from offending. Elsewhere, such as in the Italian Emilia Romagna region, various prison co-operatives have been successfully established (Ecchia & Mazzanti, 2016; Picciotti et al., 2014).

The commissioners convened a team of interested practitioners and service managers across the local criminal justice and mental health sectors to harness strategic input into securing funding and early planning. These efforts resulted in two strands of work supported with the input of Gareth Nash and Dave Nicholson from CMS, focused respectively within the PIPEs at ERH and Wymott, a men's prison in Lancashire. Developments have been slower to materialise at Wymott, arguably because of extant limitations on creation of employment opportunities within the more restrictive environment of a prison.

ERH is a large detached Georgian house in central Preston, re-furbished into an approved premises (AP). It houses women residents in a number of bedrooms, staff offices, and other meeting spaces. At ERH, the AP manager led on efforts to coproduce the idea of focusing the co-operative on artistic design, working alongside other staff, resident women, and the CMS co-operative development consultants to turn this into a business prospect. The co-operative continues to dynamically refresh its designs within its own democratic organising processes. DNW currently occupies the basement area of ERH, but has been constituted separately, so

that even though the co-operative is supported by ERH staff and funding has come from the same commissioners, DNW is an independent entity.

## Working in DNW

Both residents and staff report various benefits of working within DNW. For staff there is renewed interest in addressing matters of employability and community re-entry in novel ways. There is also opportunity to clearly endorse PIPE values and organising principles as part of helping to shape co-operative participation and governance. Taken together, these experiences coalesce to bolster staff job fulfilment and commitment to a role that can be quite challenging. The staff take pride and professional satisfaction in seeing women residents grow into effective co-operators, becoming increasingly confident in job roles within the co-operative.

The business focus of DNW recognises the innate creativity and talents of the women collectively, playing to strengths and building capabilities and confidence along the way. In many respects, such recognition has been previously absent or lacking in the troubled lives these women have experienced prior to, and during, incarceration. While working in the co-operative, women acquire new skills and build upon established capabilities including art skills, selling skills, and earning the trust to hold money belonging to the co-operative.

One staff member delights in telling an anecdote about DNW's regular market stall. In the early days, there was a contrast between one relatively quiet woman who seemingly lacked confidence encouraging passersby to purchase goods, compared with another woman who already had experience of working in a market. In this scenario, the first woman was quiet as a mouse to start with, offering potential customers little more than cursory information, but eventually learned from her peer who possessed a confident loudness and relaxed market banter. She grew into the sales role, and now, according to this member of staff, "you couldn't shut her up."

The women in DNW also express pride in the quality of their work, appreciating seeing how the designs made in the basement of ERH are eventually transformed into tangible, desirable products for sale. The women co-operators have also spent time attending meetings, conferences, and other opportunities to tell people about their work and publicise the co-operative. This has included providing teaching input on mental health and criminal justice worker education courses at the university and beyond.

At the end of their time at ERH, women are not always released directly to the local community, potentially being dispersed around the country. This limits the extent to which women can stay involved in the co-operative once they have left the approved premises. As such, DNW and other offender/ex-offender co-operatives may be best thought of as providing transitional employment. For instance, demonstrating capabilities and commitment for work, establishing achievements on personal CVs and employment records, such that individuals are then better placed to secure jobs within the mainstream labour market. It has been argued that such initiatives ought to go beyond simple employment goals, and positive impacts might include contribution to desistance from future offending (see Nicholson & McKeown 2021, Weaver 2016).

Beth Weaver and colleagues (Weaver, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2026; Weaver & Weaver, 2016, Weaver et al., 2019, 2023) have called attention to the potential for co-operative and coproduced models of employment to add to the already known positive benefits of employment for people exiting incarceration and hoping to forge a new life within communities. In this respect, key characteristics of co-operative work connect with policy principles of community coproduction and are seen to potentiate important dimensions of personal growth, notably self-respect and agency. An emphasis on reciprocal relationships supports development of prosocial identities, citizenship and, ultimately, community integration. Ironically, these capabilities are often those most negatively impacted by periods of incarceration and any unsupported exit from

detention. For Weaver, social co-operatives offer a road to redemption for individuals who carry the heavy stigma of incarceration and offender identity. Latterly, McNeill, Corcoran, and Weaver (2026) have coined the term “generative justice” to encompass all the various democratised and participatory approaches that potentiate positive justice outcomes. Whilst Weaver extolls the virtues of co-operative solutions, she also tellingly points out the relative lack of such provision.

## Finding Meaning in Mutuality

Scholars of work and the labour process focus attention on the importance of meaningful work. Indeed, work that offers little sense of meaning is ultimately alienating and unfulfilling (Graeber, 2019) and it is our capacity for work, above all else, that defines us as human (Marx, 1844/1964). In our conversations at ERH, it was more than apparent that being involved in DNW, and the overarching ethos of support, is distinctly meaningful for the women workers:

We are just there for each other, aren't we? We all share what problems we have got ... in reflective space we are all just sat there sharing how we feel, so everyone knows what's going on, so that kind of helps us support each other.

As such, those involved in the development of DNW were at pains to create work that was rewarding and meaningful. Basing the work on the expressed wishes of the women and accessing their declared talents and creativity was one way of ensuring meaningfulness was baked into the emergent co-operative. In this way, the co-operative workers would be engaged in craftwork, essentially being in control of their labour process from the conception of an idea through to realisation of a design. As well as sharing in the benefits accruing from selling these design products, the women can also appreciate they are reciprocally and mutually supporting each other in the course of this work. In a classic sense, this exertion of control within the labour process and transaction of mutual support is in contradistinction with alienating work (Marx, 1844/1964). The women have also been able to innovate new ideas for products and technologies to assist their work; such as making costume jewellery using digital printing.

Matters of identity and recognition are also important for the DNW workforce. A point of interest for the women is that the suffragette Edith Rigby was herself jailed on at least seven occasions for her militancy, including admitting acts of violence and arson. She also experienced the harshness of overly coercive penal environments, including hunger strike and forced feeding. These resonances with their own experiences are not lost on the ERH residents. This recognition of common experience embraces humour, but also a degree of pride in being involved in work that reflects shared commitments to empowerment and justice; powerfully redolent with meaning for these previously disempowered women: “I'd not heard about the history but now I can see [that] slogan is such a powerful thing ... Deeds Not Words. It's more than just a slogan.”

Similarly, the women have begun to take more interest in the history of women's suffrage and empowerment. They initiated conversations about the suffragettes, were curious about the links between past and present hinted at in the naming of DNW and ERH, and expressed interest in learning more, resulting in screenings of relevant films and documentaries, followed by group discussions.

When we asked the women about what they liked about being involved in the co-operative, most emphasised appreciation for the general ERH milieu of mutual support between service users and professional staff at the unit: “When you come to an environment where you feel cared for you do better.”

Staff present in the conversations were singled out for credit in being trusted providers of care and support. Moreover, they talked about genuine concern for each other and a sense that they “had each other's backs”. It was acknowledged that fellow residents would understandably take time to settle into ERH when newly transferred. There would be anxieties around transitions, more upheaval when new and when about to leave, but in-between there is a time for less stressful relationships and developing helpful insights and social skills. It is in this period that the women are most likely to appreciate involvement in DNW.

This was not all dewy-eyed appreciation for positives: the women were strongly aware they were subject to rules and restrictions. What was appreciated was consistent and fair application of rules and thoughtful, empathic responses to breaches. With good humour, the residents could be starkly self-deprecatory, and critical of each other at times, with one woman noting the challenges of living closely to “a bunch of other women, you know”. This sort of sentiment would be tempered by its converse of knowing where each other were coming from, the emotional stresses of communal life, and the leakage of previous traumas into present relationships, with a commitment to help each other as best they can without prejudice: “We have all got a story, we have all got a past, so why judge people when you don’t know what they have been through.”

Interestingly, some of the women drew on their own storied lives to inspire the art or products that DNW create, like an adult colouring book designed by one of the residents based on her own experiences. Crucially, the women value the sort of mutually direct communication that is promoted within a TC: “It’s being honest with each other, open and honest” that is important.

Weekly planning meetings direct activities in the unit, an essential feature of a PIPE, and are reflected in the organising of the co-operative. In this way, the women residents are used to being democratically involved in planning at ERH, organising activities that suit people’s interests and what they enjoy doing. This collective planning of the week ahead establishes a principle of making sure everybody has a voice within the house, being highly congruent with co-operative principles.

Not all the women are looking for paid work. For some, this is because of the vagaries of the benefits system. When jobs exist they have to be worth the transition off benefits and the worry that cessation of employment might hazard returning to a lower level of support. Interestingly, choices around work prospects are coloured by previous experiences: for some women, anything akin to factory work is to be avoided as “boring, like slave labour”, hence the attraction of the craft basis of DNW. Alternately, some see dignity and camaraderie in factory work, having previously experienced this as workers before incarceration. The idea of control over one’s practice and experience of work appears crucial to both views.

When the women talked about their work and understanding of DNW, however, the language of co-operative organisation and governance was underplayed. Yet, the way they described the positive impacts of this work for themselves were replete with notions co-operators would recognise as the intended benefits of co-operative working. The women could readily associate these benefits with their more longstanding experiences of the PIPEs and everyday interactions in ERH. This seems to suggest that the founding co-operative principles of DNW, and how these relate to the PIPE ethos, could be providentially revisited with the workforce. This is especially important given the regular turnover of women passing through ERH and hence DNW. Thus, as the co-operative consolidates and deepens its democratic governance systems, appreciation of the nature and practice of working in a co-operative can be regularly reinforced.

## **Being a Voice for Change**

The women spoke with warmth and clarity about having a say in the everyday life of the unit and within decisions about their own progress (Feeling heard. I don’t like being told what to do).

Staff and residents were also acutely aware that women may experience multiple disadvantages within the carceral system: “Men get a better deal in prison, more canteens, more exercise ... Men run it, they really do. It is different for women in prison. The suicide risk is higher for women in prisons.”

Working in a co-operative that valorises female emancipation was felt to be a helpful antidote or rejoinder to these examples of women’s disadvantages within the system and society at large. An extension of this was the appeal of having a voice within society, and through the sales work of DNW, publicising the ethos and goals of the organisation:

Because we go to the market, we sell these t-shirts and offer leaflets ... we tell people what the business is actually for, the hope to get women ex-prisoners into work, back into the community ... to get more understanding of why we have done what we have done.

Reporting interactions with peers and the public, the women were at pains to challenge various prevailing stereotypes:

We are also showing them that we are real about wanting a job and are not wanting to sit on benefits or go back to using [drugs] or whatever ... So like us being here is actually changing a perspective. Because we actually want to go further in life.

The opportunity to be heard was understood and appreciated as part of an overall ethos within ERH and as an underlying message of DNW. This was contrasted with multiple perceptions of not being heard in the criminal justice system. There is also a strong sense of being able to shift public perceptions or reframe identity while becoming a worker, rather than being defined by one's past: "People just see what the past is and think criminals. Being heard and feeling valued is what is important ... from the suffragettes to people now in mental health crisis."

This process of redemption can chime in with an understanding of changed perceptions of Edith Rigby herself with the passage of time: "Yesterday's problem person becomes today's hero and heroine."

## Conclusions

Despite the numbers of women progressing through the DNW co-operative being modest to date, we are persuaded the value extends beyond the immediate utility of providing opportunities for meaningful work. It is hoped that co-operative working may contribute to broader resettlement and desistance objectives. The successes of DNW to date are reported largely in terms of qualitative improvements to personal growth, fulfilment, confidence, and aspirations. These are perhaps unsurprising outcomes of co-operative work. The congruence of co-operative systems and the implicit democracy of the PIPEs is undoubtedly helpful, and staff appreciation for the approach represents an endorsement of democratisation principles and relational practice. Positive outcomes of DNW as a form of transitional employment will need to be tracked longer term with regard to sustained employability or desistance from offending, but the outlook appears promising and worthy of continued investment. The relational character of co-operative work affords a shift from previously damaging, dehumanising, and coercive systems towards more respectful embrace of human agency and dignity (Haigh & Benefield, 2023).

The final word best belongs to one of the co-operators who eloquently states the transformational impact for her: "I've turned my life around since coming here ... if I had got out and been on my own I would have been back in prison."

## The Authors

Mick McKeown is Professor of Democratic Mental Health at the University of Lancashire and a board member of Preston Cooperative Education Centre and union-coops:UK. Ashley Mayoh is Approved Premises Manager at Edith Rigby PIPE Approved Premises. Working alongside Victoria Ecclestone, Ashley was involved in the launch of Deeds Not Words and its continued democratic leadership. Victoria Ecclestone is North West Approved Premises Area Manager with strategic leadership responsibility for PIPEs and founder of the co-operative business Deeds Not Words. The Women of Deeds Not Words are members of the Deeds Not Words co-operative and prefer to remain anonymous but are credited as co-authors collectively under the Deeds Not Words banner.

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