

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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**Where does the prison  
system go from here?**

*Special Edition*

# Editorial Comment

This special edition of *Prison Service Journal* has been commissioned in order to explore the question: where does the prison system go from here? This question has been posed as the prison system is at the start of a period of potential change.

There are at least three elements to this change. The first is that the global economic crisis that started in 2007 has led to the necessity to look afresh at how public services are delivered. The Spending Review was announced in October 2010 in order to provide a national plan for tackling the deficit in public finances. This is to be achieved predominantly by reducing public spending rather than by raising additional revenue. For the Ministry of Justice this will mean a 23 per cent reduction in funding over a four year period. Meeting this challenge will mean asking questions about the use of imprisonment. Can it continue to be used at the same rate and expanded at the same pace as over the last 15 years? Can it continue to be delivered in the same way? Will prison services have to be scaled back? Will they have to be delivered by different providers? These are all questions that have confronted governments around the world over the last three and a half years and will continue to challenge them. For many, this has led to a shift in their thinking about how many people should be in prison as well as what services they receive whilst they are incarcerated.

The second element of the potential change is that a new government was elected in the UK in May 2010. Elements of their policies are starting to emerge and will be fully announced in a sentencing Green Paper. One of the key aspects of the policy changes include challenging the use of imprisonment and arguing that imprisonment should not continue to expand and indeed should start to contract. This has been argued not only on grounds of efficiency, that this is not affordable, but also on effectiveness grounds, that community sentences often work better, and on moral grounds, that the continued expansion of prison is not justified. Many commentators have noted that this marks a shift in political policy. The second distinct area of policy emerging is about the approach to the purpose of imprisonment. There is an increased focus on rehabilitation and in making sure that prisons are effective at providing services that reduce the likelihood of prisoners reoffending on release. The third aspect is in re-examining the role of the state. This can be seen in discussion about the role of

commercial and charitable organisations in delivering services. This is not simply about competition but is also about what has been described as the 'Big Society', a broad idea about how citizens can contribute to the wider community and the achievement of political objectives.

The third dynamic element of the current landscape is the nature of the government. This is the first full coalition since the Second World War. It has been claimed by many, particularly those within the government, that this marked the beginning of the 'new politics', which would be less partisan and more collaborative. This is important as many commentators noted that the rise in the use of imprisonment was fuelled by political and media competitiveness about being tough on crime. If the ambition of a 'new politics' were to be realised that may mean a debate about crime and punishment that is more temperate and rational.

These issues are explored in this edition by nine prominent and knowledgeable players in the world of prisons. These include those with senior roles including the prisons minister, Crispin Blunt, the Chief Executive of NOMS, Michael Spurr, and the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Nick Hardwick. It also includes those who can speak from the perspective of those at the front line of prisons including Eoin McLennan-Murray, the President of the Prison Governors' Association, and John Bowers, an ex-prisoner and editor of the prisoner newspaper *Inside Time*. Prominent commentators are also interviewed including Richard Garside from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, and Juliet Lyons of the Prison Reform Trust. The edition also includes two experts who look at the issues from the perspective of specific groups. Rod Morgan brings his world-class expertise in young people in the criminal justice system, and Rachel Halford talks about the issues from the perspective of women in prison.

The issues were discussed with each of these interviewees through a standard list questions. These questions examined the key points including the size of the prison population and the conditions of imprisonment now and in the future. They also addressed prominent government policies including the 'big society', the 'broken society', the 'rehabilitation revolution' and the role of the commercial and charitable sectors. They were also asked about how these changes might have an impact on particular groups including prisoners, prison managers and prison staff.

Each of the contributors adds a distinctive and personal view but there are some common themes that emerge from the interviews. The most clear are that there is an emerging consensus that the use of imprisonment needs to be reduced and its purpose refocused on rehabilitation. There is also an orthodox view that is pragmatic about the operation of prisons and services, being comfortable with a mixed economy of public, commercial and charitable providers. Many of the interviewees also welcome the pilot of 'payment by results' at HMP Peterborough. In this innovative project, a consortium is investing up front in a scheme to mentor released prisoners with the prospect of making a return on their investment by being paid for reducing the instances of reoffending amongst those involved in the scheme. If successful, this may provide a model for a new approach to funding services for prisoners.

It is recognised by the interviewees that achieving their aims will be challenging. In particular the financial pressures will make it difficult to maintain services and there is a risk that there will be pressure to erode the quality of provision for prisoners. Some of the interviewees are also realistic that there may be media, political, professional and popular resistance to reducing the prison population,

particularly as this is turning a tide that has been progressing for over a decade and a half. How will this direction be maintained when inevitably a high profile case hits the headlines? What will the reaction be to political criticism and claims of being 'soft' on crime? How will the resistance of unions or professional groups such as judges be overcome? Finally, the interviewees recognise that an aim such as reducing reoffending is laudable but turning this into reality is difficult. What approaches work? Can complex social problems be effectively addressed in prison? Will payment by results be attractive to sufficient numbers of investors? Although there appears to be an emerging consensus, turning this into reality will have to follow a rocky road with many pitfalls and potholes along the way.

This edition of *Prison Service Journal* is published at an important time and is an attempt to provide an informed and stimulating exploration of the key issues. This will provide practitioners and a wider audience with insights from respected professionals and commentators. This is an important resource that sets out the current direction of travel and the challenges to be faced. The success of this project will be apparent in the years ahead.