

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

July 2011 No 196

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

January 2011 No 193



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

Special Edition

Voices from the front line

Editorial Comment

In January 2011, *Prison Service Journal* published a special edition entitled: *Where does the prison system go from here?* This featured interviews with prominent public figures including the Minister responsible for prisons, the Chief Executive of the National Offender Management Service, the Chief Inspector of Prisons, several heads of prominent interest groups, a union leader and a former editorial board member of *Inside Time*. The interviews were conducted shortly before the publication of the Green Paper *Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders* and this edition was intended to provide a reflection upon the critical thinking that would inform the future direction of public policy.

The edition was generally well received by readers. However, there were criticisms from some quarters. In particular, some officers and prisoners commented that they felt over-looked in the debate. Those comments sowed a seed that over time took root and grew into this follow up edition focussing on *Voices from the frontline*. This has been a bold, challenging and risky project but one that has also been exciting, valuable and poignant. Providing a space for the authentic voices of staff, prisoners, prisoners' families and those working in the voluntary and charitable sector is important for a number of reasons. First, those are people who understand and experience imprisonment most intensely. They therefore have a particular insight into the reality of the lived experience, which is valuable in informing change. Second, it is precisely because their voices are so rarely heard directly, openly and at length that it is important that a space is provided so as to empower them to be participants in the debate rather than merely the subjects of it. Third, hearing those voices directly conveys something of the personality of those people, revealing their human strengths, frailties and complexities. It is a humanising process.

The interviews for this edition took place at the end of the consultation period for the Green paper, *Breaking the Cycle*, and shortly prior to the publication of the White paper setting out the Government's detailed legislative proposals. These papers will set the direction for the coming years. There are three particularly important areas of planned reform that are salient to prisons. The first is that there is a challenge being presented to the current use of imprisonment. It has been argued that not only does the expansion of the prison system need to be halted but indeed there should be a reduction in its use. This has been justified on grounds of efficiency, that this is not affordable; on effectiveness grounds, that community sentences often work better; and on moral grounds, that the current level of use is not justified. The second is that prisons should be 'places of hard work and industry' where prisoners should undertake employment in a way that more closely resembles a working week. It is intended that this will foster a habit of work as well as provide skills and prospects that may be of benefit upon release. The third is that an innovative approach to rehabilitation will be developed through 'payment by results'. The intention is that by incentivizing organisations there will be an opportunity to encourage more and more effective services that will help to break the cycle of re-offending.

The issues discussed in this edition are explored by thirteen people who are intimately and directly involved in the prison experience. They include four members of staff, ranging from an officer working in a high security prison, to an instructional officer, a senior officer working in training services and a prison governor. The five prisoners who contribute include two in local prisons, a life sentence prisoner, a woman prisoner and one in an open establishment. There are also interviews with two parents of serving prisoners and two people who work for charitable and voluntary sector organisations, delivering services to prisoners. The interviewees were identified through a range of contacts in prisons and whilst it is not intended that they are an exhaustive, representative or scientifically sampled group, it is intended that they provide authenticity, credibility and insight. It was decided at an early stage that personal details of the interviewees would be kept to a minimum. In addition it was decided that individual offences would not be discussed with prisoners or prisoner's families and that pseudonyms would be used. This was partly for reasons of relevance and sensitivity, but was also to ensure that those voices could be heard without distraction. The issues were discussed with each of the interviewees using a standardised list of questions. These questions examined the key issues including the size of the prison population and the conditions of imprisonment in the past, present and future. They also addressed prominent areas of public policy including the 'broken society', the 'rehabilitation revolution' and the role of the commercial and charitable sectors.

Whilst each individual has a distinct and personal perspective, and that was indeed one of the reasons for pursuing this project, there were some common themes that emerged. In general there was a consensus about prisons being overused and there was support for investment in rehabilitation and particularly employment in prisons. However, there were many pragmatic questions raised. The most significant of these related to resources. Interviewees were particularly concerned about how services could be maintained and improved in the current fiscal environment. Were the funds available to realise the ambitions? What services were at risk now or in the future from efficiency savings or policy changes? What might be the effect on the culture and climate of prisons from changes in service delivery? They also had many questions about the public, political and media appetite for proposed changes. Many questioned how much the public knew and understood about prisons? How much consensus there was about the changes? Can they be sustained in the face of resistance? Whilst there was some general optimism about the intentions for the future, there was anxiety about the challenges of turning this into reality.

This edition of *Prison Service Journal* is published at an important time where the Government's strategy is taking definitive form. This edition includes thirteen individual and authentic accounts of the hopes, fears and aspirations of those living and working in prisons or dealing with the consequences of imprisonment. For those involved, it provides an opportunity to talk openly and honestly and to be heard by those responsible for practice and policy. For those reading this edition, it is hoped that they will be rewarded with perspectives and insights that are all the more valuable as a result of their rarity.