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

Special Edition

Voices from the front line

Interview: Prisoner in a female closed prison

Debra Walton is a prisoner at Eastwood Park serving a sentence for financial fraud and Monica Lloyd is based in Rehabilitation Services Group at NOMS headquarters.

Debra Walton is a prisoner at Eastwood Park serving a four year sentence for financial fraud. She has completed several courses in the education department during her sentence and has the objective of completing a counselling qualification. She is a listener and is currently employed as an orderly.

ML: From your perspective, what are the effects of the fact that we are locking up increasing numbers of people in prison? What are the consequences for you of prisons being full?

DW: Services are plainly over-stretched and officers are not able to spend as much time with individual prisoners, particularly personal officers. There are still some officers who make time, but on the whole they are over-stretched and with the cuts we are having that's going to get worse.

ML: Politicians often use the term 'Broken Society' Do you think this describes the world you come from?

DW: It doesn't apply to me, but I do recognise it for many of the others. The size of the drug and alcohol problem is huge and for me, first time in prison, it's a real eye opener. It's not just the prisoner who's on drugs or alcohol, it's the entire family.

ML: Do you think prisons can help with social problems like unemployment, drug use and family breakdown?

DW: Well, they're doing a good job by providing methadone de-tox if they're here long enough, which is good. And you do see girls here desperately wanting to stay off drugs when they go back out. Unfortunately they are going back to an area where there are no jobs and they have lost their homes. They go into hostels where they are mixing with alcoholics and drug users and before long they're back on the drugs. It's a vicious circle and in the time I've been in here there are several girls who have been in three times, and that's down to drug use. It doesn't seem to make much difference what the prison does, it's not followed up outside to keep them off drugs and stop them coming back. The job situation is the same for everybody, but if you've just come out of prison and have been on drugs it's a real problem. Of course if you're in a hostel a lot of employers won't take you on either. I can't see how it can change. It goes beyond prisons.

ML: Does imprisonment make it easier or harder for you to make positive changes to your life?

DW: It's a bit of both. For me it's certainly easier because I have time to re-educate and retrain and work towards what I want to do when I get out, but I can't do it properly because of the facilities that are available. I'm trying to retrain as a counsellor and I could really do with access to the internet. I understand why we can't have this but it would be useful if we could go to restricted sites. I've done as much as I can here but have come up against a brick wall now. For others I know that distance learning is difficult as by the time they've applied for funding they've missed out on the course because it takes a long time to get the funding organised. We are a remand prison so it's difficult.

ML: The Government wants to achieve what it is calling a 'rehabilitation revolution'. From your point of view, what are the areas where more could be done to help prisoners go straight on release?

DW: This comes back to the cycle of drug use. The Government needs to address this. Yes, prisons can get women clean and genuinely wanting a new life but until they put facilities in place outside and jobs, housing and benefits they are not going to be rehabilitating successfully. The revolution needs a lot more support from outside. Another big problem is that the criminal records checks take so long and if you're waiting to start a job and you're on the dole, you get desperate and your aspirations fade. If you can't get a job sorted within a month you go back to your old ways just to survive.

ML: What kind of work or training do you think could be introduced to prisons?

DW: That's not easy. We had some wonderful courses here. Textiles and needlework, though there are very few clothing manufacturers outside now, so that's no longer any use. Painting and decorating would be brilliant, but perhaps we should look at trades such as plumbing or electrician. It's what the country needs after all and it would provide an opportunity for somebody.

There are jobs that prisoners could do that are currently being done by the administrative staff. Of course they can't do the security stuff and I wouldn't expect them to do so, but there's no reason why prisoners can't help with issuing visiting orders for example once the prisoner is set up on the system. There are actually a lot of jobs that prisoners could do office wise. Everything seems to take so long in the administration department and I often think 'let me have a go. I'd get it sorted'. A lot of us are quite capable of doing a lot more than they give us credit for. I just feel that in these days of austerity it really

is time that they started looking at those prisoners who have the ability to help.

ML: Would you welcome the opportunity to 'pay something back' to the community for your crimes, either financially, through some kind of unpaid work, or by meeting your victim?

DW: It is costing the Government thousands of pounds to keep me here. I strongly feel that that money would have been better spent if I'd been given a sentence that required me to pay something back to the community. I've spoken to others and most agree with me, if it's for non-violent crime. With drugs it's different. You have to get your de-tox. But for those who are not on drugs and are not violent all you are doing is removing them from society at great cost, and you're losing everything when you come into prison — your home, your possessions, often your children — your whole life. It's a big price to pay.

ML: How has the prisoner experience shifted in recent years?

DW: There's more lock up now because of staff shortages. In general I hear the girls saying it never used to be like this.

ML: How have prison-staff and staff-prisoner relationships changed in recent years? How do you think they could be improved?

DW: Relationships between staff and prisoners have to be good, the morale of the prison hinges on staff and prisoners getting on. If they're not you are going to have trouble. Respect goes a long way. There has to be respect both ways and if things aren't fair that's where problems start. If you put into an application you may get one answer and a girl in the other room gets a different answer to the same question.

There is not enough flexibility to allow for individual differences. Some of us are educated and able to do an awful lot of good for the prison and help. A lot of us are quite capable of doing a lot more than they give us credit for. I feel that in these days of austerity it really is time that they started looking at those prisoners who have the ability to help.

ML: What are the aspects of being in prison that people outside are least aware of?

DW: The time it takes to do things. It took three and a half weeks to get my first visiting order, and that was an important one as it was my first time in prison. My parents needed to know that I was alright and if I'd had children wanting to see me it would have been dreadful. And when you ring people they say can you ring back later? But, sorry no, we are locked up at 5 o'clock. They don't realise there are restrictions. Another thing are

restrictions like not being allowed fabric to make curtains for my room because it is not fire retardant, and you are not allowed to be sent in magazines. Nobody explains why. It's silly little things that create frustration.

ML: An increasing number of prisons are potentially to be managed by private companies in the near future and there will be potentially wider opportunities for the voluntary and charitable sector. What are the benefits and risks of these changes for you?

DW: It's obviously another way of the Government saving money. As long as they are regulated in the same way I don't see that as a massive problem. At the end of the day if the country is in trouble we have to make savings. As for the charitable sector being involved, great, as long as it's not just for drugs and alcohol. There are other people who need help, and it needs to be followed through into the outside as well.

ML: What do you think are the biggest problems in the prison system?

DW: It's down to the prisoner themselves but the whole idea of the prison regime is to provide education and to make us more employable. There is a lack of discipline in the classroom and a lack of respect that disrupts lessons for the majority. The other thing is they have some wonderful courses and they are a bit over-focussed on catering for drugs and alcohol and nothing else, such

as for mental health.

ML: What are the things that get in the way of prisons being more like you would want them to be?

DW: The one thing that did surprise me when I came into this prison were the stunning grounds and it's very pleasant. It gives you every opportunity to do something with your time, but there are people who can give more. At the end of the day we are stuck here and want to do things to help, but are hampered at every turn.

ML: If you could do one thing to improve the effectiveness of the prison service, what would it be?

DW: I would like to sort out the mountains of paper that are produced. For example I am on medication for various things and failed a mandatory drug test the other day, having signed the form to say that I was on medication. I ended up on two charges for which there was reams of paper produced, all representing time and money. Why? A simple phone call to health care staff would have prevented it all. It just seemed like an awful waste of time and money, and there is a lot of it.

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