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Special Edition
Closing and Opening Prisons

Interview: Jo Wells

Jo Wells is the manager for Dorset and Somerset at the Footprints Project. She is interviewed by Christopher Stacey, Director (Services) at Unlock. The interview took place in January 2014.

CS: Could you describe your role as a third sector provider at HMP Dorchester before the closure announcement?

JW: The Footprints Project offers support to people leaving custody. We offer a through the gate mentoring service for people that are returning to the Dorset/South Somerset area. Our relationship with HMP Dorchester was that we were an outside agency who would go in (we had keys to the prison), and we would make people aware of the service and see if they were interested. We'd get their details from them in order to find them mentors on the outside, and then organise for mentors to visit men in Dorchester before their release date, so that they built up a relationship. I was the person from Footprints who would frequently go into Dorchester and build that relationship. There was no funding relationship between us and the prison — we are totally independent — we don't have any state funding at all; we're funded entirely by charitable trusts and private donations.

CS: How long had you been involved with delivering services in HMP Dorchester?

JW: The actual project was set up by a Chaplain that was in HMP Dorchester and he initiated the project in 2005. I've been working with them since 2008, but we'd been going in once or twice a week since 2005. I wasn't there right at the beginning, and obviously we had a foot in the door because of the Chaplain, so people were quickly aware of what was going on. But it was difficult with getting other members of staff in, getting security cleared, getting keys, and then just building up a relationship with people throughout the prison. It just takes a long time to do that kind of thing.

CS: Was there any anticipation within your organisation that HMP Dorchester would be affected by the announcement regarding prison closures?

JW: How we interacted with the prison staff themselves was mainly informally. We worked both with the Offender Management Unit (who we had a more formal relationship with, as they did the risk assessments and checking the suitability for individuals to have a mentor) and with wing staff (where the relationship with us was more informal). An example of our strong link with the prison was that we used to go to a quarterly resettlement meeting.

This was primarily an internal meeting, but we were invited, so we were considered to be stakeholders in the resettlement process. In terms of knowing that the prison was going to close, there had been rumours ever since Shepton Mallet closed down that Dorchester was going to be next on the list, but it was never anything formal, it was just the dreaded rumour mill.

CS: How were you informed that HMP Dorchester would be closing?

JW: We heard from the Ministerial announcement. It was awful. All the prison staff were called into the centre on the day that it was made public. It was about 10am in the morning. And then we got a call about 10.45 from somebody that works with us inside, telling us what happened. And then we got a letter from the Governor about a week later.

CS: How did you feel when you heard that news?

JW: It was awful. You expect it to happen, but then when it does actually happen, it's a bit of a shock. You're just not prepared for it. When you hear rumours for such a long time — we'd been hearing them for at least 18 months. We'd also had a meeting with the Governor about 6 weeks before they made the announcement, when she told us that she'd been informed by NOMS/MoJ that Dorchester was to become a Resettlement Prison under Transforming Rehabilitation. And as far as she was concerned, that was to put paid to all rumours about closure. That was 6 weeks before they announced the closure.

CS: How were your staff informed?

JW: We're not a huge project — in terms of paid staff, we have 2 full-time people and a couple of people doing flexible outreach work in the community, and then the rest are actually volunteers, so in terms of people who had keys in the prison, there were only two of us. So after we took the call, we just informed the rest of the team.

CS: How did your staff respond to the news?

JW: It was obviously very disappointing. It impacts on our volunteers because they would now have to be travelling to different prisons.

CS: What was the impact on how your organisation operates?

JW: We're all floundering, to be honest. Since we had the announcement, within 2 weeks the prison's population had halved, so they closed it very quickly.

From October, we've been looking at where people are being moved to, and then building up relationships with other prisons that would take the case load that we were taking from Dorchester. About 50 per cent of our caseload were coming from Dorchester, so for that 50 per cent, we're trying to work out where they going to go to now, and that's just taken time. We go into other prisons, like Portland, and we were also working out of The Verne which has also closed as a prison.

CS: What has happened to your staff working at HMP Dorchester since the closure?

JW: We've located all of the people that we had on our list, they're all over the place, but I would say 60 per cent of them have gone to Portland, and that's not too far away, but that's only sentenced prisoners, HMP Dorchester was also Remand and Local, so they had people on very short sentences there. Although we're not sure about the future of Portland now. We found a few of them in Dartmoor, a couple of them are down in Channings Wood in Devon. One or two have gone to Erlestoke in Wiltshire. And as for the remand prisoners, they are spread between HMP Exeter, HMP Bristol and HMP Winchester, which has huge implications for us because our office is literally 10 metres away from Dorchester prison gate, there's no way we can catch up with remand prisoners at Exeter, Bristol or Winchester, they're all

2 hours drive away. There were other providers going into Dorchester — a policeman that was part of a PPO Unit, Probation would go in there, Substance Misuse workers we're going in to do work, and they can't travel that kind of distance either.

CS: Have you been able to take up new opportunities within newly opened prisons?

JW: We've been building up relationships with the prisons that our clients had been moved to, and the main one of those is Portland. At the end of last year, it was announced that it would be the Resettlement Prison for Dorset, so we were thinking that was great, as we had a foot in the door and a good relationship, but now there's more rumours saying it's not going to be Portland, but actually Channings Wood, so there's uncertainty yet again. It makes you question whether you want to be

spending all of your time investing in relationships in Portland if that's not where we're going to end up going. It takes time to embed in places, and you really need to know — you don't want to be messed about every 5 minutes with different announcements being made.

CS: How have wider public sector reforms combined with the closure program impacted on how you deliver your services?

JW: It's a bit unknown. It's almost as if it's been thrown up in the air and we're waiting for it to come back down. For example, we don't know what's going to happen with the Probation Service. That's still unclear. We know there's people making plans, but we don't know whether they'll be made concrete or come into effect. So, for the next 12 months, we don't really know what's going to happen with Probation. Likewise, with some of the other key statutory agencies that we work with, there's huge cuts locally on things like Local Government, and that's had a huge impact on supported services and things like accommodation and housing. Trying to get hold of a mental health team or arrange a mental health assessment in Dorset is almost impossible at the moment. Substance misuse too — there's cuts everywhere. Because we're funded largely by charitable trusts and donations from local people, our work will continue, but we would like to

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improve and expand, especially now we've got the challenges of travelling a bit further to find our caseload. Looking for other funding opportunities is more and more challenging, because funders are saying that the Government is now going to be providing services to all offenders coming out of prison, so how are you fitting into that? We largely help people serving under 12 months who have no other support, which matches what the Government are saying they're wanting to do. At the moment, we're trying to keep our options open. We go to a lot of meetings where we sit with Probation and say 'this is what we provide, if you're wanting to work in partnership in providing these services, we're happy to work with you'. We've just got to keep our options open. In terms of existing funding, we've never had a problem demonstrating the need for what we do.

CS: Were you able to be involved in marking the closure of Dorchester?

JW: Yes, but it was quite a frustrating process. When we first heard that the prison was closing, we were working with a lot of men that had spent time in Dorchester and they were also quite interested in marking that closure. Some of them had spent the best part of their lives in there, one way or another, and they were quite upset about it, and they had made friends with prison staff, and they wanted to participate in that. We contacted the prison to say 'if you are organising any kind of closing ceremony, we'd like to collaborate as our service users would also like to show their respects to the closing of the prison'. We received quite a curt reply saying 'we don't want prisoners involved', which is always a bit sad. They did have this public closing ceremony, which was organised by the Governor and a couple of staff members in there, which involved the Town Crier, the Mayor, and the media. It involved a ceremonial closing of the gate, bringing the flag down and a quick march. We were invited to that, but it was made clear to us that they didn't want any of our service users present, which is a shame, given that in effect, it was a public ceremony.

CS: What lessons would you take from this closure and what advice would you offer to the government and prison service leading a prison closure?

JW: I think it was very blinkered in that 'the prison' seemed to equal 'people that were employed by the prison service'. We were a partner agency, and we weren't considered to be part of the picture. The same seemed to apply to people that had spent time in there. It's a local community, there's outside agencies going in, people who had been incarcerated there, people who would visit, official and domestic, and we just weren't part of the picture. In future, there should be consideration of the whole picture and the impact it might have on the local community, given it's a local prison. Our job is permanently trying to build a bridge between people inside prison and the community, so that when they come out, they feel connected to that community and they've got appointments in place etc. That's the constant battle that we face. We felt we'd been building that bridge since 2005, but it was almost like there was no recognition of that.