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Editorial Comment

This is the first edition of *Prison Service Journal* produced since the General Election in June 2017. The election campaign itself had little focus on prisons, but this was an issue that featured in the election manifestos of the main parties.

The Conservative Party re-emphasised the aims of the prison reforms they have been developing since 2015 and formalised in the White Paper, *Prison safety and reform*.¹ Their manifesto stated:

'Prisons should be places of reform and rehabilitation, but we should always remember that incarceration is punishment for people who commit serious crimes'.

The £15 billion annual cost to society of reoffending shows we have so much more to do to make the penal system work better. Prisons must become places of safety, discipline and hard work, places where people are helped to turn their lives around. They should help prisoners learn English, maths and the work skills they need to get a job when they leave prison, whilst providing the help prisoners require to come off drugs and deal with mental health problems.

We will invest over £1 billion to modernise the prison estate, replacing the most dilapidated prisons and creating 10,000 modern prison places. We will reform the entry requirements, training, management and career paths of prison officers. We will create a new legal framework for prisons, strengthening the inspectorate and ombudsman to provide sharper external scrutiny'.²

The Labour Party struck a different tone. Inevitably, as the main opposition, the language was more confrontational towards government policy. They stated:

'Labour is tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, but we won't make the lives of workers in the criminal justice system tougher. Prison officers, probation officers and other workers need the resources to do their jobs safely, effectively and successfully'.

Our prisons are overcrowded. Staffing levels are too low. The situation is dangerous and violence against prison officers is rising. Riots and disturbances in our

prisons are increasing. Prison escapes cause distress to people living near prisons

A Labour government will publish annual reports on prisoner–staff ratios, with a view to maintaining safety and ending overcrowding.

We will recruit 3,000 more prison officers and review the training and professional development available. We will publish prison officer to prisoner ratios for all prisons. Our proposal to lift the public sector pay cap will help to increase the recruitment and retention of both prison officers and probation officers.

Reoffending rates are too high. The Conservatives talked of a rehabilitation revolution, and then just gave up. Their proposal now is to lock up more and more individuals, ignoring the evidence that our prisons are too often dumping grounds for people who need treatment more than they need punishment. Labour will insist on personal rehabilitation plans for all prisoners.

Prison should always be a last resort—the state's most severe sanction for serious offences. It should never be a substitute for failing mental health services, or the withdrawal of funding from drug treatment centres. We will review the provision of mental health services in prisons.

*Under a Labour government, there will be no new private prisons and no public sector prisons will be privatised.*³

Despite the antagonistic rhetoric, and some sharp divisions on issues such as the role of the private sector in prisons, there is significant commonality across the manifestos. In particular the shared concern with reducing reoffending through education, employment, drug treatment and mental health services. While this is a perennial issue in penal policy and practice, the prominence given to this issue does convey a developing consensus about the priorities and purpose of imprisonment. Both parties also recognise the challenge of resources in prisons, attention is given in the manifestos to the need for additional staff. It is too early to say how this emerging agreement on investment and rehabilitative values will play out, it is a notable shift in discourse.

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1. Ministry of Justice (2016) *Prison safety and reform* London: Ministry of Justice available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565014/cm-9350-prison-safety-and-reform-_web_.pdf accessed on 28 June 2017.
 2. The Conservative Party (2017) *Forward together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future* available at <https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/manifesto2017/Manifesto2017.pdf> accessed on 29 June 2017 p.45.
 3. The Labour Party (2017) *For the many not the few* available at <http://www.labour.org.uk/page/-/Images/manifesto-2017/Labour%20Manifesto%202017.pdf> accessed on 29 June 2017 p.82.

This edition of *Prison Service Journal* touches upon issues in rehabilitation, including three articles addressing different aspects of prison visiting and the experience of prisoners and their families. This is an area that has attracted some additional investment recently and is one of the recognised pathways towards reducing reoffending. There is also an article by Dr Helen Nichols on the experience of education in prisons, another area that has attracted prominence in policy and practice in recent times, particularly as a result of Dame Sally Coates's review.⁴ Dr Nichols article particularly addresses the ways in which education can be a vehicle for enriching personal relationships within the prison and outside with families. An important

and substantial article is contributed by Dr Caroline Gorden. This is a literature review digesting and analysing the published research on the experience of transgender people in prisons. Given that this is a rapidly developing area of policy and practice, and that there has been growing concerns about the adverse experiences of transgender people in custody, this will be a valuable resource to many in prisons. Finally, this edition also includes an interview with Pamela Dow, a former senior official in the Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice. This is an inside account of the policy thinking that has shaped major areas of public sector reform over recent years.

4. Coates, S. (2016) *Unlocking potential: A review of education in prison* London: Ministry of Justice available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf accessed on 28 June 2017.