Fact finding visit to Horserød prison, Denmark
by the Quaker Council for European Affairs, March 2006

In March 2006, QCEA visited Horserød open prison in Denmark. Information for this report was obtained both directly from the visit and from an introduction to the prison edited by the educational co-ordinator at the prison and a special consultant.

General

Horserød is the second largest prison in Denmark (221 beds) and the only open prison for women in the country. An open prison in Denmark is one without an external perimeter wall. One thousand prisoners a year pass through Horserød and the average stay is 3 months. Less than one fifth of the prisoners are women, with approximately 250 men to 30-40 women. Women from Greater Københavnb and the islands east of Storebælt are placed here. The average age of women prisoners is 23 and only 10% are over 40.

Many juvenile delinquent schools in Denmark have been closed down so there are sometimes juveniles held in Horserød. Juveniles are defined as 15–17 years old. At the time of the visit all the juveniles were boys and staff could not remember any girls being sent there. There are currently discussions taking place to decide whether people under 25, who are in work or education, should be electronically tagged rather than sent to prison. Generally, efforts are made to keep juveniles out of prison.

Prisoners do not have a holistic plan for their sentence, although if a social worker is involved they will have knowledge of other aspects of a prisoner’s life. Prisoners do have a key worker, but this poses difficulties as officers are on shift. There are 6 or 7 welfare officers. Welfare officers attempt to build a network between prisoners’ relations and social services outside the prison, taking account of the women’s situation, but ‘it is a struggle’. There are as many female staff members as male.

When prisoners have served two thirds of their sentence they may be released on parole and this happens for 80% of prisoners. Welfare officers organise parole, finding out if prisoners have work and accommodation to go to, although in principle it is the Governor who gives permission. External social workers will be involved when there is already a connection with that prisoner. Prisoners may also be granted leave for leisure activities and are escorted by prison officers. Leave may be cancelled if it is abused.

The prison has 150 staff, including personnel, who are employed on an hourly basis. Staff are organised according to the ‘AUF model’. For 4 months staff work as occupational supervisors in prison workshops and for 12 months as security officers (dealing with disciplinary problems), case or liaison officers (dealing with
issues concerning individual prisoners) and as instructors in leisure and hobby activities.

Recidivism here is lower than for the high security prisons.

The Prison

There is no external fence to the prison and the prison looks more like a university campus. There is CCTV but it is not fully monitored as there are not enough staff to watch the screens. There are approximately 100 escapes a year and ‘we have settled for that’ senior staff told us. The situation will be reviewed if the number changes. Men escape more than women. Some prisoners have asked to be in a high security prison because they think they would break the rules in a low security prison and get into trouble.

Prisoners have the key to their own cells and are never locked in. The front doors to departments are locked at 21.15. There are morning and evening roll-calls. In all parts of the prison frisk searches are carried out and sniffer-dogs used. Prisoners can use the well-kept grounds freely during the day. According to staff the relaxed atmosphere helps with security and suicide risk. An officer told us she had never been verbally or physically assaulted by a prisoner. Dumbbells are used in the gym and knives in the kitchen and the staff were not concerned that these heightened the risk of violence within the prison: ‘they will always find something, or use their fists’. Our guide could only remember one case when someone had been attacked with a bread-slicer. There are some racial tensions in the prison. In harassment cases the harasser will be moved to a closed prison.

The prison has 1 drug treatment unit for women only and 4 other mixed sex units. However, men and women resident on single sex units work together. Staff described the mixed sex unit as relaxed as it was more normal. Staff told us the difference in atmosphere between a mixed unit and an all male unit is bigger than that between a mixed unit and an all women unit. Women themselves choose whether to serve their sentence in a mixed or single sex unit. Women who have experienced male violence or abuse often choose a single sex unit.

Bedrooms lead off one side of a corridor (which is rather dark). Bedrooms contain a sink and small cupboard, a fridge, wardrobe, bed, desk, chair and sometimes a chest of drawers. The walls are white. Prisoners can bring radios and TVs in. Prisoners appear to bring quite a lot of personal possessions with them. There are common showers and toilets on the units.

There is a 13-bed, all-women drug treatment unit receiving women from all over Denmark who volunteer for drug treatment. There is no compulsory drug treatment. Women in this unit have ‘hard histories’ and have often been prostitutes prior to imprisonment with histories of abuse. The unit is run according to ‘project humanity’ principles. The project is half funded by the Ministry of
Social Affairs and run by external workers assisted by guards. Family issues are addressed on the programme. Children are not allowed on the unit. The project includes confidence building workshops and rehabilitative work e.g. massage classes, as women on the programme frequently have histories of violence and abuse and have never experienced touch as a positive thing. The staff on this unit say they are understaffed.

There is a 22-place mixed drug-free unit. Prisoners have to sign a no-drugs contract and submit to regular testing; if they are found to have taken drugs they are excluded from the unit. Prisoners who have never taken drugs can be on this unit as well as those trying to stop taking drugs. It is generally a relaxed unit.

There is a mixed semi-closed unit for ‘inmates who cannot manage on an open unit’ as this phrasing suggests prisoners are not in the semi-open section for disciplinary measures but for their own protection. Sex offenders who are likely to be bullied or ostracised are kept there, also drug-abusers, who may be pushed by others to take drugs. Unlike the rest of the prison there is an obvious fence surrounding the unit, however this is there to keep other inmates out rather than inmates in. These inmates are granted leave just the same as the others.

A 14-bed family unit provides accommodation for parents with children of less than 3 years of age and for married couples where both partners have committed a crime. This is for couples who were together before the start of the sentence. There is 1 cell for a couple with children which consists of a room for the parents and a connecting door to a room for the child.

In Denmark the prison sends a letter to the prisoner requesting them to come to prison after the judge passes sentence. This gives the prisoner more opportunity to make arrangements for any children they have. At the time of our visit there were only 3 children residing in the prison. Separation is extremely rare as sentences are so short. Staff could not remember a case where a mother and child had been separated. Women with long sentences do not bring their children to prison.

Whether a baby resides in prison is the mother’s choice. Discussions take place with external social services. It is more usual to have a foster family caring for the child than for children to stay in prison. Other prisoners are not allowed inside the family unit for the safety of children and it is a drug-free unit. Mothers have cots in the cells with them. Prisoners told us there is no bullying in this unit as there is in other units and they try to take care of each other. We spoke to one prisoner whose daughter and grandchild were inside and thus she had chosen to be in the family unit.

Mothers are under no obligation to undertake purposeful activity as the other inmates are but if they wish to work or study their child (ren) can go to an external kindergarten. There is no qualified childminder or nurse within the unit.
although, when asked, staff said this would be beneficial. Children can be taken out to visit family members for short visits. Mothers can also be given leave to take children outside the prison for activities, e.g. a children’s theatre production. However this is not particularly promoted by the prison so it rarely happens. Mothers can take their children out of the unit and visit other prisoners with their child. The effects of prison on children are not monitored. There is a gap in service provision for drug taking mothers, as children are not allowed in the drug treatment unit; but drug taking mothers can be in the family unit if they obey the rules and take no drugs when they are in the unit.

There is a remand unit which, unlike the other units, was surrounded by a high barbed wire fence. This is a central government initiative and appears to be out of keeping with the rest of the prison. Staff were unenthusiastic about the facility and said that prisoners are being held there who could be held in one of the open units. There were no women in the facility at the time of the visit.

Staff have offices in the main corridors near the prisoners’ rooms, creating less of a division between staff and prisoners.

There are large common rooms which contain well-equipped kitchens. Prisoners can use these whenever they want and are able to mix with prisoners from other units. The common rooms varied; some contained books, pool tables and table football, TVs and one had 2 birds in a cage.

Outside there was a barbecue that prisoners can use.

There is a room set aside for a church with a permanent altar and an organ which is used for protestant services. This room is also used for concerts and meditation courses. Muslim and Catholic prisoners go to a Catholic Church and Mosque nearby. There is also a part-time chaplain.

There is a library with a piano staffed by a librarian. There is a solarium.

There is a reasonably large gym with all the usual equipment. We were told that male prisoners were encouraged to use the gym for health and fitness reasons not weight-lifting to gain muscle tone.

There are solitary confinement cells which are used for disciplinary purposes. The time there is a maximum of 3 days. Prisoners are sometimes confined to their own room if the solitary confinement cells are full. Inmates are put in solitary confinement if they refuse to work. The other punishment is transferral to a closed prison or fines.
Work, education and training

Prisoners are under obligation to undertake 37 hours a week purposeful activity; within this prisoners have a choice of work or education. Some prisoners work and study outside the prison 3 months before release. In fact, the average length of stay in Horserød is 3 months so this is often possible very early on in the sentence. Not many prisoners take advantage of this scheme; it is primarily adapted for those prisoners who were already studying or working close by.

Work and education are in competition for participants. If there were more classes workshops would have to be cut. The Head of Education said prisoners seemed to have a positive attitude towards classes and wished for more subjects. Inmates can combine part-time work and part-time education although this is not encouraged by the workshops and not many prisoners do it.

Work

Prisoners work for the upkeep of the prison and most rebuilding and renovating jobs are done by prisoners. More women are involved in cleaning jobs than men. Traditionally feminine work is not provided but there used to be sewing which attracted more women. There are 4 commercial workshops: metal work, laundry, carpentry and assembly work, with places for 50-60 inmates. A few inmates are in external work, approved by the prison.

From time to time unemployment is a problem but prisoners still get paid as ‘this is out of their hands’. Work is paid by the hour and prisoners are given weekly wages. One prisoner told us she had earned just 7 Kroner (£1) for packing a box of fruit with 110 pieces of fruit. Prisoners can possess, bring in or be sent money up to a value of 1,500 Danish Kroner (approximately £200) at a time. Prisoners do their own shopping at the supermarket (where the products are behind glass) and their own cooking.

Education

On average women prisoners have a higher educational level than men, reflecting the trend in the general population. Upon arrival the prisoner makes an education plan with staff. Teachers are employed by the Ministry of Justice; they thus attend meetings with the rest of the staff. 25 prisoners do classes outside prison and 25 inside. There are fewer women than men in education.

It is known that recidivism drops when prisoners undertake education and that when recidivism does occur, there is a longer time lapse before a second crime is committed.

General Adult Education is offered, as it is in the community. Classes are available in Danish, English and Mathematics and the level is that of 16 year olds.
in the community. An external teacher comes in to teach computer science. External exams take place twice a year. Prisoners in education have internet access.

If prisoners were in education when they committed a crime the prison will discuss with them how to keep in contact with the institution. Prisoners may do distance study courses, either continuing studies they started outside prison, or beginning in prison.

Women on the drug treatment unit live separately and do not take classes with the other prisoners.

Training

Vocational training is limited. Prisoners may do apprenticeships in blacksmith work, gardening and painting and decorating in the workshops; at present only 1 prisoner is doing an apprenticeship. More men undertake apprenticeships than women although a woman had recently undertaken one in painting and decorating. Vocational education can take place outside the prison in any subject. Prisoners have to pay something towards courses; they usually get the money from other family members. At present, only a handful of prisoners are taking vocational courses outside prison, several as gardeners, one as a truck-driver and another in commercial business.

The cognitive skills programme is taught to classes of 4-8 people in a small seminar room with tables grouped together, flip-chart, whiteboard etc. This room was vacant at the time of our visit so it was locked. There is increasing interest in this programme as word spreads and another room is in preparation.

Drugs

There is no needle exchange programme as it is thought to be condoning drug use but there is bleach freely available in the bathrooms for needle sterilisation. Prisoners can be transferred to other prisons for drug treatment. An officer told us that they try to keep hard drugs out but do not do much about soft drugs. Any heroin drug addicts at Horserød Prison are transferred to the closed prison.  

Health Care

There are 2 nurses and 1 doctor at the prison. An external dentist comes in. Going out of the prison for medical treatment does not present a difficulty as it is an open prison and leave is generous. Like adults, children residing in the prison with their mothers can see the prison doctor but are also registered at an outside clinic where they go for their checkups and injections. We spoke to one pregnant

1 www.prisondefemmes.org
prisoner who said her health care was good and that she had gone out of the prison for all the necessary scans and checks on time.

There is one part-time psychologist which we were told ‘is definitely not enough’. Staff said there had been an increase in prisoners with mental illness: ten times more than ten years ago. If prisoners have severe mental health problems they will not be in Horserød, ‘it depends if they are more dangerous than ill’. Staff agreed prison was not the right place for the mentally ill but there is a shortage of closed psychiatric hospital places.

There are confined cells for suicide prevention. There is a suicide approximately every 5 years. An officer told us she did not think there was any self-harm in the prison. Sex-specific health care information is not targeted at women. Abortion can be arranged in an external hospital and information is available. Female contraception is available.

The prison has no HIV reduction plan. There are information leaflets but there is no structured plan for disseminating information. Free condoms and bleach are available.

The Outside World

Prisoners often tell employers they are on holiday when they go to prison; this is possible because of the short sentences. 2 prisoners told us they had done this; 1 said it would probably be hard to get a job with a criminal record and she would have a gap in her employment record so she wanted to go back to her old job after her sentence. The prison may help prisoners engage with their employers and educational institutes. The prison will not lie for prisoners and encourages prisoners to be truthful with their colleagues, as ‘people tend to understand if you are open about it otherwise they are suspicious’, however only one person at an educational establishment needs to know that a student is serving a sentence and the prison will help with this.

Prisoners are given leave for external appointments. On the day of our visit 37 inmates were out of the prison for various reasons. The prison will arrange the travel route. If prisoners are caught by the police where they should not be, there will be disciplinary sanctions, including transfer to a closed prison.

Home leave is granted every 3 weeks for prisoners to go out and see family from Friday to Sunday. This is cleared beforehand with the police for prisoners committed for assault, violence, manslaughter and drug trafficking. The staff member we spoke with said he had not come across any prisoners who did not take leave because they could not afford it. There are women who don’t take leave. This is the prisoner’s decision and the prison does not push visits. Social workers discuss family and domestic violence.
Visits are 2 hours twice a week. The visiting rooms are next to the main reception area: small rooms leading off a corridor are equipped with a sofa bed, sink, mirror, chairs; condoms and towels are provided. As in Ringe prison (a closed prison in Denmark) no special arrangements need to be made for conjugal visits as all visits take place in private rooms. Rooms were not very cheerful but were quite spacious. There was a special visiting room for children with toys and this was carpeted (unlike the other rooms). There was also a small, fenced garden with table and chairs and a play-house, seesaw and swings. Visitors are allowed to bring food into the prison but not drinks as it is too easy to hide drugs in them. Prisoners are allowed to take food back to their rooms.

Other

We asked one officer the differences she found between male and female prisoners. She replied worries about children were much more obvious amongst women prisoners. She said women did talk to her about their problems.

Sexual relations are allowed between prisoners. When asked, an officer told us she would not know if a sexual relationship was exploitative but confirmed that women in the prison did prostitute themselves for drugs.

On pin boards in the units there were adverts for a stress management and prisoner rehabilitation evening and for the Thursday Film Club.

Prisoners have a free hairdressing session every 8 weeks and can pay for appointments in between.