

Criminal Justice Alliance Members Meeting

Wednesday 25 January 2017 14.00

The Foundry, 17 Oval Way, London SE11 5JH

Guest Speaker

Ian Bickers, Executive Governor of Wandsworth Prison.

I'll try and give you a sense of where we are in this forever changing landscape and some history about where we have come from that might inform where we are going to.

I was asked in November 2015 to be executive governor at Wandsworth. I said yes, and the person asking the question said: 'Do you want to just think about it?'. I didn't really. The ability to have the freedom over what we wanted to do, which was our original remit, really interested me. Michael Gove's original plan was to create a very different type of prison, in the way it is operated and run. His mantra was separate legal status, trying to create academy style prisons and environments, built around what he did in education. Someone at the time mentioned, however, that there were 40,000 schools in the country and 120 prisons. How do you do something similar when the two are fundamentally different?

It took until October to get a real sense from Liz Truss, Michael Gove's replacement, as to what she was trying to achieve and how that would then play out. I left school at 16 and joined the army and was told to always follow the rules until told differently. So, I still carry on doing reform until someone tells me differently.

In very simple terms what we did over the summer was not to stop. We kept on trying to implement the agenda of change and doing things differently. But you can all see from the White Paper the direction of travel has changed a bit, although not significantly. The question about separate legal status does still remain, but I think the chances of that happening are quite small, and many people are breathing a sigh of relief as a result.

What you see moving forward is the prison service being structured differently. We are heading in the direction of prison clusters, led by people on the ground being able to determine the strategy. That person will have control of resources, in the sense of money and people. Those clusters will be grouped either geographically, ones very close together, as we did in the Isle of Sheppey, or determined by prisoner flow. So if you take Wandsworth as an example we tend to push most of our long termers out of prison to HMP Onley. Does that mean you would cluster Wandsworth with Onley for example? Geographically not very close but it makes sense in respect of prisoner flow and arrangements with CRCs, education contracts and so on.

It's been interesting at Wandsworth. It has had some difficult and turbulent times, both recently and in the recent past. I've had the privilege of serving there twice. The sense we have at Wandsworth is we are trying to introduce significant change. I was talking to someone last week, an ex-prisoner, who bumped into someone in a pub in Kent who was a prison officer talking about prison reform. He was saying that some of these prison reformers are doing stupid things, and that the governor of Wandsworth has gone 'right soft'. I think that's a good thing actually, the hard view of Wandsworth is wrong.

The prison has to move away from the hard reputation it had in the 70s, 80s and 90s. The fact that I've introduced yoga and mindfulness and the men like it is an interesting

dynamic. And if that's going soft then so be it, I've gone soft. But it's the right thing to do. The men are really up for it. It's a brilliant way of doing things differently.

We've gone out at Wandsworth to do things in a different way. I can't find anyone who has a memory of Wandsworth being fully staffed. Even when we used to do national recruitment and post everybody to London for their first two years it wasn't fully staffed. The first thing we are doing with reform is to consider how we could deal with recruitment. We have had a significant result with this. We were able to negotiate with NOMS a different way of being able to deal with recruitment - a national standard that enabled us to recruit at Wandsworth specifically. We currently today carry 44 prison officer vacancies. NOMS' recruitment was able to provide us with one new prison officer in the three months prior to the first of October when we took over. In the last ten weeks we produced 89 prison officer job offers. We have to get those people to start, through training etc. but we are pretty convinced we will get them through and started.

For the first time in living memory, Wandsworth will be overstaffed which means we can do things we want. We are hoping that the additional resources we get through the recruitment process will allow us to bring people in. We should then be able to prove to people that with more staff around we can do different things. But I'm fairly confident that we will get a portion of the additional prison safety money Liz Truss has promised too. So we are ahead of the curve as far as recruitment is concerned.

One of the measures of success that I want is our staff being able to do the things I could when I was a prison officer. Which was to be able to sit on a prisoner's bed and read a letter because he can't read it and encourage him to go to education to learn to read. Just one example of how I'd like to see us changing back to some of the things we did in the past. And that's not me harking back to the good old days, that's just generally having enough staff to build the prisoner-staff relationship. Because we know that works well. Being able to encourage people to go and think through their own responsibilities, offering and doing something around life choices and life chances.

We are doing a massive amount of work on education. It's our second priority. We are in the process of creating 14 centres of excellence. We've done a huge piece of work researching this. What we want is to be able to do is put learning at the centre of everything we do. Every interaction should be a learning opportunity for our men, whether that's a 'Good morning, how are you today?' model or actually a formal education programme that leads to a qualification, or something that is self-taught.

We are starting that transition. We think it will take us this year to get to the point where we have our 14 centres of excellence up and running. We have been working with employers and further education providers too. We want to know that in every centre of excellence that opens up we have an employer that is prepared to give prisoners jobs, or a further education opportunity for that man to go into once he has left custody. And that is very joined up. We've run that past Ofsted who have said if we manage to deliver half of what we intend to, I don't do halves, we will have the best education provision in the country and it will set an example of what other prisons could do. These are some really high ambitions.

We are making a lot of other changes. For example, we are doing a lot of work with families and outreach which is vital to success. We are also trying to improve the green space and communal spaces within the prison. We are trying to think innovatively.

I spent the first seven weeks living in the command suite. There was a huge amount of work to do with the overall prison regime. There were constant prisoner disturbances. We used the radio to plead with prisoners to stop. We told them we can't make any changes

if they are continually kicking off. And they listened to us. It gave us the chance to try and begin to introduce change.

Now that we have control of contracts we can now challenge external suppliers. We are able to interrogate contracts and put proper pressure on them to fulfil their obligations, something we couldn't do to the extent we wanted to in the past. If there is a problem we can get them to fix it faster than before.

I want to be transparent with what's happening at Wandsworth. I allowed the BBC to record in the prison last year. And I was a little disappointed with the end result. Of the 40 hours of footage that they had they chose to show all the bad stuff and none of the good stuff that's happening in Wandsworth.

In the new landscape if you approach a Governor and she/he initially says that they don't need you my advice is to be patient. Don't get too discouraged. People are going to have to grow into their jobs. At the moment the centre, NOMS, does a lot for governors. It isn't going to be like that anymore but it's going to take time for them to feel comfortable in what they are doing.

Q&A

Leap: What is your perspective of the skills of current officers and do you think there any specific gaps?

IB: The average age of a prison officer in Wandsworth is 23. They therefore have relatively limited life skills. There are more and more criminology students. They are lacking experience and as a result order and control suffers. The younger officers need time to be coached and mentored, a substantial amount of effort focused on induction with the freedom to train people on a local basis. Coaching qualifications should be a priority and skilling people up. There is a big gap at the moment, 50 per cent of staff have less than five years' experience and another large per cent have more than 15 years. There need to be plans in place to properly utilise ambitious young people in an intense environment.

PAS: Providers' contracts for education are based on meeting certain outcomes but don't necessarily look at the quality of the service.

IB: The rules have changed and as a result Governors are now commissioners of contracts. The big issue is how to create an appropriate framework for commissioning these services. You have to balance between national and local providers. Those with local expertise along with those who have bigger economies of scale and possibly a greater breadth of experience. We need to track prisoners' learning development, for example social interactions that a prisoner has, and not necessarily just how many qualifications they have received. It must be about personal growth. I'm a firm believer that if you do the right thing you will get there.

PET: I'm intrigued about how you measure the culture of a specific prison. The idea of clustering is interesting. In Sheppey it didn't work so well whereas it is working well in Wales at the moment. Will the reform agenda help the process of clustering?

IB: It is all about structuring the management level appropriately. In Sheppey there were too many chiefs. Ian Blakeman tends to stand back from his two prisons, he sets the strategic direction but has individuals running the day to day operation of the prison. Nick is more hands on at one of his prisons, Highdown, and less so with the other. Ideally you will have a governing governor for safety and then someone more senior with more of an overview. I work out of Wandsworth 2/3 days a week and have someone running it daily.

There is going to have to be the appropriate balance. Even if I'm still seen technically as the Governing Governor I'm a step back from that.

Gemma Buckland: The MoJ plans to introduce more performance measurement in more areas than in the past. What sort of risks does that bring?

IB: We need to determine outcomes and certain measurement (we need to ensure there is progress) but let them achieve it themselves. We need to be measuring progress and not just outcomes. Michael Gove wanted to measure how a prison felt, saying that in order to do so you had to go out and see it. It's something very hard to capture but we need to think of innovative ways of doing so.

The Griffins Society: Do you have any ideas how the prison reform agenda and reform prisons will impact the female prison estate?

IB: It's the one area of the prison system that I've never worked in so not something I can really do justice to. We need to have far better specialism. We need to set a marker against which we can then look at the distance travelled.

KeepOut: That's music to my ears. Who should decide what direction a prisoner should travel?

IB: The methodology we are thinking of is personal ownership. Obviously this is something far easier in a small prison than one housing over 1,500 men. It all comes down to the initial assessment made with each prisoner. It must encompass everything, as much as possible. I'm a big believer that once prisons are safe it is our job to engage prisoners to care about themselves. It isn't for us to tell them how to live once they leave. There needs to be some incentive to get them going forward, but that incentive depends on each individual. An example is learning with an iPad, the more you use it for learning the more it could unlock videos, music etc. Ideally we create a single record for each prisoner and that travels with them, there is no replication. It is added to as they progress and go to different establishments.

PRT: There is a mammoth list of basic standards and rules in prisons. Are there any that could be appropriately devolved to governors and some that are somewhat sacrosanct?

IB: We can place the standards and rules into three piles. One is full of rubbish that we don't need and hopefully governors will be able to do away with in the future. The second group we can devolve to an extent to individual governors. IEP schemes is an example. Governors would have to have three different levels, they have to according to legislation, but could interpret what those levels are very differently. The third group would be ones that no governor would want to touch, a good example is the new rules for transgender prisoners. The four current governors of reform prisons haven't changed any policies as of yet.

Langley House Trust: Do you have any concerns around the plans to change access to supported housing for prisoners?

IB: I'm more concerned with whether or not the CRC is putting people into appropriate accommodation. There's less local knowledge at the moment than in the past.

RAPt: How are you dealing with psychoactive substances?

IB: We don't have spice in our prison anymore really. We worked with the Metropolitan Police to prevent drones coming into the prison and we haven't had one since October last

year. Once we stopped drones coming in it had an immediate impact. People taking it should be seen as a health problem. We need to understand why people are taking drugs in prison and formulate an appropriate psycho-social and holistic response.

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