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*Special Edition*  
**Closing and Opening Prisons**

# Reflections on the downside of ‘the best job in the world’

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**This essay reflects on some of the issues that were raised in the two interviews about opening a new prison. It first discusses the climate around the process of planning and opening a new prison. We then turn to more specific questions such as staffing and procurement. The essay ends with the question with which Tina concludes her interview.**

One of the things that strikes me most forcefully from the interviews — and which is entirely consistent with my own experience of observing the opening of a Cat C prison — is the sense of chaos in the early stages, first of planning and then of building up prisoner numbers. Each planning team — Security, regime, procurement, staffing — is closely bonded. These are hand picked, high performing individuals, with a burning sense of purpose and shared motivation. It is these characteristics that led the Deputy Governor at a new prison to describe the run-up to opening as ‘the best job in the world’. Despite that enthusiasm, there is a downside. The preparative teams have not worked together before; they have not performed this task before; they have not had to interact so intensely with other specialists before; and, in all probability, they have not had to meet such tight deadlines before (tight, that is, in relation to the enormity of the task before them.) With the best will in the world (and that is a fair assumption in this context), there are rough edges, inconsistencies, overlaps, confusions, gaps and misunderstandings which can leave individuals and teams feeling that they are wading in concrete in the dark and without a compass — against the clock.

Even language becomes unstable. People talk of induction — and then find some are thinking of the induction of staff and others of prisoners. When that confusion is cleared up (hopefully quite quickly), it becomes apparent that in the matter of staff induction some mean a half day conducted tour round the establishment with a few reminders about the fundamentals of security; while others mean a five day course on the purpose, nature, style and values of the prison, with team building exercises and intense interpersonal interactions. The world of security is riddled with such potential confusions: consider the phrase ‘perimeter security’. Depending on the type of establishment each individual comes from (and I

immediately exclude the High security estate), it could mean anything from a wall with razor wire on it, to daily searches of the interior and exterior aprons, the fitting of PIRs and lights, CCTV, and close liaison with the Police on suspicious activity within fifty yards of the outside of the wall.

If language becomes slippery, it is hardly surprising if the very nature and purpose of the prison becomes hard to communicate in a way that new and diverse staff can comprehend and relate to. Tina from Isis tells us that the Governing Governor was very clear about the kind of prison she wanted to create and the values that would undergird it. Great. I wonder, though, how many staff, six months after the opening, could relate these high ideals to their own daily routines. That comment is by no means meant critically: it is rather to draw attention to two immensely difficult tasks: communicating organisational values in a comprehensible and acceptable way; and enabling staff to ingest and adhere to those values in the hurly burly of the first few months of the jail’s existence (especially when the jail is chronically understaffed, as Isis was.)

Tina does not tell us by what means the Governing Governor (No 1) had decided on the values she wished the jail to live by. I am always sceptical of the chances of success of a process in which the No 1 (or someone higher up the food chain) decides that the new jail will exhibit values A, B and C and then ‘tells’ the workforce that this is how they are to think and behave. Given all the pressures on each actor throughout the start up period, the chances of these values even being properly understood in all their implications, much less so absorbed that they actually become determinative of subsequent behaviours, are, to put it at its best, slim indeed. I think there is much more chance for an upward inductive process where the values arise from the shared experience of the whole work force. That, of course, takes time and money: both are in short supply. To its credit, NOMS did enable such a process at Kennet. How far it was more successful has never been scientifically assessed. Impressions are that it made a difference during the tenure of the first No 1, a charismatic leader; but that it quickly waned thereafter.

I am not suggesting that the rough edges I discussed above are not smoothed in the months leading up to the opening; but I am suggesting that they are often not

perfectly smoothed — and that this translates into the experience of the early arrivals among the prisoners of the much reported (and seemingly much resented) ‘chaos’, ‘confusion’, ‘inconsistency’ ‘lack of regime’... all eloquently condemned in the interview with the prisoner from Isis.

What these complaints tend to ignore is that each individual prisoner brings with him (or her) a set of expectations which, largely unconsciously, s/he imposes on the new prison. The familiar expression of this is: ‘Why can’t they make it run like it did at HMP S? There was never any of this hassle there’. Or : ‘We didn’t do it like this at HMP X’ or ‘It was much better at YOI Y’. And the no less familiar and equally draining : ‘Well, we were allowed it at HMP T’. These expressions of unfavourable comparison are pointing to something deeper and more difficult for the newly arrived prisoner to grapple with: a mix of insecurity (because all the old pecking orders have disappeared and new ones are going to have to be established: that can be a painful — both literally and metaphorically — business); anxiety, because old identities have had to be shed and new ones now have to be formed; and uncertainty, because who can you trust, among staff and prisoners both, in this new, strange environment? Naturally some personality types deal with these issues more confidently than others.

The crucial point, however, is that these questions are only hammered out by shoving at boundaries, most obviously the boundaries imposed — with more or less confidence and competence — by the new staff. But here is a paradox. Staff often report that prisoners are unusually ‘quiet’, ‘co-operative’, ‘compliant’, ‘easy’ in the early stages of the build up of the prisoner population. How can this be reconciled with prisoners ‘shoving the boundaries’ as reported above? There are two explanations. First, because both staff and prisoners are new to the prison, neither is entirely sure when the boundaries are in fact being ‘shoved’. What the prisoner thinks is the boundary may well be within the margin of tolerance. Second, inexperienced or disoriented staff may lack the confidence to define the boundaries — and then defend them. The prisoners may indeed be on the margin, but the raw staff may not realise it — and report that the prisoners are fully compliant. Certainly it seems to be common that when the jail is up to capacity, the staff’s sense of easy compliance diminishes sharply.

How does this look from the standpoint of the staff, and especially the wing staff and the instructors who

have daily contact with the prisoners? It is uncanny how the issues facing the prisoners also face the staff. There are the same issues of establishing pecking orders, structures of primacy, conventions of deference, interpretations of rules (for some reason, rules around property seem a peculiarly fertile area of disagreement and multiple renegotiation) and above all of boundary definition and defence; and there is the same period of probing and testing (very much like the ‘phoney war’ of 1940.). Oddly (or perhaps not) I have myself witnessed brilliant examples of the very best of jailcraft during this period: sadly, they subsequently seem to get squeezed out of the repertoire by diurnal pressures of ‘doing the basics’.

The staff are almost literally ‘finding themselves’ during this period, irrespective of how comprehensive or sketchy their formal induction. The role of first and second line managers at this point is crucial. With luck and judgement some of them will have been members of the planning and implementation teams and will therefore have a better idea than many of what the senior managers are trying to achieve. The issue then becomes how faithfully they deliver that aim in the way they manage and mould their teams. And that in turn will depend on how proactively and imaginatively they are themselves managed. But here we are back to familiar territory. The same issues of identity,

supremacy, boundary definition, and boundary defence re-emerge. These more senior people will, however, have former models of all these things well burnt into the tracks of their minds — and therefore the possibility of conflict becomes all the greater. In my experience, the period between the fourth and ninth month of the opening of a new prison is extraordinarily — and often painfully — replete with examples of these issues being worked out, sometimes fortissime. Unplanned departures rise, sometimes alarmingly.

Now if you put all these perspectives together, it is easy to see why the early months of a new prison feel, to both staff and prisoners, so dis-ordered, un-settled, uncomfortable and in-secure. The oddity is, however, that despite these undoubted feelings of a strange alienation, there is also, from all sides, a commitment to ‘make it work’, to ‘create a genuinely new prison’, to ‘find a new way forward’, to ‘create something unusual’. It is when these two worlds of meaning collide that the sense of disorientation and sometimes disillusionment are at their strongest. No wonder some new prisons find that some of their ‘best’ staff depart in less than two years..

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Having explored the affective context of opening, we need to get down to some of the administrative basics. Of these, perhaps the most important is the recruitment of staff for the new prison. As in many areas, there is a major gap between the approach of the private prisons and those in the public sector. Put crudely, the former recruit a far higher proportion of young people (often immediately post tertiary education), many of whom do not see the Prison Service as a life long career. They are trained in house and gain their early experience of jailcraft by supervising the early arrivals of prisoners. The public sector, by contrast, seeks to recruit from the existing stock of experienced officers, which can bring its own problems of different — and occasionally incompatible — traditions and expectations. (But see Tina's statement that Isis recruited a large number of over qualified youngsters, new to the Service and almost certainly not intending to make it a career.) The power of the network of contacts among the planning teams cannot be over-emphasised: it is usually that network that identifies and hopefully attracts the early recruits. It will, however, only go so far; and in a rapid build up (which is now the norm), those networks cannot deliver the quantity required. It is at this point that the maintenance of quality becomes a major problem. Other public sector prisons will not happily release their best staff and will seek to maximise the delays built in to the system. The new prison cannot afford those delays and has to take what 'the market' offers. Caveat emptor! Unfortunately, time pressures do not allow for much caution and it is here that the quality of the recruits is likely to dip alarmingly — a situation made all the worse by the fact that whatever induction process was offered to the early arrivals is likely to be curtailed or even abandoned for these later arrivals. As the Isis interview demonstrates, turn-over figures can become stratospheric.

A somewhat different pattern is evident with the recruitment of prisoners. Almost inevitably, established prisons will send their more difficult prisoners, despite instructions to the contrary from Region or HQ. I have noticed special glee in public sector establishments as they contemplate the pleasure of off-loading their hardest cases to a new private sector prison. The receiving prison usually has little control over its incomers, except perhaps in the earliest days.

The 'difficult' prisoners — at least in my limited experience — tend not to be the violent or high risk (who

are usually excluded from transfers to a new prison anyway); rather they tend to be the needy, the demanding, the litigious, the manipulative and sometimes the controlling. These are, almost by definition, the kinds of prisoners who need the attention of the most experienced officers. They are unlikely to get it in public sector prisons and will almost certainly not get it in private prisons. As the interview with Tina from Isis demonstrates so well, a new prison is most unlikely to have the range and depth of experience in wing staff and civilian staff (in education and industries) that this kind of prisoner needs. There are two possible outcomes: the prisoner conditions some of the staff; or he gets so angry, frustrated and inverted that he does something stupid and a 'Littlehey event' becomes more likely.

I turn now to an issue hinted at in both opening interviews — purchasing and procuring. In general — and certainly there are some weird exceptions — the public sector has robust procurement procedures. There may be cost ceilings that seem too low or arbitrary, but overall the system is so well established and oiled, one may say, so amply by the sweat of generations, that, apart from detailed oversights by the planners (one new prison found there were no ladles in the kitchen), procurement is not likely to prove a major issue. It is not so in the private prisons. Even a large contractor has only a small

number of prisons and some of them may have been inherited from the public sector in fully functional form. So equipping a new prison from scratch, (one estimate is that 40,000 orders have to be processed for a medium sized Cat C prison) can be a formidable challenge to an organisation for which the new prison is little more than a pimple on the procurement department's spread-sheet. So horror stories abound. One of my favourites (the truth of which I have been able to establish) is the No 1 having to max out his credit cards to buy drugs for the Health Centre three days before the prison opened. The Procurement Dept of the major company concerned had never had the need to buy drugs before and could not produce the necessary protocols.

That raises an associated theme, again touched upon in the Isis interview — namely forming relationships with outside bodies, from the NHS and Police to the volunteers who will work in the Visits centre. The NHS is notorious in this regard. Establishing a contractual relationship with the local Trust can be slow, cumbersome, frustrating and immensely time consuming

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— even with goodwill on both sides (and that is quite an assumption.) But at least there is a ‘face at the table’. For the third sector and especially some of the smaller, more specialised units that cannot be taken for granted. They work, as it were, on and through established relationships, almost kin networks. By definition these are born out of time; they cannot be summoned on demand. ‘You can buy a dentist’s chair; you cannot buy a couple of ladies to make the tea in the Visits centre.’ But the latter may add at least as much affective value as the former.

Lastly, I want to explore a fascinating theme that came from the Isis interview, one that seems to have stopped the interviewer in her tracks. Tina complained of the lack of friendliness from the rest of the Service. She — and by extension her senior colleagues — was made to feel something of a pariah, and, she alleges, others took pleasure in the difficulties and failures that the prison experienced in its early years.

We need to ask what is going on here? (Tina herself seems to have only the most tentative diagnosis, perhaps from a laudable sense of loyalty to her disloyal colleagues). Let’s start by putting these regional (or similar) meetings in context. They are a well-bonded

group, with their own dynamics; their own strategies and even their own humour. Into this comes not just a newcomer, but a favoured newcomer, one who has been hand-picked by very senior people in the Service to have the privilege and responsibility for opening a new and innovative jail. Professional jealousy is perhaps inevitable, especially in the absence of a firm containing presence from senior managers. And the more innovative the new prison strives to be — and Tina tells us the No 1 had very clear ambitions in that respect — the greater will be the implied criticism of the existing establishments. And therefore the more trenchant the schadenfreude when it seems to fail.

Maybe there is something a little more primitive operating here. Perhaps the new prison represents the favoured youngest sibling who is both threat to and judge of the rest of the family; the Joseph figure in short. If that is right, we are in another world, one in which fantasy ousts reason and primitive fear makes common courtesy impossible. It takes wise and patient leadership of an exceptional quality to help a group through this position. And like most other large organisations, the Prison Service is not well endowed with such leadership.



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