

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

September 2014 No 215



Special Edition
Closing and Opening Prisons

Interview: Tony Lunnon

*Tony Lunnon is a Prison Officer at HMP Gartree and experienced a prison closure when HMP Wellingborough shut in 2012. He is interviewed by **Chris Gunderson** who works for Business Development Group, NOMS.*

The interview took place in January 2014.

CG: Could you describe your time at HMP Wellingborough before the closure announcement?

TL: I joined HMP Wellingborough in 2005 after working at Wandsworth and Highpoint. I spent about seven years at Wellingborough as a Residential Officer. The establishment was a medium sized Category C prison, holding long term lifers and prisoners from the local area. Relationships with prisoners were very positive, incidents were low and there was a strong establishment identity. When I joined I immediately found staff welcoming and approachable. I greatly enjoyed my time at Wellingborough.

CG: Was there any anticipation Wellingborough would be closed?

TL: Two years before the closure announcement Wellingborough was put up for Market Testing with Birmingham and Buckley Hall. We assumed it was a clear choice between staying public or going private. At one point I wondered whether we could close because we needed investment to upgrade facilities. I wouldn't say I anticipated the closure but I was concerned investing in Wellingborough might be more expensive than building new prisons or units. We carried on as normal for the next twelve to eighteen months as preferred bidders finalised their proposals. Bids were submitted and we awaited a decision. But on the eve of the announcements for Birmingham and Buckley Hall the Wellingborough tender was withdrawn. We were told the Wellingborough bid was not proceeding and no long term contract was being awarded. Instead the establishment would operate on a rolling contract whilst a permanent decision was made about our future. Despite this uncertainty staff remained optimistic. There was a feeling we had been considered fit for a tender therefore we must be considered fit to stay open. We had not replaced the staff that left when Market Testing was announced so we were now operating more cheaply. We now became an overspill facility for London and began to take prisoners from across the capital. We had reduced costs, been given a new role and come through Market Testing, and we were feeling positive about the future. This sequence of events made the closure announcement all the more unexpected.

CG: How were you informed that Wellingborough would be closing?

TL: I was on a rest day and got a phone call from a colleague in the prison. He asked whether I had heard the news, I asked what he meant and he said we were closing. I switched the computer on and it was on the BBC website. My colleague told me staff in the jail had been called to a meeting in the Chapel where the Governor made the announcement. The chapel is invariably the biggest space in a prison so it is often where full staff meetings take place and announcements are made. During Market Testing we joked about getting bad news whenever we were called to the Chapel. Previously staff had come out laughing but that day was different. I was told the Governor was crying with staff after making the announcement. This was her first Governor post and she was just as upset as the other staff.

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

TL: To be honest I couldn't believe the news. Having emerged from the stress and uncertainty of Market Testing we all thought we were over the worst of it and were cautiously looking forward. The prison returned to normal with a new population and function which gave us more hope. This made the closure announcement more of a shock and I think it hit everyone a lot harder. There were very strong views about the closure both among staff and figures within the local community.

CG: How did your colleagues respond to the news?

TL: I was on duty the day after the announcement and I remember being surprised that there was a lot of good humour when I went into the prison. There was a lot of emotion but staff rallied round to support each other. We were a close group and the situation brought us closer together. I think this banter was our collective way of coping. This coping mentality quickly turned to discussing plans for the future. I remember officers openly discussing the Voluntary Early Departure Scheme (VEDS) and redeployment to different prisons. I remember conversations about the distances to different jails and people huddled round computers looking at maps. Nobody stopped wanting to do a good job each day but every person began to focus on the longer term decisions they would have to make.

CG: How was the news announced to prisoners and how did they respond?

TL: On the day she made the announcement to staff, the Governor wrote to prisoners informing them of the closure. Some staff predicted prisoners would use the opportunity to plan disorder or openly mock the staff but we didn't experience anything like this. The prisoners remained compliant and many were genuinely upset which I had not expected. I recall the life sentenced prisoners that had been with us a long time didn't want to leave. It was a difficult time for everyone.

CG: What was the impact on other prisons nearby and what was the approach to managing that?

TL: The only impact I recall hearing about was some negativity experienced by staff at the prisons they were redeployed to. Sites like Littlehey, Aylesbury, Onley, Bedford, Stocken and Gartree were required to receive our staff at short notice and I heard some of our staff had quite a tough time when they relocated. I am not sure whether this was widespread or what the cause was but I didn't experience any difficulties myself.

CG: What was the response of unions and what role did they have in the process?

TL: Following the closure announcement delegates from the POA NEC Committee visited the establishment to meet with union members. We held a vote on whether to engage with the HR interviews and redeployment process. There were strong views and staff saw this as an opportunity to show our dissent. However the NEC advised the Branch Chair not to take this action. POA members were advised to participate in HR interviews to retain some control over our redeployment. This was sound advice but it unfortunately proved the extent of the support the NEC could offer. The Committee arranged access to legal advisors for those staff requesting it but they couldn't do anything further. In truth I don't think unions had power to do more. We were the only prison going through this at the time and there was nothing the NEC or anybody else could do.

CG: 'How were the transfers of prisoners managed and what were the main challenges to this?'

TL: We sent prisoners to a variety of different establishments which took a lot of organising. At one stage we were sending out daily drafts to different

prisons. The Governor decided to move the prisoners that were easiest to locate first. The majority were moved quickly but we had a significant number of the longer term prisoners that for offence or health reasons were harder to place. The real challenge was relocating the oldest prisoners. It was difficult for some to get into vehicles and there are not many suitable units to send elderly prisoners to. I remember several refused including one prisoner in his seventies and we spent a lot of time encouraging individuals onto vehicles. Despite the challenges the population was moved very quickly. In total all 588 prisoners were moved in under

three months. The only prisoners left were a small group of volunteers who had agreed to stay to help with the decommission work.

CG: What physical work needed to be carried out in order to decommission the site as a prison?

TL: A manager was brought in to oversee and plan the closure. I didn't realise prior to this but there is a prison service manual on how to decommission a prison which we had to follow to the letter. All work was planned and tasks were issued out each morning. At the end of each day projects were marked off on the planner when they were complete. These tasks included everything from breaking up items of furniture to securing each decommissioned area. I remember looking out onto the exercise yards and

Nothing could be sold for profit so a lot of equipment went into skips. I remember about 20 skips going in and out through the gate each day at one stage. We needed so many that the skip company ran out of skips.

seeing groups of staff and prisoners breaking up old furniture. As each unit was emptied an inventory was drawn up listing the equipment that was left. These lists were circulated to all other prisons. Each day OSGs and Officers would arrive at the gate with vans. Other prisons were literally stripping the place bare like a prison 'bring and buy' sale. Everything that wasn't taken by other prisons was earmarked for destruction on the yards. Nothing could be sold for profit so a lot of equipment went into skips. I remember about 20 skips going in and out through the gate each day at one stage. We needed so many that the skip company ran out of skips. I recall seeing an entire dentist's consulting suite being stripped out. Because we couldn't sell this it was packaged up by a charity and shipped across to a Hospital in Africa. Personally I didn't want to be part of the decommission work. I wanted to go to a new prison and get on with my job as soon as possible. I wrote to

the Governor asking to be redeployed as soon as possible. I was lucky enough to get a swift redeployment and was thankful to avoid being involved in decommissioning.

CG: How did people respond to having to carry out the role of closure whilst dealing with their own uncertainty?

TL: Every member of staff was extremely professional and got the work done but I think a lot of those involved in the decommissioning found it very difficult. Everyone handled it in their own way and nobody really talked about it. The main priority was to keep occupied but I am sure it was difficult. As I have said I was pleased to move on as quickly as possible. The process of redeployment was the hardest part. Personally I was just glad redeployment was happening quickly and we were not required to work for a period on detached duty at other prisons but I think some staff found it very difficult and gave the HR representatives a difficult time. I felt they were trying to do their job and I appreciated the fact they tried to place us all quickly. Further delays would have placed additional strain on individuals and families. We were required to provide a list of jails we would consider that were within 75 minutes commute from our homes. I provided five names but in truth I would have considered any commute to keep a job. A few weeks later we received sealed envelopes confirming our postings. I was on a rest day but I went in to discover my fate. I remember walking up to the gate and seeing two colleagues outside. They had received their postings and were trying to find out where their new prison was! I went up to the Chapel and joined the queue. We waited in silence and shuffled towards the front where a woman sat behind a small desk. She had a box full of alphabetically arranged envelopes with each member of staff's name on. You simply gave her your name, she ticked you off a list and handed you your envelope. People took themselves off somewhere quiet to open their letters. I asked someone to open mine for me and he told me we were both going to Gartree. I was lucky to receive a posting that was a similar commute to Wellingborough. A lot of staff

The prison was a big employer in the town so the closure had a big effect. I recall the MP for Wellingborough was extremely vocal in his criticism of the decision.

were not so lucky. I remember a lot of staff crying that day.

CG: How did you personally cope with the impact of closure and draw on your resilience to see the process through?

TL: I just wanted to get on with the job. I wrote to the Deputy Governor asking for my redeployment to be brought forward to the earliest possible date. Luckily my request was accepted and I was granted a very quick move. My redeployment letter had been dated 26th September and I started at HMP Gartree in November.

CG: What was the impact on the wider community?

TL: The prison was a big employer in the town so the closure had a big effect. I recall the MP for Wellingborough was extremely vocal in his criticism of the decision. He asked for an opportunity to personally question the NOMS Board and Justice Minister Kenneth Clarke over the decision. He drew a lot of attention to the issue and highlighted the impact on the community. The Mayor was also very supportive but ultimately they could not influence the decision.

CG: How did you mark the closing of Wellingborough?

TL: There was a march out from the gates and a formal ceremony like we have recently seen at other prisons but I did not want to attend or participate. Every member of staff was also given a coffee mug with the prison crest and the opening and closure dates on but I did not feel this was something I wanted.

CG: What lessons would you take from this closure and what advice would you offer to a member of staff involved in a prison closure?

TL: My advice would be to not expect miracles from the HR team but not to treat them as the enemy. If the HR team can support you and help you they will do. They may not have much information at first but will tell you what they can. Even after what has happened I still enjoy the job. I have been in the prison service for 24 years and don't feel I have been treated badly overall.