January 2021 No 252

Special edition:
Security in prisons

Leading prison security

Interview with Claudia Sturt, Executive Director for Security, Order and Counter Terrorism

Claudia Sturt *is Executive Director for Security, Order and Counter Terrorism in HM Prison and Probation Service. She is interviewed by* ***Dr. Kate Gooch,*** *Associate Professor at University of Bath.*

Claudia Sturt is the Executive Director for Security, Order and Counter Terrorism in HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). She was the first person to undertake this role after it was created in 2016. Her responsibilities include leading services across prisons, probation and youth custody tackling violent extremism, serious organised crime and corruption. Her team also lead on the management of intelligence and the development of security policies and practice, including new technologies and countermeasures. In addition, she manages teams that respond to serious incidents.

Prior to taking on this role, Claudia Sturt was a successful prison manager. She governed four prisons: Erlestoke, Dartmoor, Winchester and Belmarsh. She was also a Deputy Director between 2010 and 2016, responsible for leading all of the prisons in the Thames Valley, Hampshire and Isle of Wight area.

This interview took place in October 2020.

KG: How would you describe prison security?

CS: Security can be understood as the protection of an organisation, its mission and objectives against hostile activity. The mission and objectives of HMPPS are to protect the public; reducing reoffending and building positive lives. What Security means in that context is ensuring the sentence of the court is carried out, but then enabling prisons to be places where rehabilitation can happen and people can lead safe, well ordered lives in our custody. You won't get much meaningful rehabilitation within prisons that are chaotic and dangerous, because people in there are just too busy surviving. I see Security as creating the bedrock for rehabilitative cultures and opportunities, rather than just something for its own sake. The traditional view of prison security was dominated by preventing escape. Of course that's still our pre-eminent responsibility, but it's no longer enough. In former days, when you incarcerated somebody behind a big high wall, their offending behaviour either stopped or was at least put on hold while they were in custody. All you had to do to protect the public from prisoners was to stop them escaping- because as long as they didn't escape, they couldn't carry on their criminal activity. That's clearly not the case any longer, with the proliferation of digital technology. We're not able to eradicate this or completely prevent its use, and for that reason many offenders still manage to maintain their networks and criminal activity while they're in custody. Therefore, in order to protect the public and reduce reoffending we have to curtail ongoing criminal activity; prison Security now is as much about tackling the illicit economy and ongoing criminality as it is about preventing escape.

KG: Do you think that changes the daily practice of security within a prison?

CS: Yes, I think it needs to. We best protect the institution, its mission and objectives by, first of all, understanding the threat- the nature of things that can go wrong, let's say in our context escape, ongoing criminality and extremism. Then we need to understand the level of risk- by which I mean the likelihood that those things will go wrong. Then we have to find ways to mitigate those risks. We protect the organisation by building its resilience, by reducing the rewards of hostile activity and by increasing the jeopardy attached continued offending. You can't do those things in isolation from other partners across the law enforcement and national security landscape. I think much more of our focus now is more upstream than it used to be. So traditionally, I think prisons have looked at the way the threat manifests itself in relation to individual prisoners' behaviour. For example, you observe prisoner X passing something to prisoner Y, and you might drug test one and search the other — that's dealing with the downstream manifestations of the threat. If you look upstream, and you're willing to be partnership-minded and work with other agencies, then you start being able to tackle the threat at source. You can start looking at the criminal groups who are supplying prisons rather than the individual who's handing it out across the wing. You can start disrupting and degrading the supply chain. By using strategic intelligence you can begin to get ahead of the problem rather than only ever dealing with the symptoms of it.

If as a SOCT (Security, Order and Counter-Terrorism) team we are sitting around the table with the right agencies, we can be contributing to their understanding and they can be contributing to ours and we jointly start filling the knowledge gaps. This Directorate has got to be a knowledge-based economy.

KG: Has that involved cultural change either on the part of the prison service or the police or both?

CS: Yes, certainly some fundamental changes were necessary. We had to make a strategic choice to be at the table with law enforcement and national security partners, rather than working in isolation. Historically, the Prison Service could be insular; although we have always co-operated with partners at the operational level. Strategically, we would just plough our own furrow-and you can get away with that, but you won't make any headway-so part of the shift for us is having more of an open, outward- facing mindset that says, 'we're partners not competitors', so we can build a joint response. Our partners also had to recognise that we had a really valuable part to play and that we could be trusted, so that they would choose to work with us. I think we are now treated with a lot more respect and consideration by our partners in law enforcement and national security. We're certainly now seen as part of the solution and highly relevant to the national security effort; not at all something to be worked around.

Our partners also had to recognise that we had a really valuable part to play and that we could be trusted, so that they would choose to work with us.

KG: One of the things that has happened in the last couple of years is that prison security has attracted a lot of investment, which in terms of the context of the last decade, is quite unique. Do you think that the new capabilities are making a difference and bringing better outcomes for individuals, for prisons or the Service as a whole?

CS: I think you'll see a big difference. That investment was made possible by a couple of things. I spoke about intelligence; the strategic intelligence picture we developed gave us an evidence base to establish what our critical threats were. In place of anecdote we had for the first time an authoritative articulation of our threat picture with powerful enough Evidence to open the Treasury purse-strings. Developing a partnership approach was the second thing that was necessary. One of the reasons why we got the investment was because colleagues within the Home Office saw the value of working with us on the case management of high harm individuals, and lobbied on our behalf. Without external support for our bid I don't think it would have succeeded, so it's a real tangible example of the benefits of facing outward. And of course, we were lucky with the timing- a new Government keen to tackle crime just as we were producing our threat assessment. The £100 million investment will strengthen our resilience from multiple directions, starting with enhancing gate security. I spoke earlier about increasing the jeopardy and reducing the profitability of criminal supply operations, so one way you reduce the profitability is to increase the number of consignments that don't' get delivered, so that the profit-loss equation is shifted. If you can also identify who is people bringing contraband into the prison, you're increasing their jeopardy. What I am working towards is that people no longer see prisons as a worthwhile or lucrative marketplace because too many of their trades go wrong and they run too high a risk of getting caught themselves. Enhancing gate security is a critical aspect of that because it makes it much harder to get the items in quantities through the gate. We are investing in new technologies, such as X-Ray body and bag scanners and metal detector portals, with SOCT staff working directly with the manufacturers to develop the best possible specifications for prison use. We are also increasing searching staff and dogs so that anything that comes through the gate is scrutinised in a really credible way. We are able to do this in about 50 new sites that don't already have those measures. I'd love to go further, but it's a great start.

As part of the Security Investment programme, we are also developing a digital forensics lab. The purpose of that is to access the information downloaded from SIM cards and mobile phones that we recover. Those mobile phones have often been places that are not very bio-secure so we need to be able to handle the items properly. And then we are replacing the Mercury intelligence system with a new digital platform that will give us the opportunity to interrogate data not just process it, then use our intelligence much more proactively.

We are developing our multi-agency responses to serious organised crime, investing in a powerful joint case management, control and disruption approach for high harm and serious organised criminals to make it as near impossible as we can for them to continue their activities in prison and after their release too —

that's why the Home Office wanted us to have the money for that.

The other area where we are going to be investing quite heavily is on counter-corruption work. We recognise that if you close down other supply routes for contraband, crime groups and individuals will increasingly target our colleagues, so we are helping to build the resilience of staff against being corrupted. Organised crime is absolutely ruthless, and they will exploit whatever weakness they can find, whether that is people who have debt, or those who are lonely or insecure, who are uncertain about their status at work or think that colleagues don't value or support them. Very few people join the job with a view to working corruptly; a small number might, but generally speaking, those people who get corrupted are singled out and manipulated because criminals see a chink in their armour.

The Security Investment Programme is a combination of measures- technological and human factors- and from both a staff and offender perspective, that will make a significant difference, but that doesn't mean it will be job done. One of the unfortunate realities that we are working with is that serious organised crime is ruthless, entrepreneurial, adaptable, greedy, and as long as they see an attractive market and they think that the cost:benefit ratio is in their favour, they will keep trying to exploit it.

We recognise that if you close down other supply routes for contraband, crime groups and individuals will increasingly target our colleagues, so we are helping to build resilience of staff against being corrupted.

KG: Do you think that threat has changed whilst you've been in the role, or perhaps in the Prison Service?

CS: Certainly, during my time in the Prison Service, it is hardly recognisable from the days of trading lavatory paper and phone cards. It will have developed even since I've been in this role, but I think what has really changed is our ability to know what it looks like. Previously you were just working blind about what happens outside the prison. But now we have improved our ability to see. Digital technology of course is changing everything- and the illicit economy in prison is no different. The most significant change is that people can grow very rich without ever getting their hands dirty and they can have victims that never meet — they can have victims on another continent and that's a massive game changer. With the dark web and digital technology, there's now a market place where you never have to meet the person who is supplying you.

KG: And in some ways, that's the change with mobile phones in prison; you don't have to meet the victim or be in direct contact…

CS: A lot of people ask, why can't we relax a little bit about mobile phones in prison because prisoners are just trying to keep in touch with their loved ones, speak to their kids before bedtime, and they're doing it on a mobile phone because it's private, cheaper, and easier than speaking on a landline on prison landings. Most of the people in prison come from a generation where they spend most of their time with a phone in their hand so it just feels unnatural not to have a mobile to text and call with. But because all those mobile phones have to be trafficked in, they are all feeding the illicit economy, and the debt and violence that goes with it. It may be true that nearly three quarters of calls on illicit mobiles are made to people we are happy for them to contact, but that still leaves 25-30 per cent of calls to friends, associates or victims who we are not happy for them to speak to- and we have evidence or that figure, by the way.

KG: And when they are calling family members there can sometimes be an indirect link to the illicit economy because family members are repaying debts or being coerced directly…

CS: Absolutely. To say we are happy for them to talk to their family doesn't always mean we would be happy with the content of what they are saying.

KG: I guess that speaks to some of the difficult tensions when trying to balance those things that we know support rehabilitation and desistance, but also being alive to the things that might constitute a threat or create an element of risk, and that balance is never perfect.

CS: Yes, one of the things that was wrong with our response traditionally has been how we categorised people, so we've been reliant on sentence length to establish someone's security category as a shorthand, which doesn't take into account that risk of harm and sentence length don't necessarily go hand in hand. Plenty of people who are immersed in serious criminality don't get long sentences, either because

they are well represented in court or because law enforcement is unable to prosecute them for the totality of what they are doing. We always have a significant proportion of known organised crime group members in custody at any given time, with the majority still held in relatively low security conditions. For some of them, that's appropriate because they might be coming to the end of their sentence and we should be trying to get them successfully resettled. For many, though, they will make their way to medium or low security conditions because their short sentences mean that they are automatically categorised as Category C or Category D, or they are skilled at shaping how we see them, very good at becoming cleaners, orderlies and in trusted positions on the Prison Council and so on. They do well out of the decisions that are made about them by prison staff. So if you can change how you categorise people to reflect actual risk, than you can be much better at making sure that those who need genuinely need rehabilitative support don't have those opportunities ruined by the activities of organised criminals trying to control the establishment for their own profit. The new generation of prisons are designed to be all about reducing reoffending and to give people an opportunity to be busy in a constructive way, to behave responsibly and live positive lives in custody. If we make sure that people in those prisons are the ones who need and won't abuse it, that's an important service. It also creates a degree of leverage for the people who are currently doing really well out of the system but are not desisting from criminal activity.

The new generation of prisons are designed to be all about reducing reoffending and to give people an opportunity to be busy in a constructive way, to behave responsibly and live positive lives in custody.

KG: One of the recent changes has been to introduce financial investigation units, and to invest in both regional and national intelligence units — how important has this been?

CS: It's probably the first time that we've made a real effort to be knowledge based and that knowledge isn't just about what happened locally, but goes beyond establishments, beyond criminal justice and even beyond U.K. borders. Some of the new capabilities have been really important to that. We have increased the number of prison-based intelligence staff, and professionalised their role so they are qualified to the same level as law enforcement analysts. Better local intelligence provides the building blocks for better regional and national analysis. The use of data is a shift. This includes, for example, downloading data from captured drones or recovered mobile phones, and using that as part of a wider law enforcement effort. We have been able to get convictions for drone pilots by getting data off drones that were recovered, and that was never previously possible. The Regional Intelligence Units are very important to us now because they help join the dots and synthesise the local intelligence, and see the associations and networks that you can't necessarily see when you are just looking within a single establishment or group. Where those Regional Intelligence Units now partner up with Regional Organised Crime Units, that starts both contributing to, and drawing on contributions from, agencies such as the National Crime Agency, the Police, HMRC, Borders and Immigration and so on. We can therefore see a much more complete picture about how the illicit economy operates. Crime Groups are completely agnostic about how they make money, they look for the best opportunities for profit and power. One week it might be supplying steroids to a gym in a prison, the next week perhaps trafficking sex workers or moving cryptocurrency on the dark web — they don't care how they do it, it's about whatever is most profitable and least risky.

KG: The theme that has come up during the interview is about law enforcement. Do you think that's a change in philosophy, strategy or practice for prison officers or prison managers?

CS: I think traditionally, people working within prison have almost had to choose which hat they are going to wear — whether they are focused on security or rehabilitation. I came to this job having never worked in a security related role. I was always about reducing reoffending and decency in prisons, and I wouldn't necessarily even say that I had a positive view or expert understanding about the role of Security. Sometimes it even felt like Security saw their job as stopping me doing mine, although I'm sure from their perspective they were just watching my back. What I absolutely urge people to think about is that you don't have to choose, because security serves rehabilitation. Good Security should be helping the rehabilitation effort to happen safely and making a reality of it, not stopping it.

We should have people working in prison who are interested in both simultaneously and see how they can contribute to both simultaneously. One of the areas of investment in the Security Investment Programme, only a small investment but I think an important one, is about capability raising. I'm really influenced by a case that Ian Bickers and I investigated several years ago when I was DDC (Deputy Director of Custody) for South Central. It was the escape of a high risk prisoner from Crown Court, and we were struck that the whole case was a triumph of process over critical thinking. The process was correct at every stage, but the escape occurred because they were so reliant on the process that they lost their ability to think about the threat. I think that investigation was the single most influential thing I'd done in my career in terms of security because it showed me that process might assure people that they have done their job correctly but it doesn't actually prevent things from going wrong, it doesn't protect the organisation's mission. For this reason much of my focus with SOCT has been developing a Directorate that has questioning and thinking at its heart. We want to develop intelligence and ask questions about how things go wrong, not to attribute blame but to understand so that we can improve the response next time. I've tried to move us away from a mindset that is about handling adverse events to one that is about not repeating them. To do that, you need to have a culture where people say I think a mistake has been made, how was that mistake possible and how do we design it out?

We want to develop intelligence and ask questions about how things go wrong, not to attribute blame but to understand so that we can improve the response next time.

KG: So, it's about building resilience without designing out human capacity and skill?

CS: It is absolutely. I'm long enough in the tooth now and I am a Historian so I'm bound to think back to HMP Whitemoor and HMP Parkhust and the escapes in the 1990s, and the lessons that we learnt very painfully then which were about inadequate process. We had prison staff who were conditioned and intimidated into not doing their job, and the organisational response to that was to codify every requirement with a regime of auditing to make sure that each task had been completed and couldn't be missed or avoided. It was probably an important corrective at the time, but we became over reliant on it and a successful Security Audit became the test of whether a prison was deemed to be secure or not. I wouldn't want to see the audits go all together but it has to be balanced by having an intelligent and enquiring approach to what our threats are, be they places, problems or people; understanding what those threats are and how they operate and then thinking about how best they can be mitigated.

KG: What makes you proud about the work that you do or that you see in others?

CS: I was very lucky to have an opportunity to create something almost from scratch; you don't often get that and certainly not with the combination of investment coupled with space to innovate and make a real difference. My colleagues and I have been able to build something new; a Directorate where the culture, capability, partnership, and the outcomes make me very, very proud. I'm proud that it is a Directorate that's not afraid to do things differently, that isn't constrained by the way we have always done things. Because it's fresh and interesting and exciting work, we've been able to attract some brilliant people to join SOCT. I don't have words for how proud I am of the work that they do, though some of it I can't talk about, which is very frustrating. When I see the sheer inventiveness and quality of the work that some of my colleagues do, I'm incredibly proud. They are not simply doing it because I've told them to; I've built the clock and wound it up but they're doing it and working it out for themselves. I've got people in SOCT who have enormously greater security experience that I have. I don't have all the answers on this at all. I've brought a mindset and way of looking at an issue, but other people have developed things, so I'm proud of them. I see successful operations from the capabilities and relationships that my colleagues have built. I know that there are people walking around alive on the street today because of a piece of work that was done in SOCT, and that's not an exaggeration. I know that we are putting holes in the illicit economy because of our activity, and I know that we are keeping the public safer, and people who live in work in prisons and probation safer. I'm really proud of that, and it's been probably the greatest privilege I've ever had, to be able to create this Directorate.

KG: How would you describe your experience as a female senior leader working in a male-dominated security world?

CS: People used to always ask me this question when I was a Governor, but my response was always, 'It's not a male dominated environment, it's a Claudia dominated environment.' I was not completely joking. As a leader, you set the tone and culture by what you do and what you put up with. I don't ever feel that I've suffered from being in a world that is numerically dominated by men because the work I've done has been determined by me and the people I've got around me. For a young directorate, SOCT has a good track record in attracting senior female leadership to pivotal roles. Both men and women in SOCT have brought their talents to bear on the problems that they've seen and they've been brilliant at it. There might be more men than women in the Security arena, I think we are going in the right direction and the SOCT Directorate is a good counterbalance for that- although like other parts of HMPPS gender is not the only area where we would benefit from greater diversity.

KG: Could you name one person who has influenced you?

CS: I've been lucky enough to work for some great leaders — Martin Narey and Michael Spurr come to mind immediately, of course. And I learn so much from people who work within my Directorate. But another person who had a really profound influence on me, and who I really miss now, is Dr Ruth Mann, not just because she was also a really passionate servant of rehabilitation and always wanted to find ways to make things better, but she taught very powerful lessons about evidence, about not approaching questions with pre-formed assumptions or believing that you already have all the answers. She taught us about having an open mind and to be evidence based, which is important in every part of our work but especially so in the world of Security. Ruth was a person of genuine goodness; without ever making you feel harassed she always advocated strongly for hope, dignity and humanity in a way that was impossible to ignore. She's not someone we can easily replace but her influence and legacy are powerful and enduring, and they live on after her.

KG: What are your future hopes for SOCT Directorate?

CS: The next challenge for SOCT, which I think will make a huge difference, will be to help the organisation to understand better what we can offer. People don't necessarily know enough about what we do for us to have maximum impact. Before COVID, our primary objective for this year was bridging the gap between SOCT and wider operational capability so that people who work in prisons and probation can have a greater share of the knowledge capital that we have built up. It is no good at all having all these fantastic capabilities if they're not being used, or they are only being used for the things we can spot. We've created the capabilities, and I really want them harnessed to the maximum effect which requires operational colleagues to be actively aware, lobbying for and exploiting them because that's what will make prisons safer, stable and more law abiding, and more decent and rehabilitative.