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Interview with Dr. Jo Farrar

Dr. Jo Farrar is Chief Executive Officer of HM Prison and Probation Service and is interviewed by Dr. Jamie Bennett who is a Deputy Director in HMPPS and editor of Prison Service Journal

Dr. Jo Farrar was appointed Chief Executive Officer of HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in April 2019. She was appointed after a long and distinguished career in public service, including as Chief executive of Bridgend Borough Council, and Bath and North-East Somerset Council. Immediately prior to her appointment, she was Director General for local government and public services in the Department for Communities and Local Government.

HMPPS is an Executive Agency of the Ministry of Justice, which commissions, provides and regulates services including prison, probation and youth custody. The organisation has running costs of around £4 billion a year, directly employing around 49,000 people¹, providing services for some 83,000 people in prison and almost 250,000 on probation². Jo Farrar took on the role following what Richard Heaton, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Justice described as ‘several challenging years’³. The preceding years were described by the Chief Inspector of Prisons as ‘deeply troubling’ with ‘...far too many of our jails...plagued by drugs, violence, appalling living conditions and a lack of access to meaningful rehabilitative activity’⁴. This immense leadership challenge was only intensified by the coronavirus pandemic, which swept around the globe in 2020.

This interview took place in June 2020 and offers an opportunity for Dr. Farrar to reflect on her first year in the role and the enormous challenges of leading HMPPS.

JB: Could you tell us about your personal background?

JF: Of course, thank you for having me, I’m delighted to share my reflections with you. I started as CEO of HMPPS just over a year ago and it is a role I feel incredibly proud to be in.

A little about me — I have two children (and have recently become a Grandmother!) and I live in Bath with my youngest child and my husband Jeff.

I have spent most of my career in the public sector. I remember making a decision early on — when I was working with young offenders in the prison service — that I wanted to have a career in public service. It gives us the opportunity to make a difference to people’s lives and that

is so important, particularly when people are vulnerable or who have suffered from not having a good start in life.

JB: What were your early career experiences before entering local government?

JF: I spent most of my early career in the Home Office, where I always felt I was doing something important — whether that was working in the centre — in the Home Secretary’s private office, training staff, being part of the Inspectorate of Constabulary or taking a bill through parliament. All of these experiences helped shape me as a person and made me totally committed to giving back.

However, it was in the Cabinet Office, when I was working on Civil Service reform, where I came across some amazing people from lots of different sectors who encouraged me to reach out and widen my experience beyond the Civil Service. I applied for, and was surprised and delighted to be offered, an Assistant CEO role in Camden Council, a job which gave me a passion for local government as I realised the significance of the hundreds of essential services which councils provide to local communities.

This experience led me to becoming CEO of two local authorities, Bridgend in South Wales, and Bath and North East Somerset.

This second part of my career shaped me as a leader. It allowed me to bring about culture change, lead major programmes and respond to events and crises where — I firmly believe — we were able to save lives, bring families together and deliver lasting change.

I spent over ten years as CEO in local government, then, one day, saw an advert for a DG in Department for Communities and Local Government (now Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government) and spoke to the Permanent Secretary, Melanie Dawes, who helped me to see the value I could bring to local government in a national role. It was great to return to the Civil Service and to bring something different, as well as learning a huge amount.

JB: What drew you to be interested in leading HM Prison and Probation Service?

JF: In 2019, I was drawn to the role of CEO of HMPPS as I could see that it would allow me to bring together the

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1. HM Prison and Probation Service (2019) *Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19* available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/818788/HMPPS_Annual_Report_and_Accounts_2018-19_web_.pdf accessed on 28 July 2020
 2. HM Prison and Probation Service (2020) *Offender management statistics quarterly: October to December 2019 and annual 2019* available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2019/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2019-and-annual-2019> accessed on 28 July 2020
 3. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chief-executive-of-hm-prison-and-probation-service-next-appointment> accessed on 28 July 2020
 4. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2019) *Annual Report 2018-19* available at https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/07/6.5563_HMI-Prisons-AR_2018-19_WEB_FINAL_040719.pdf accessed on 28 July 2020

operational experience I gained as a CEO in local government, together with the policy experience and knowledge gained in central government, in an area — going back to my early career — that I am passionate about. I felt that I could bring a fresh perspective and new ways of doing things to HMPPS. A year in, it is a job I love and feel privileged to have.

JB: What do you consider to be the most important attributes of a leader?

JF: As I reflect on my first year, there are some attributes that I believe are really important to my leadership. Over the last few weeks, we have seen people react to the death of George Floyd in America, and I have heard some important and difficult truths from my staff about the way they are feeling and have been treated. It has reminded me of the importance of listening and of hearing people's lived experiences. I want HMPPS to be an organisation where people are treated well and fairly and are able to reach their potential. While I am CEO, I will do everything I can to make sure this happens.

Another vital leadership attribute is the ability to empower and inspire the people who work for you. As a leader, it is important that you are clear about the vision and set parameters, so people know where they are heading and the space they have to operate. Then you should practice letting go. People will deliver much more if they are motivated and have freedom to innovate.

However, if you were to push me, I would say the leadership quality I hold dearest is authenticity. I could not be a leader if I was not true to myself. People need to see who you are and what you stand for. I always try to be the best version of myself and to have the courage to stand up for what I believe in.

JB: What, for you, is the purpose of imprisonment?

JF: Prison is the sharp end of our justice system. Whilst of course, this sanction is to protect the public, as well as being a place for those to serve the sentence handed to them by the court for committing a crime, it should be considered a place for rehabilitation. It offers a place to reflect and take responsibility for their actions and prepare them for a law-abiding life when they are released. We should take every opportunity we can to help people turn their lives around.

JB: What have you found most distressing and most rewarding about what you have experienced during your first year in HMPPS?

JF: I find it distressing every time I hear a personal story from someone in prison, youth custody or on probation about the difficulties they have faced which have led them to criminal behaviour and I find it incredibly rewarding when I hear the same people talking about how someone

in HMPPS has inspired them and helped them to choose a different path. This is why the work we do is so important. Sometimes the difference our staff make goes unnoticed — and yet it has been so significant for an individual person. Our staff really are hidden heroes.

JB: Over recent years there has been a deterioration in safety in prisons. In 2019, there were 63,328 incidents of self-harm, 80 people took their own lives and 32,669 assaults⁵. What is your approach to reducing these harms?

JF: I know that far too many prisoners are self-harming or taking their own lives. When I joined HMPPS I made it one of my key priorities to lower this number and I continue to pursue this with huge determination. We are doing everything we can to support those who are struggling and it's one of the reasons we introduced the key worker scheme in 2018, supported by the recruitment of extra prison officers, so that everyone in custody can have the dedicated support they need and someone to talk to.

We've given over 25,000 staff better training to spot and prevent self-harm and are investing an extra £2.75 billion to modernise prisons, combat drug use and improve the environment in which prisoners live. We have also refreshed our partnership with the Samaritans, awarding a grant of £500k each year for the next three years. This supports the excellent Listeners scheme, through which selected prisoners are trained to provide emotional support to their fellow prisoners.

Whilst we also know that assaults remain unacceptably high, we are seeing positive improvements across the estate. We have been working really hard to reduce the levels of violence in prisons and have in place a wide-ranging Safety Programme to improve safety in prisons. The latest Safety in Custody statistics published on 30 April 2020 show some encouraging reductions in assaults and show how our efforts to improve safety in prisons were working at a time before the current impact of COVID-19. The figures do still highlight there is more work we need to do to reduce these levels further. We have seen a welcome 4 per cent decrease in assaults in the 12 months to December 2019 and assaults coming down by 7 per cent from the previous quarter. The number of serious assaults is also down 9 per cent in comparison to the previous quarter. This demonstrates real progress and improving safety in prisons is a real priority for me.

JB: The Lammy Review highlighted the racial disproportionality in the criminal justice system, including prisons⁶. Despite making up just 14 per cent of the population, BAME men and women make up 25 per cent of prisoners, while over 40 per cent of young people in custody are from BAME backgrounds. There are also problems of quality,

5. HMPPS (2020) *Safety in Custody Statistics, England and Wales: Deaths in Prison Custody to March 2020. Assaults and Self-harm to December 2019* available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/881990/safety-in-custody-q4-2019.pdf Accessed on 28 June 2020

6. Lammy, D. (2017) *The Lammy review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system*. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/643001/lammy-review-final-report.pdf. Accessed on 30 May 2020

including: in many prisons relationships between staff and BAME prisoners are poor; many problems are identified and unmet including mental health, learning disabilities and family issues; the under-representation of BAME people among prison staff contributes an 'us and them' culture, and; the system fails to address reoffending and so entrenches disproportionality. Are these isolated problems or is there a more significant institutional, structural and cultural problem in relation to equalities? What is being done to address this?

JF: I made it clear when I joined HMPPS that having an inclusive organisation is non-negotiable. I recognise that we have a long way to go but I am determined that, under my leadership, we will be more diverse, and we will nurture talent and encourage people to reach their potential. We are tackling this in a number of ways.

First of all, through recruitment. We are committed to increasing the diversity of our workforce, not just frontline staff but also in positions in policy and senior decision-making roles. We have set recruitment targets and are developing and supporting local areas to reach out to their communities and encourage people to join our service; trialling pilot initiatives to improve the application process; including targeted advertising in our large campaigns; and keeping our processes under review for adverse impacts and working with our Occupational Psychologists to consider how these can be mitigated.

Secondly, we know that we need to build the trust of the people in our care and are revising our complaints process to increase prisoners' understanding and confidence in the fairness of the process; introducing a new incentives policy, which reinforces positive behaviour and reflects the findings of the Lammy Review and introducing an Incentives Forum in each prison, to bring together a diverse group of staff and people in custody to discuss the fairness of the Incentives system.

Thirdly, we are committed to ensuring our staff are skilled in cultural competence and we are developing training packages to provide the most impact. This varies from bite sized face to face briefings to a larger suite of online training and resources available to all staff, as well as introducing training to reduce bias in decision making and mandatory diversity and inclusion training.

JB: Modern prison buildings, such as Berwyn, have comparatively good conditions including cells with separate toilets and showers, and access to in-cell IT and telephones. The Inspectorate of prisons have, however, described that 'far too many prisoners still endure very poor and overcrowded living conditions...[including] some of the most

squalid conditions...broken windows, unscreened lavatories in shared cells, vermin and filth should not feature in 21st century jails'.⁷ In your view can such conditions be tolerated? Is there sufficient investment in replacing older prison buildings?

JF: When I started in April, I spoke to some Governors and I mentioned that I was under no illusion about the enormity of the task to solve the large backlog of maintenance work. It is not a case of some quick fixes overnight, but I'm delighted with the progress we have made and are continuing to make.

We are investing an additional £156m of maintenance funding for the financial year 2020/21. This investment will update critical infrastructure such as fire systems and boilers, refurbish cells and showers and improve conditions for those living and working in prisons requiring the most urgent attention.

I have been pleased to have been given feedback from Governors about the difference this is starting to make.

JB: The National Crime Agency have identified that Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) use prisons to network and recruit, and target staff for corruption so as to smuggle illicit items such as drugs and phones into prisons.⁸ What is being done to tackle this threat?

JF: I have found the overwhelming majority of our prison staff are honest and hardworking, and I am so impressed by their dedication to protect the public and commitment to our common cause, despite it being an enormously challenging role.

For the small number who are not, however, we won't hesitate to take action. Last year we announced a new Counter Corruption Unit (CCU) to close the net on those who drive crime. The CCU has received investment that will allow us to design a new prevent strategy and introduce a new team within the Counter Corruption Unit to support prisons and probation teams.

As well as this, the training package for new prison officers has been redesigned and we have recently published information for all establishments to brief all new staff about understanding, managing and reporting the risk of corruption in their daily work.

JB: Recent terrorist attacks at Fishmonger's Hall, Streatham and Whitemoor have highlighted the significant risk that continues from violent extremism. In response the government announced 'Tougher sentencing and monitoring'.⁹ Is enough being done in prisons to address this risk? Is being tough the right approach?

JF: As CEO, I've been really impressed with the staff who have responded to these incidents, both operationally

7. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2019) *Annual Report 2018–19* p.11 available at https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/07/6.5563_HMI-Prisons-AR_2018-19_WEB_FINAL_040719.pdf accessed on 30 May 2020

8. National Crime Agency (2020) *National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime* available at <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/437-national-strategic-assessment-of-serious-and-organised-crime-2020/file> accessed on 30 May 2020

9. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tougher-sentencing-and-monitoring-in-government-overhaul-of-terrorism-response> accessed on 30 May 2020

and in HQ. Violent extremism poses a great risk to our society and way of life. We take the threat posed by terrorist offenders very seriously and are playing a key part in improving safety in our prisons and in the community for those under probation supervision. We have strict measures to stop extremists spreading their ideology and our new legislation means they will now face much tougher sentences

In January, we announced a significant investment of Counter-Terrorism capability and capacity in HMPPS. This will double the number of counter-terrorism probation officers, and provide a new assessment and rehabilitations centre and a multi-agency intelligence hub.

Highest risk offenders are managed through Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements which begin months before release. Terrorist offenders released on probation are subject to very restrictive licence conditions, with failure to adhere to conditions potentially resulting in being returned to prison.

More needs to be done and we expect the threat to continue to evolve as it has done in recent years. We will continually assess the effectiveness of our actions and will be flexible in adapting our approach accordingly to keep the public safe.

JB: Can prisons offer the opportunity for people to rehabilitate? How would you like to see this strengthened in prisons?

JF: Yes, I believe they can and do. I have pushed for strong and open relationships between staff and the people in our care, which is so important. A good example of this is our Key Worker scheme that allows prison officers to support and encourage people in prison to address their offending behaviour, and help them lead productive lives while they are with us, and when they are released.

This is then supplemented by good education and employment training in custody to make use of the time that people spend in prison and also allow them a smooth resettlement back into the community. We know there is more work to be done. I hope a combination of the above, alongside accommodation on release and our through the gate support will allow us to rehabilitate those in our care and ultimately reduce reoffending.

JB: How do you see prisons connecting with the wider community, whether that is public service, voluntary services, educational institutions, employers and the general public?

JF: I have been so impressed with the work prisons have done to a part of their communities. Obviously, there will be differences in approaches across prisons as they tailor these to meet the needs of the local population. It is not an easy task — the walls make it harder for communities to really understand the work that we do.

However, we have strong links with the voluntary sector, who provide a range of services to support prisoners — and also their families — and the links which are so important to help someone reintegrate into society. Relationships with employers are also strong, and often the relationship with prisoners starts before release. There are

many good employers who engage proactively with us (Timpsons, Halfords, Greggs). The New Futures Network — the specialist part of the prison service responsible for engaging employers — is constantly seeking to grow and nurture new relationships.

We know that there are many who live in communities who support the rehabilitation of prisoners and want to see them make a real contribution in society. But we also acknowledge that this is not a view shared by everyone and that this can impact on the opportunities prisoners have to make positive changes in their lives. We will be seeking to do more in HMPPS to work with communities to support the work we do to reduce reoffending and prevent victims.

JB: What role do you see for research and evidence in the future of HM Prison and Probation Services?

JF: I believe that using evidence to inform how we deliver and develop our service is a fundamental principle. We are ambitious about creating a strong, open, learning culture. Every day our staff use their professional experience and judgement to make tough decisions — and we want them to make the best decisions; decisions which are fair, legitimate and effective. We plan and develop our system using insight and data and understanding the consequences of our choices. This is about bridging the gap between evidence and practice, helping our people turn insight into new and better ways of working.

Coronavirus has created enormous challenges for us, necessitating change and innovation at a pace we would never normally consider. We have already stood up a programme of learning, helping us identify what we have done well, and not so well, as we bring back our services for the better.

In the future, I see a clear role for research and evidence — we will use it to: improve performance and deliver our services as efficiently and as effectively as possible; increase our understanding of what works, learn from our successes and to identify and build on best practice.

To name a few ways in which we are doing this: Insights20 (a vibrant programme of over 400 events and opportunities sharing learning and practice across the justice system) has gone online and across social media bringing evidence to life. Skilled researchers and practitioners are translating evidence into bespoke practice summaries, five-minute briefings, videos and guidance designed specifically for front line staff.

JB: The Prison Service Pay Review Body described that prison staff 'are responsible for delivering a service in increasingly demanding and violent conditions. We consider that all staff should receive financial recognition for the difficult job they are doing in protecting prisoners in their care and the public'¹⁰. What has been your experience of prison staff? How would you like to see their role recognised?

JF: I fully appreciate the dedication and hard work our staff undertake in difficult circumstances to ensure the safety of the public, HMPPS colleagues and the people in our care. The Independent Prison Service Pay Review Body is an important part in helping us to determine the financial reward and remuneration our staff receive. I would also like to move to a position where we are able to recognise all of our staff through a number of routes, including offering a greater degree of choice. Pay remains an important element, but offering our staff a range of flexible benefits will allow us to continue to recruit and retain a high calibre of staff.

JB: We had two questions submitted by readers. The first is linked to the previous question: what would you like to have as an entry level qualification for prison service staff?

JF: I have found entry level qualifications can be very restrictive when looking for diversity in role holders. Even introducing minimums of GCSE level qualifications may restrict those who didn't perform well at school, but who have gained valuable knowledge and skills later in life.

Where we are able to, it would always be a preference to design assessments which measure the specific requirements needed for a job role. With prison officers, we know that they require basic levels of numeracy skills. Instead of asking for a GCSE in mathematics, which is over and above the level of knowledge needed, we instead design selection tests that measure the exact numeracy skills/level needed in the role. Similarly for English — we know prison officers need a certain level of both spoken and written ability. Instead of asking for a qualification however, we measure this through our assessments. For example, we have multiple opportunities to measure someone's spoken English during role plays and an interview.

In this way, we are ensuring we are measuring the important areas required to be successful in the job role, without restricting the numbers of people who can apply.

JB: The second is: do believe the new Incentives Policy Framework, which came into force in January 2020 in all establishments in England and Wales, which now places the onus on each individual Governor/Director to create their own scheme of incentives and privileges, is a good thing?

JF: We found that the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) PSI — which the Incentives Policy Framework replaced — wasn't being used effectively to help change behaviour, or experienced fairly, particularly by people from a BAME background. It was also very prescriptive, leaving little room for governors to respond to the needs and challenges of their particular population.

HMIP reported that IEP schemes were often focussed on sanctions for bad behaviour, rather than incentives for good behaviour, while the Lammy Review described men from BAME backgrounds as more likely to report being victimised and unfairly treated by the IEP scheme.

Clearly, we needed to address these findings. There is also good evidence of a link between poorer perceptions of procedural justice and bad behaviour — people are more likely to have a better experience of prison and abide by rules when they perceive them to be fair. Research also shows that the most effective way to shape others' behaviour is to notice and reward the behaviour we want to encourage.

The new policy is informed by this research, focussing on reinforcing positive behaviour and ensuring procedures are fair. Consistency is provided through a common framework whilst there is greater freedom and responsibility for governors to design schemes to meet the local needs and challenges of their population and to make best use of the facilities they have available. This approach will better incentivise people to make the right choices, prepare them to lead crime-free lives when released and help make prisons safer.

JB: We are talking in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Prisons are at the stage of transitioning from the restrictive 'lockdown' regime to a medium term plan that manages the health risks but starts to restore a fuller service. What are your reflections on the immediate crisis response? What lessons have you learned during this time? What are your aspirations for the future?

JF: I have been really impressed and grateful to staff — both in HQ and on the frontline — for their immediate crisis response. We have had to work in ways that last year would have been unimaginable. They have risen to the challenge with extreme patience, compassion, professionalism and resilience. As the UK begins to ease restrictions put in place to protect the country, we are focussing on what changes we can make safely to begin our recovery.

Moving into the next phase, we have a real opportunity to shape HMPPS into a safe and inclusive environment, standing in solidarity together. My personal commitment is to continue the hard work that is underway in the MoJ, recognising that there is still a lot of work to do to ensure every single person — as a member of staff or in our care — is supported to be the best version of themselves. I will continue to do this with dogged determination and I look to everyone in HMPPS to get involved and do what we do best — working together to make lasting change.

10. Prison Service Pay Review Body (2019) Eighteenth Report on England and Wales 2019 p.xv. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819442/PSPRB_Annual_Report_2019_Accessible__1_.pdf accessed on 30 May 2020