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**Special edition:
Recovering from the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Prisons, prison governors and leading prisons through pandemic and recovery

Andrea Albutt is the President of the Prison Governor's Association (PGA) and a former Prison Governor of multiple prisons. She is interviewed by Paul Crossey, Deputy Governor, HMP The Mount.

Andrea Albutt was a former military nurse in the British Army and has worked in Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) for over 30 years. During this time she has governed four prisons and was the national operational lead for the smoke free project, implementing the smoking ban across prisons. She was elected to the PGA National Executive Committee in 2006, becoming Vice President in 2009 and President in 2015. The PGA was founded in October 1987 to represent the higher operational managers in the Prison Service in England and Wales and has around 1000 members. It exists to represent the interests of its membership, which include Governors, Deputy Governors and other 'governor grades', and promote and support continuous improvement within the criminal justice system.

The interview took place in November 2021.

PC: How did the coronavirus pandemic have an impact upon the prison service?

AA: The service was not ready for the pandemic. We had developed communicable disease contingency plans, but we just not prepared for something on this scale. The service is normally a slow moving machine but we had to move at pace to respond each new direction coming from the Government, often with little or no warning prior to a press briefing announcing each change. This was something new to the service because even though we can respond well to individual incidents, this was a whole service approach at incredible speed. Additionally, these changes were made in consultation with unions and that process was significantly improved at pace.

PC: How else did the service change in order to continue during the pandemic? What did you learn from this? Was there anything that you would now continue to do? Was there anything that you lost during that time that was particularly valuable?

AA: I believe we are still within that time period, so this is an evolving picture. However, the prison service

went into command mode and everything was incredibly centralized from that point. I understand why that happened, but, immediately prior to the pandemic, 'freedoms' for governors (their scope of control over key aspects of the operation of the prison) were tentative to say the least. I think that has now been completely lost. The organisation has always had a very directive approach and there was much work in the HR sphere to address that and balance the style of leadership. However, within this crisis it is our natural default position and that is what we have reverted to. However, governors are telling us that they are exceptionally frustrated that they have very little freedom to make decisions around their prisons and that they want to be released from these shackles. They are physically and mentally tired having managed through a really difficult time and this lack of autonomy adds to their tiredness and stress.

PC: How are you planning to shape the future? Who is involved in this?

AA: As I have said I think the consultation and engagement with unions has been amazing and my focus is on ensuring that it does not return to the way it was before the pandemic, where it was a formality rather than authentic. I think HMPPS are starting to realise the impact of effective consultation when they are delivering new initiatives. My members are the experts who can translate some of the blue sky thinking of Headquarters into a reality, as well as ensuring changes are of use on the ground floor where outcomes will be felt.

PC: What are your expectations on the impact of coronavirus and other health threats over the coming years? Do you expect that the vaccination programme will end the need for further measures? Do you anticipate living with some of the public health measures for the foreseeable future?

AA: I think there will be some form of public health measures for the foreseeable future. Winter influenza and other viruses have often caused significant issues within individual prisons and they are

a greater threat at the moment following restrictions being eased in the community. We have learned some very valuable lessons from coronavirus around the management and prevention of outbreaks that can be applied to any viral threat. In particular the extra focus on hygiene in prisons is invaluable. However, I do not think there will be an ongoing need for reverse cohorting units or other similar more severe restrictions in prisons.

PC: How has the pandemic changed the way that staff work and how have they been affected? How are working practices changing? How are you helping colleagues to adapt to change?

AA: The prison service is still in the midst of this pandemic. Right now, most of our prisons still have some form of restrictions in place. I think we need to wait and see if working practices change or if we return to the way it always was. The politics of the situation as well new ministers arriving will cause uncertainty. We have learnt some lessons which need to be applied to future regimes. Prisoners and staff felt safer with smaller numbers out. Gone are the days, for example when I was at HMP Bristol, when the workforce planning benchmark suggested an entire wing should be unlocked for association with four staff. It was unsurprising that it resulted in absolute carnage. That is why we had record breaking terrible safety statistics, quarter on quarter. Getting as many prisoners out of their cells, for as long as possible, is not necessarily the best or right thing for anyone. There is a more nuanced position between heavy restrictions and excessive uncontrolled and unsafe, unlock. If people are feeling unsafe, they are not going to engage with the regime and it is not going to be rehabilitative. We need to ensure safety and then look to suitable key performance targets (KPTs), not the other way around. Time out of cell as a KPT is an incredibly blunt tool.

PC: How has the staff culture changed and what effects do you expect from altered ways of working?

AA: Working in a safer, albeit still a difficult, environment staff would have felt less fraught. However, there are a number of staff who have never worked outside of the pandemic restrictions. We are also seeing high levels of turnover, as with many sectors. Therefore, I think it is probably too early and

too much in flux to make a judgement on the impact of staff culture at the moment.

PC: What have been the effects on prisoners of prolonged public health measures?

AA: At the beginning of the pandemic there was an understanding from prisoners that they had to be safeguarded from the virus as much as possible. There was a legitimacy to the restrictions because it reflected life in the community at the time. However, now there is a growing frustration when they see normal life restart in the community and hear that reported by friends and family. My members are telling me that it has just gone on too long and they are keen to start running better regimes, but they need the freedom to make that happen.

PC: Have there been any developments in technology for prisoners introduced during the pandemic? What has been learned from that?

AA: It is amazing that the prison service was able to move at such phenomenal speed to deliver technological solutions such as virtual visits. That is a brilliant innovation because clearly if people are held in custody a long way from their families and friends, which limits their ability to visit, this is a great alternative to maintaining those relationships. The prison service is normally slow, bureaucratic and

very risk adverse with these types of ideas. I think the key lesson we have learned from that is to adjust the service's views on all the reasons why we cannot introduce these things outside of the pandemic. A member told me that they were trying to introduce video calls for foreign nationals for a number of years with little success due to the slow moving nature of the service. However, everywhere managed to introduce them within months of the beginning of the pandemic in a safe, secure and decent manner. In the future, prisons need to remain technologically astute because technology improves everyone's quality of life.

PC: How might these changes in health threats, regimes and technology alter the prison or prisoner culture?

AA: The success of using technology to maintain family contact should just be the beginning. We should be considering technology to assist us with every task. For instance, we should make better use of technology to provide health appointments, in the same way as I

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may have a video call with my Doctor instead of attending my surgery. The issue will be funding for these kind of endeavours but ultimately it makes prisons a better place, especially when health and wellbeing is so crucial to prisoners.

PC: How have relationships between prisoners and their families been affected? What was put in place to help? What has been learned from this?

AA: I was interviewed on the radio during the pandemic, once we had video calls in place across the service. I had spoken about the positives of video calls. However, the interview included three families of prisoners, all of whom disliked video visits. They had found video calls very upsetting because although they could see the prisoner, they were unable to have physical contact with them. They felt it was more stressful than not having any type of visit. That is the same with physical social visits — many prisoners found it more difficult to have a visit where they were unable to touch their loved ones, than avoiding it all together. This particularly impacted on those with very young children. I think families have been very worried both in general across the pandemic, but also when prisons had outbreaks and increase in time spent locked in cells. I think that remains a concern for those families.

PC: There have been concerns about the period of the pandemic intensifying social inequality, including based upon race, sex and economic inequality. Have you seen this in prisons? How might this shape the future?

AA: I have spoken to a number of my members about this. They have not experienced this yet in prisons due to the restricted regimes in operation. They anticipate that prisons will eventually feel this inequality coming through. However, at the moment, as in the community, it is largely younger and ethnic minority prisoners who are refusing the vaccine which may have longer term impacts in this field.

PC: What have you learned about contingency planning and business continuity? How can prisons better respond to extreme events?

AA: I think we have learned a great deal about contingency planning for the entire prison system. There has never been a time when the entire service was placed into command mode to deal with a crisis.

This allowed us to move at pace and respond appropriately across England and Wales. This has shown that we can be well prepared for any nationwide extreme events in the future.

PC: How might prison be physically designed for a post-pandemic world?

AA: The new prisons currently being built have been designed with much smaller units. Some of that came from consulting prisoners who identified that they much preferred smaller populations on each unit. That has been borne out during the pandemic where smaller groups have felt safer and produced better results. These small units are the future and will inadvertently prepare us well against future pandemics. The real issue for us is our current estate which is not fit for purpose. I am concerned that post-pandemic we will have a two tier prison service where you will serve a very different type of sentence depending on where

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you are located. The other issue is that we are running out of spaces against the projected increase in population. The new prisons will not come on line quickly enough and we will have a serious issue as soon as 2023. The service is working hard to find every available space it can in current prisons, which will add to the pressures of crowding in those prisons, but it will not be enough. The government has a mandate to be tough on crime and with the increase in 20,000 police officers plus thousands of court cases in the backlog the problem will get quite acute. A number of those police officers are coming from the prison officers we have employed and everyone now knows that HGV drivers can earn £50,000 per annum, which far outstrips the current prison officer salary. That is why

prison officer applications have reduced by 40 per cent in recent times and we have the highest levels of staff attrition we have ever known.

PC: Do you have any sense that public views about imprisonment have altered as a result of the pandemic and the widespread experience of confinement?

AA: Absolutely not. There will always be families and groups that lobby the government but the general public care about health and education. I had an interview with LBC radio host Nick Ferrari. I explained that it was important for a whole prison approach to improving vaccine uptake with a wider public health benefit. Both Nick Ferrari and a succession of callers angrily felt that it was wrong that prisoners were even getting the vaccine. My argument was not focused on individual prisoners receiving the vaccine, but rather the fact that prisons exist within communities and the wider impact on public health of lots of prisoners who end up hospitalised and the conditions where the virus

could mutate and become more deadly. This fell on deaf ears, so I don't agree that there has been any change in perceptions.

PC: What have you personally learned over the pandemic? How have you changed the way you do your work?

AA: I have learnt that using technology, whether it is Microsoft Teams or video calls or in cell technology, can make a huge difference and keep the prison system operating effectively. We can respond far quicker to issues and meet easier to make decisions on progress. Where these things save on travel for example, they can also have an important impact on our organisational carbon footprint. I would also say that once again the shining lights throughout the pandemic are our governors and their teams in prisons. They have responded amazingly and I know that when there is a crisis, that is when those people are at their best, showing fantastic leadership. They deserve recognition for that.