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The Last Days of Camp Hill:

Interview with Andy Lattimore

Andy Lattimore is the Governor of HMP Isle of Wight and is interviewed by Dr Jamie Bennett who is Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.

Andy Lattimore is Governor of HMP Isle of Wight. He joined the Prison Service in 1988, after graduating in psychology from the University of Durham. He was recruited onto the first Accelerated Promotion Scheme. He has worked in a range of establishments including local prisons, high security, category B training prisons, women's prisons and young offender institutions. He also held a post in the private office of the prisons minister.

In 2005 he took up post as Governor of HMP Winchester, a category B local prison, before moving on to govern HMP Bullingdon, another local prison, in 2009. He took up post as Governor of HMP Isle of Wight in January 2013. At the time of his appointment, this was a cluster of three formerly separate prisons: HMP Albany, HMP Parkhurst and HMP Camp Hill. A week after he arrived, the decision to close the HMP Camp Hill site was announced by the Secretary of State for Justice.

This interview took place in June 2013.

JB: Could you describe your first week at HMP Isle of Wight?

AL: Albany, Camp Hill and Parkhurst prisons were amalgamated as one establishment in April 2009. I took up post as Governor of HMP Isle of Wight on 2 January 2013 and had planned my first week around getting out and about in the three sites to meet as many people as possible, to get a feeling for how the place worked and its issues, and to meet with key staff and stakeholders to introduce myself and hear from them. I was certainly in 'look, listen and learn' mode, getting to grips with a large and complex organisation responsible for over 1500 prisoners and 750 staff.

JB: Was there any anticipation Camp Hill or any of the Isle of Wight prisons would be affected by the announcement regarding prison closures?

AL: No there wasn't. While it was well known throughout the service that a closure announcement was to be made and that that no prison was immune from consideration, I don't think anyone locally was concerned that we would be included. Indeed a strategic plan had been proposed by my predecessor for unifying the offender profile across the Isle of Wight sites and I was keen to review this and in all likelihood look to take it forward.

JB: How were you informed that Camp Hill would be closing?

AL: It was the evening of 9 January and I was in the local supermarket when I got the call from my DDC.

It was quickly apparent that this was one of those 'are you sitting down?' conversations so I went out and sat in the car to take the call.

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

AL: Certainly it was a shock and my mind started racing almost straight away about all the risks, tasks and responsibilities that there would be to manage. A personal concern was that as I was so new in post I did not know my people well and who would be best suited for what task. I also knew that this would be huge and distressing news for staff and I was concerned for their well-being, both on hearing the news and in the longer term. For the prisoners, while many did not like being located on the Isle of Wight away from their home area, a significant proportion were fully engaged with the regime and addressing their offending and resettlement issues and I was concerned at how we could manage their transfer to other prisons in as supportive a way as possible.

JB: What plans did then make to announce that to staff and how did you do that?

AL: This was carefully co-ordinated as my communications locally had to tie in with the Secretary of State's announcement to Parliament which must come first. On confirmation that this had been done I spoke at a staff meeting on site at Camp Hill. I then did it all again with the rest of HMP Isle of Wight staff a short time later. I was supported by headquarters and regional staff who brought with them that morning a pack of communication materials, including speaking notes for me. This was helpful but I had literally minutes to look these over and prepare. I knew what, when and why were the immediate things people would want to know but I also wanted to set out how people would be supported through the process as best as I knew it at the time.

JB: How did it feel having to make that kind of announcement to staff, having been there for such a short period of time?

AL: It is never easy to impart difficult news but I knew I had to do my best give confident leadership at such a challenging time. I was conscious that only two days previously I had held my first full staff meeting as the new Governor and had talked positively about HMP Isle of Wight's achievements and the future.

JB: How did staff respond to the news?

AL: There was an audible sound of shock and some staff were in tears. Many people had served a

long time at Camp Hill or certainly on the Isle of Wight and this went across families and generations. Senior managers in the Prison Service come and go but throughout my career I have always been aware of quite how much investment staff have in their workplace where it is not unusual for them to spend most or even all of their working lives in one place. At a personal level I was quite humbled by the number of staff in the following days who expressed sympathy for me picking up this issue so new in post and who were concerned as to whether I would be impacted by the announcement either as the Governor or in terms of my plans to move my family. I tried to give staff a little time after the announcement to come to terms with the news, but we still had the prison to run and I have to say staff were absolutely brilliant in the circumstances, carrying on with the duties and tasks of the day.

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

AL: We had prepared information notices for prisoners to publish on the day and then it was about getting as many managers as possible out and about to be visible to both staff and prisoners, giving them as much support and assurance as we could. The prisoners' response was varied. While many were pleased to be returning to the mainland, a significant number had concerns — the courses or programmes they were on, impact on their HDC or resettlement plans and where they might be sent to. A very few were quite unpleasant to the staff and that was a challenge to deal with.

JB: What was the impact on staffing on HMP Isle of Wight and what was the approach to managing that?

AL: Achieving the necessary staffing reductions turned out to be the biggest and most challenging aspect of the closure. I was clear from the start that it was not just those based in Camp Hill that would be affected. We were one prison and one staff group. However, as a part-closure in relation to the rest of HMP Isle of Wight, and with our island location this was both a highly complex task as well as a personally very difficult one for individuals. At most prisons, redeployment to another establishment within commutable distance is a realistic option for people. Not so for the Isle of Wight, especially as HMP Kingston in Portsmouth was also closing which might just have been feasible for some. Nevertheless, I was determined that we should manage reductions by voluntary means if at all possible, either via the VEDS scheme or

supported redeployment elsewhere even though this would mean moves of home. We had to re-profile the prison at speed to determine what our new staffing levels should be — and this entailed being clear about what we had as staff fixed costs for the whole prison and what was Camp Hill specific. For example, as Governor I was a fixed cost as I can't be cut by a third! We also wanted to help people to consider their options and an open day for staff and their families where careers advisers, further education providers and the like were available proved to be very valuable. There were delays in processing VEDS applications which drew out the uncertainty for people but in the end we were able to achieve the reductions with volunteers. It was very pleasing to me that many I said goodbye to had new opportunities to move on to that they were looking forward to.

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

AL: Like everyone else, the local unions were also shocked by the news but obviously wanted to do all they could to support their members. We facilitated meetings for them and with them regularly and tried to get communications right. I was very ably supported by regional and local HRBPs who took on much of the staffing issues and who also

worked hard to address issues with union involvement. I was keen for the unions to be directly involved in re-profiling work and they agree to this which was helpful as a matter of joint interest.

JB: How was the transfer of prisoners managed and what were the main challenges?

AL: We worked very closely with national population managers and they fully supported the task. 467 prisoners were transferred to 15 different establishments in 40 days, almost all to their home areas for their eventual resettlement and we only lost one day due to bad weather. All prisoners were seen individually to take account of their issues and concerns and we worked hard to be considerate of work they were undertaking or their release plans. For example, it made no sense to transfer a prisoner who was due for release before the final closure date or to disrupt an offending behaviour programme if it could be completed in time. A few individuals presented particular challenges but all departed peacefully in the end, thanks largely to the fantastic job staff did with them. The last prisoner to go asked if he could turn the lights out!

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

AL: The physical de-commissioning was a mammoth task in its own right. Basically if an item wasn't bolted down it had to go. The scale of this is best illustrated by some figures: 3.5 tons of shredding and 14.5 tons of paper recycling, the equivalent of 90 trees. 4000 files verified, logged, boxed and transported. Every sheet of 2800 prisoner files sorted and appropriately stored or disposed of in over 450 boxes. Every building stripped and cleaned with items re-distributed, refurbished or stored for future use. This included 1000 chairs, two pianos and even a small rocking horse — amazing what you find! Industrial equipment from workshops, locks, keys, radios, IT and telephony — the list is endless and often specific protocols for disposal had to be followed.

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

AL: Staff were just brilliant at all levels of the organisation. I am immensely proud of their commitment and achievements and there was never a shortage of volunteers for the work that had to be done.

JB: Whilst this was being managed, the work of the two other Isle of Wight sites had to continue and you had to introduce national changes including the implementation of Fair and Sustainable. How did you ensure that this 'business as usual' continued?

AL: The only way to manage it was to split the senior team so that some retained 'business as usual' responsibility while others focused full-time on the closure. Some of the closure work hit a peak and then subsided so people could spend more time on their usual work as time passed.

JB: What place did Camp Hill have in the wider community of the Isle of Wight? What was the impact on the wider community?

AL: The Isle of Wight is a small community and the Prison Service is one of the biggest employers. On top of that there are local suppliers of goods and services so in all we are a major part of island life. This meant the closure raised political, media and broader community concerns. The main worry outside our walls was the

economic and social impact of a significant number of newly unemployed people and also questions about what would happen to the Camp Hill site following closure. I answered these questions as far as I was able and I think the economic impact was mitigated by the voluntary nature of the departures where, for instance, quite a number of staff went on to join or even start small businesses.

JB: How did you mark the closing of Camp Hill?

AL: This was really important to everyone and we held a closure ceremony on the day of handover to the Ministry of Justice. Staff, former staff and families came to see the place (a rare opportunity to do this) and speeches were given by myself, the Lord Lieutenant of the Isle of Wight and Ian Young as the last Governor of Camp Hill as a prison in its own right. The Last Post was played in memory of staff who had given their lives in war, we lowered the Union flag and staff marched out through the Gate. It was an emotional afternoon but I think a fitting occasion and I was keen to emphasise that the legacy of the work that staff had done would live on in the offenders who had been helped to live law abiding lives and staff's continuing efforts either elsewhere in prison work or in their future endeavours wherever they may be. We produced a book of photographs of the prison for people to take away and a commemorative badge. We also compiled a book of staff and offender memories — Camp Hill Tales.

JB: What lessons would you take from this closure and what advice would you offer to a Governor leading a prison closure?

AL: I was pleased that the Service did conduct a 'lessons learned' exercise in which both I and key members of my team were involved. The key issues for me were to assign clear roles and responsibilities to the local project team, that you can't do too much communication throughout the process and this needs a dedicated co-ordinator, HR issues will need most attention from the Governor and asset management/disposal will be the biggest task. Overall though, I learned not to under-estimate the huge capacity of our staff to rise to a task and deliver despite difficult personal circumstances and uncertainty. I am hugely proud of them.