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Interview: Gary Monaghan

Gary Monaghan is Governor of HMP Pentonville. He is interviewed by Dr Jamie Bennett, Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.

Gary Monaghan has been Governor of HMP Pentonville since 2009. He joined the Prison Service in 1991 as a prison officer, later gaining a place on the Accelerated Promotion Scheme. He has held a number of posts including Governor of HMP Everthorpe, a category C prison. Immediately prior to taking up post at Pentonville, he was responsible for the national roll-out of NOMIS, the electronic prisoner record system.

JB: What did it mean to you to be appointed Governor of Pentonville and why did you want to do it?

GM: I worked here previously as a Senior Manager between 1999 and 2001. I thought it was an interesting place with many positive staff, although the conditions were difficult. At the time there were lots of issues in other London prisons and Pentonville was one of the stronger local prisons. Subsequently, it seemed to have a chequered history. I wanted to come back because I wanted to be part of it being restored to being one of the best, if not the best, of the London locals. I also experienced here a diverse prisoner and staff group and I enjoyed working in that environment. Having moved North out of London, I had missed the diverse working environment. Pentonville is about as diverse as you can get. I was also attracted to the history. It is a very historic place.

JB: How would you describe your role as Governor?

GM: My job is to improve the performance of the establishment, develop the work we do so that we improve in reducing reoffending. I have to try my best to improve the conditions for prisoners and staff. I also have to develop innovation with our community partners to get more joined up, through the gate work.

JB: Pentonville was built 1840-2 by Joshua Jebb and stands as the oldest built prison in the country, constructed at the time of the birth of the modern prison system. How does the history and symbolism of the prison shape it today?

GM: We were 170 years old last year. A lot of people who work here have a pride that the modern prison service started at Pentonville. There have also been a lot of famous people associated with it, for good or bad, over the years. This was brought home to me a few years ago when I visited an old prison back home in Dublin which has been turned into a museum,

Kilmainham. Most of the talk as we were being shown around was about how practices and structures had been modelled on Pentonville. The radial design spread through this country too. So there is a sense of history and people take a pride in that.

JB: Pentonville is one of the largest prisons in England and Wales, holding 1310 prisoners. What are the particular challenges of running a prison of this scale?

GM: There are particular challenges at Pentonville. It is difficult trying to run any large establishment. When I came here we were not in a great place, there had been a number of operational failures and the establishment has not benefitted from much capital investment so the fabric is behind other sites. In contrast, Wormwood Scrubs has had substantial refurbishment. We are usually one of the busiest prisons in the country. We are dealing with between seven and seven and a half thousand people a year. There is an average stay of 55 days. That in itself is challenging to keep people safe and do something with them to try to stop them coming back in to custody. We also have the biggest mental health case load in the country and the biggest substance misuse service. So, there is a degree of complexity and vulnerability in the prisoner population.

JB: It strikes me that the simple logistics of providing the basic needs of that number of people is a challenge in itself; making sure that they have food, bedding, clothing, telephone calls and other immediate needs is a big task.

GM: It consumes a lot of time because there are many repeat processes that have to take place in a short period of time. That in itself is a massive administrative burden and one that is not properly captured by the organisations operating model. It is not always fully appreciated what demands that places upon staff and the establishment.

JB: What are the challenges of operating an old prison site in the contemporary world?

GM: It is difficult. When we start considering the regime and activity, we just don't have the footprint or buildings to provide this. Even in terms of offices and administration, it is cramped and insufficient for the requirements of a contemporary prison. Association space for the men is challenging because we physically don't have enough floor space. All of that makes it a challenge. I am struck by the contrast with a brand new prison such as Thameside, which has opened in London.

The facilities there, the in-cell facilities and the quality of accommodation is much better. Their basic regime on the incentives and earned privileges is not that far away from what we can offer to people on the enhanced level.

JB: What are the particular challenges of managing a prison population described by the inspectorate as 'drawn from some of London's poorest boroughs' and with 'amongst the highest incidence of mental ill health and substance abuse of any local prison in the country'?

GM: For myself and the senior management team, the complexity of the population is not always fully appreciated by commissioners in prisons or health. The impact of our population and the extent of their needs cannot be fully understood and reflected in current commissioning. For example, Holloway is half the size of Pentonville but has a similar size health budget. Whilst I appreciate women prisoners have additional needs, the disparity is stark and the level of service available in the prisons is very different. For a member of staff there are some difficult gang issues imported into the prison, so we have violent men alongside the very vulnerable people we also hold. We have a pull from one end to the other and have to maintain control and order against this backdrop. This takes a lot of time and places demands on staff and managers. We have 130 prisoners on the Care Plan Approach, who would basically be care in the community cases. They are living on the wings and that would be a challenge anywhere. For prisoners themselves, we have a diverse group with a wide variety of cultures, nationalities and needs. We work hard to manage those relationships and the dynamics that creates. Additionally, the high level of substance misuse shapes not only our approach to health and social care, but also to security.

JB: London is a diverse, multi-cultural city, how is this reflected in the population at Pentonville and how does the prison respond to this?

GM: We carry out a massive amount of work promoting diversity, celebrating cultures and educating people. We focus on all strands of diversity. That takes ongoing energy and time. Our population is around two-thirds from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. That makes Pentonville unique in terms of the cultural and religious events that are important to our prisoner population. We want to be fair to everybody. We also have a lot of foreign nationals, so have to work hard on communication and dealing with the additional vulnerability amongst these people. About a third of our staff are from BME backgrounds, which is higher than the general population of our local community. We develop all of our staff and invest in building their skills to deal with the population we have.

JB: How would you describe the inmate and occupational cultures of the prison? Do they differ to other prisons?

GM: We have lower levels of prisoner work in the establishment and also a short-stay population with a high turnover. This means it is difficult to encourage desistance and challenge cultures. We have to be structured and have had to be clear about boundaries, behaviours in the prison and compliance with sentence plans. In prisons where there is more activity, that tends to have a positive impact on prisoners being more motivated and compliant as well as less vulnerable.

The staff here are noted to be polite and friendly, which is more positive than some other similar establishments. Each prison has its own culture to some degree, depending upon their history, structure, the prisoner population and also the region of the country. Many prisons might therefore claim to have a unique staff culture and we would claim that too.

JB: Terence Morris produced a seminal study of Pentonville in the 1960s, have you read this? How far does it reflect the Pentonville you know?

GM: I have read a synopsis of the study. Although much is outdated, there are echoes that ring true today. The administration of the establishment is still complex and demanding and that is a feat in itself to achieve that everyday. Some of the cultures and practices have moved on but the boroughs we serve and the levels of social deprivation we see in our population remain the same.

JB: What do you see as the role of Pentonville today?

GM: We are trying to gear towards our short-term offenders but there is limited research on this. We are also engaged with our local borough, Islington, on criminal justice and on troubled families. We are trying to reduce reoffending and help the community through these links. We are trying to expand this into other boroughs. So we are trying to look internally at short-term offenders but also develop our outward focussed community links.

JB: How do you see the future of Pentonville in the modern prison service?

GM: If we fulfil our plans, we would be a leader in dealing with short-term offenders, reducing their reoffending. This is the only group where prisons are not having a large impact on reoffending. With the community engagement work I can see a future in developing improved through the gate work. We can build and improve on the integrated offender management work. It will then be for senior officials and ministers to decide strategically about the future. They will decide at which point they have had sufficient value for money from Pentonville — after 170 years.