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Interview: Ian Bickers

Ian Bickers is the governor of HMP Wandsworth and was formerly the governor of HMP High Down. He is interviewed by Dr Ben Crewe, Deputy Director of the Prisons Research Centre at the University of Cambridge.

Ian Bickers has recently been appointed Governor of HMP Wandsworth, one of the largest prisons in Western Europe, with a capacity of over 1800 prisoners. It is a local prison, holding men on remand, those recently sentenced, those serving short sentences or approaching release into the nearby area. He was formerly Governor of HMP High Down, also a local prison, which held up to 1100 men.

BC: Can you tell me a bit about your background before you joined the prison service?

IB: I joined the Prison Service twelve years ago, having worked in industry for 20 years. My career was split between nine years working in financial service sales, predominantly focused on corporate work dealing with company pension schemes and corporate financial planning. I then moved into the world of training and development, and built a career over eleven years. My last role before joining the Prison Service was as National and European Training and Development Manager at PC World.

BC: What was the attraction of the Prison Service?

IB: I left school at 16 with no qualifications, and in my early- to mid-thirties I started a psychology degree with the Open University, and decided that I wanted to use my psychology degree. Having researched it, I decided to peruse a career as a forensic psychologist, most of whom were employed the Prison Service. I contacted Woodhill, which was my local prison at the time, spoke to the senior psychologist there and went in and had a conversation with her. Her advice to me was join the Prison Service to see if you like it before you finish your degree and do my Master's. And so I made a transition into the Service as the Head of Learning and Skills, which was a non-operational senior management role, with a view that I'd do two years to see whether I liked it, and make a decision then about progressing to a Master's in forensic psychology. But my career path took me in a different route. That's how I made my way in to the Prison Service: it wasn't to be a prison governor at all, really, it was very much to be a forensic psychologist.

BC: So can you give me a very brief summary of your career in the service so far?

IB: I did nearly two years as a Head of Learning and Skills at HMP Bullingdon. During my last year in

that role I won a place on the graduate scheme within NOMS, and so having won a place on that I spent time as a prison officer at HMP Woodhill. I then progressed into a senior officer post at Aylesbury where I then also did a stint as a principal officer. I moved from Aylesbury to Spring Hill where I spent nine months as the resettlement lead, then three months in Grendon as the head of security. From there, I moved back to Woodhill as the head of security and operations where I did about two and a half years. I was then selected to go and do a secondment at the Home Office dealing with serious organised crime, basically being a representative amongst the disciplinary team of the law enforcement agencies, which was a really interesting piece of work and put me at the centre of politics. From there, I left on promotion to be the deputy governor at Wandsworth, which I did for nearly three years, then went to High Down as the governor for two and a half years, and have just recently been appointed as the governor back at Wandsworth.

BC: How would you describe the role of the governor, and how does it differ from senior management roles in other organisations?

IB: I think the role of the governor has changed quite significantly over the last five years. When I first joined the service, governors were that very archetypal person that we think of as a prison governor, who was in control and responsible for everything. Over the last 12 years the world has changed significantly, where we are not just in charge of the prison, but also contract managers, relationship managers, and partners. Much of what we do now is prisons now is outsourced. So health and education are now all outsourced, and we do lots of contract management work that was never there before. I see the role of the Governor as much more of a CEO role now than it has ever been before: having to deal with a multidisciplinary team, which isn't just direct prison staff, it's partner agencies coming in and dealing with their issues and their concerns.

BC: What do you consider to be the main purposes of imprisonment?

IB: The loss of liberty is the punishment. What we do with people whilst they're in prison is to try to reduce the risk that they pose to the community when they go back out. I believe very strongly in reducing risk and rehabilitation, and I have a really strong focus around education and work provisions to try and provide prisoners with the skills that they need to be

able to go out and reduce that risk. For me it's very simple; if somebody is going to go out and commit a crime to pay their rent or to get their next load of drugs, then our job in prison is to try to make sure they're not in that position, by giving them the skills they need to move away from that life.

BC: What are the most important risks that you manage?

IB: Keeping people alive is an important risk that we manage, as well as maintaining safety. Making sure that prisoners are in the best possible position to remain safe, and not be subjected to violence or bullying, or intimidation. I think that reducing people's risks, as I said, to be able to put them in a better position to go out into the community. Reputationally we have risks to deal with as well, not just ours but our partners as well. So I suggest that probably most of what we do is about managing risk, but those two or three things will probably be the most significant things. Finally of course the whole principle of managing escape, and maintaining security.

BC: How much power do you feel that you have to shape the prison, and shape your management team?

IB: Our power has reduced quite significantly over the last 12 years that I've been in the service — especially if I think back to when I first joined. But it's incumbent upon me to use my influence, with the resources that we have, to get the best out of that. There is a lot of opportunity to think about how we use the system to better maximise outputs. So having people say to me, 'Oh, we can't do that because the rules say we can't, or can't do that because we haven't got the resources', as the governor, it is about trying to work out at a strategic level how we then develop our teams to better their skills, to be able to influence the outcomes that we might want to be able to achieve.

BC: So you still feel that you've got quite a lot of influence over what goes on in your establishment, all of those sorts of things?

IB: Absolutely, I've listened to colleagues who say they feel like they've had their power taken away over the years. I don't think that that is the case at all. We have centralised a lot of the Prison Service much more than we've ever done before, and we're much more accountable for things that we wouldn't have expected five years ago. So being measured on how

well we use our detailing system doesn't feel like a good outcome for prisoners, but is a good indicator of how we run our business. And I think that the mind shift that governors have had to go through has been quite significant, and many would see that as undermining their power. But, actually, the reality of it is, it's an opportunity to be better at the things that have a better outcome for prisoners.

BC: Does it change the sorts of skills that you need to do the job well?

IB: Absolutely. Because you have to be much more focused on being able to run your business, and I use that word very deliberately. You have to be skilful in how you deploy your resources to maximise outputs for prisoners. So, yes, absolutely you have to have a different skill set.

BC: What role do you have in shaping the experience of prisoners and what do you think are your most important mechanisms are for shaping their existence?

IB: It would be really easy just to be able to go and hide in an office, and pretend to be managing lots of important things like figures and budgets. The reality of it is shaping what we deliver to offenders is the key part of the job. The most obvious mechanisms for dealing with that are things around management information and data. But probably the most important way of being able to determine

whether we're doing the right thing for prisoners is to go and ask them, and talk to them. So I spend quite a lot of time in the prison talking to people — predominantly prisoners — and finding out how staff are with them, what their issues and concerns are, how they feel that it is in the prison, and whether they getting the things they need. So we find out really obvious things like our systems for being able to distribute kit are failing, but nobody's told me that. So being able to bring that information back to the table is hugely important, and it has day-to-day outcomes for prisoners.

BC: Do you think prisons are places where people can change their lives for the better?

IB: Yes, absolutely.

BC: What's your role in influencing that?

IB: I have a very big focus on making sure that the environment that we create in the prison, and in all the roles that I've worked in, is as 'real-world' as possible. So that means giving prisoners responsibility for getting

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up, for going to work, for taking responsibility for reducing their own risks, helping them to understand what those risks are, and what they need to do moving forward. Creating an environment where people can engage in the world around them, and not be just passive within it, but to take an active participative role within it.

BC: Has the role of financial and performance management changed in your day-to-day role?

IB: Yes. Finances have become more centralised so the reality of it is, is that I don't manage finance at all now, really. Performance has changed: the things that we were being measured on ten years ago have changed quite significantly, so the role that we had ten years ago as governors probably was much more directly focused around outcomes for prisoners, whereas a lot of the measures that we have now are around the efficiency of our business. So where we were very focused on doing things like, for example, classroom activity and making sure we had bums on seats in classrooms, that's been replaced by measures of the efficiency of the education contract.

BC: What's your interpretation of that shift?

IB: The centralised control is about what the business wants us to do from an efficiency perspective, and we've seen much more of that in the last three or four years whilst we've been working within an austerity agenda. In many ways it has been a good thing — I know no one likes significant change, and we have had to work through that a lot much more recently. But change can take your key focus off your main business and, at the end of the day, my primary function, I believe, is to do the best I can by prisoners. To give them a safe and secure environment in which to live, and enable them to develop and flourish. If I were too focused on spreadsheets and budgets, and whether my detail system was as efficient as it could be, then that could take that focus away and I think that can be quite dangerous for governors — to be focussed that way, and not on outcomes for prisoners. There is a balance to strike and getting that right can sometimes be very challenging.

BC: How do you get staff to do what you want?

IB: It's about sharing a vision, talking about what I want to achieve for the prison, being very clear about what our outcomes have to be, and, again, that's very

focused around what we need to deliver by way of reducing risks for prisoners. It's been really interesting that over the last couple of weeks we've had to go through the process of filling out an HMIP action plan, which is backwards looking; if we just focus on that we won't be focusing on doing the right things for prisoners. So I am using HMIP expectations as an outcome — balancing the need for an action plan with doing the right things for prisoners. We are looking forward to those expectations and working back on what we need to do every day to maximise those outcomes for prisoners. For me, there's a bit about being very clear and sharing a vision with staff about what it is that we want to achieve, and then working as a team to deliver that to prisoners. And testing it out along the way: talking to staff, talking to prisoners and making sure we're doing the things that we've signed up to do.

BC: What's the right kind of relationship between frontline staff and managers, from your point of view?

IB: It is just as important as the relationship between staff and prisoners. So in the way that we would expect staff and prisoners to be interacting on a daily basis, talking to each other, sharing problems, finding solutions, the same principle applies between a management team and a staff group. It's been quite a while since I walked a

landing as a prison officer or as an SO. I find that by talking to staff they know the answers to the problems that we've got. It's about having that same sort of dialogue up and down the chain to make sure that they are able to help us solve the problems that we have. So having been at Wandsworth now for nine weeks, one of the things that we have fundamentally changed is having managers visible throughout the day at key times: free-flow in the morning, or when food is being served, for example. Because we know they're our volatile times, and we have seen our incidents reduce over that period as a result. So that visibility provides support to staff, it enables managers to challenge prisoners and their behaviour, discuss issues with staff, and also to work with staff around certain expectations about order and control for example.

BC: Can you tell me about the relationships that you have with other organisations, and with the local community?

IB: Manchester College provide our education provision, and there is a consortium of providers that provide health for us at Wandsworth. They are our

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biggest providers and along with other contracted services they make about a quarter of our staff group in total. We have much smaller organisations that come and help work with us to give advice and guidance to prisoners, so the Samaritans and Citizens' Advice Bureau are key players in what we do, and we work very hard to ensure they understand our vision. Our outward facing in to the local community is delivered by a very proactive chaplaincy department who work with a lot of volunteers that come in from various community organisations. It's been really interesting, since my arrival back at Wandsworth, we've engaged with the borough council to the point where we have the mayor in the prison probably on a weekly basis, who's actively involved in what we're doing as part of her community. And through her we're hoping to start to do a lot of work in a much wider community, with schools and other voluntary sector organisations as well. So I hope that that will get better as we progress.

BC: Can you tell me a little bit more about the most important changes that have occurred in prisons and to prisons in your time in the service?

IB: The two things that have happened that are most significant are the introduction of Fair and Sustainable, and benchmarking, which, as we know, has reduced the amount of staff that we have within prisons. And those two things have fundamentally challenged the way that we work in prisons and, in many ways, the attitudes around prisons. And although there aren't many people around who are now pre-Fresh Start, I suspect that this will be that once in a generation shift, like Fresh Start was in the eighties that will have moved the Prison Service forwards to a point where it is now able to deliver much more clearly with much more transparency.

BC: Do you think if you're a prisoner that being in Wandsworth now is better than it would have been 12 years ago, or being in High Down now is better than it would have been 12 years ago?

IB: Prisoners report that it isn't. They report that they spend more time behind their cell doors. They report that there is more attempt at order and control, because there are fewer staff around. From talking to prisoners, they absolutely get the transition to Fair and Sustainable, and didn't feel that one, but benchmarking, yes, they did feel it. And the tag of 'new ways of working', basically, has meant that prison officers do their jobs differently. Having said that, the conversations I have with prisoners

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on a regular basis are that if they are engaging with work, and they're engaging in a way that is positive, which is what benchmarking is all about, then they are no worse off, but it's persuading them to do that.

BC: Can you tell me something about the relationship between your world at establishment level, and what's going on above you? So by that I mean do you feel in tune with the values and direction of the Service, and are you proud to be part of the service?

IB: I'm very proud to be a prison governor, and it's one of those things that I'm very keen to share with people, that I'm proud to be part of an organisation that delivers the public service that we do. Right now the business is going through a fairly significant shift and so I do think that there is a disjoint between what people are doing at headquarters, and how that feels at an establishment level. Of course politics also has its part to play and sometimes you can see that as a Governor. But does that stop us doing our job? Not at all. I know what needs to be done, I understand the vision that is being shared and I can interpret that and get on and deliver it.

BC: What significance do race and gender have in your working life?

IB: Working in an inner-London prison, a huge one. When I left the prison on Friday, half of my population was foreign national — that's half of an overall population of 1,635. English is not the first language for the majority of my prisoners. Gender is also important, we are dealing with more openly transgendered prisoners than we have ever done before and we also have the issues of gay and bisexual prisoners who want a voice in prisons but find it difficult to establish a proper foothold to be as open as the rest of society and we have to balance that very carefully. My staff group also is very diverse and that helps enormously in being able to break down a whole lot of barriers and I think we do that work very well as a result.

As far as staffing is concerned, my staff group is split roughly 35 per cent female, 65 per cent male. I've always been a huge advocate of what women in the prison service do, and how they deal with men which is very different from the way that male staff do. What disappoints me is the fact that socially some people think it's acceptable now to hit a woman; prisoners hitting a female prison officer, which is a significant shift in my 12 years in the Service. In my career, I have seen other prisoners standing in front of a prisoner that was going

to assault a female member of staff to prevent it happening, and you don't see that so much now. Potentially might scare women out of our organisation, but the women that work within it are hugely impressive, not just because of the tenacity of the way they do their job, but because of the skills that they bring with them.

BC: Do you think much about the links between imprisonment and social exclusion, or social disadvantage?

IB: Yes, what's really interesting is that we have put on the agenda 'care leavers' because there's a political priority now about care leavers. We also have the issues of ex-service men in prisoners and the work we do with them. Whether it's social exclusion or the deprivation of specific groups: care leavers, ex-military, those that left school or were excluded from school all having specific issues. I would prefer not to label people, and what I'd much rather do is see the individual for their individual needs. That becomes a challenge when you're dealing with 1,635 men every day, because in ways you have to do that, but, actually, everybody's got individual needs. Some of the people we are dealing with probably wouldn't win the local citizen of the year competition in their local town. So, simply by the fact that people find themselves in prison, we're dealing with socially excluded and vulnerable people and it's our responsibility to do the best we can by them.

BC: How do you view the way politicians and the media, popular media talk about imprisonment?

IB: It frustrates me because the media just portray the negative work that we do and not the positive. I will

always try to do the best I can to try and portray the work that we do in prisons in a positive way, and will always take the opportunity, if I can, to directly talk to the media. Politicians? As a civil servant I shouldn't really have a view on that! I think society has a really poor view of the way that we collectively look after prisoners, and what prisons do for them. So they are only ever going to have that negative perception and that is driven by politics. One problem is that Ministers are generally only there for a short period of time. Sometimes, we've only just bedded in the last set of changes and we're asked to do something different, and that can be very challenging.

BC: What are the achievements that you think best reflect your particular approach to managing prisons, and can you describe your work at its best?

IB: My best achievement over the last three years has been my last HMIP inspection report at High Down. Given everything that has happened, in terms of changes in our organisation, including reduced resources, we had a very good HMIP report that reflected good staff/prisoner relationships, good levels of decency and good levels of safety. And I think that that is a real testament to our SMT and staff group there and the way we worked with our partners. Importantly, although we knew what the expectations were we did not use them as our primary focus we worked at doing the right thing for the prisoners in our care. And by doing that, we created an environment where people were able to grow and develop, and where safety and decency were high on the agenda. And that was recognised by HMIP. I think that would demonstrate my work was at its best.