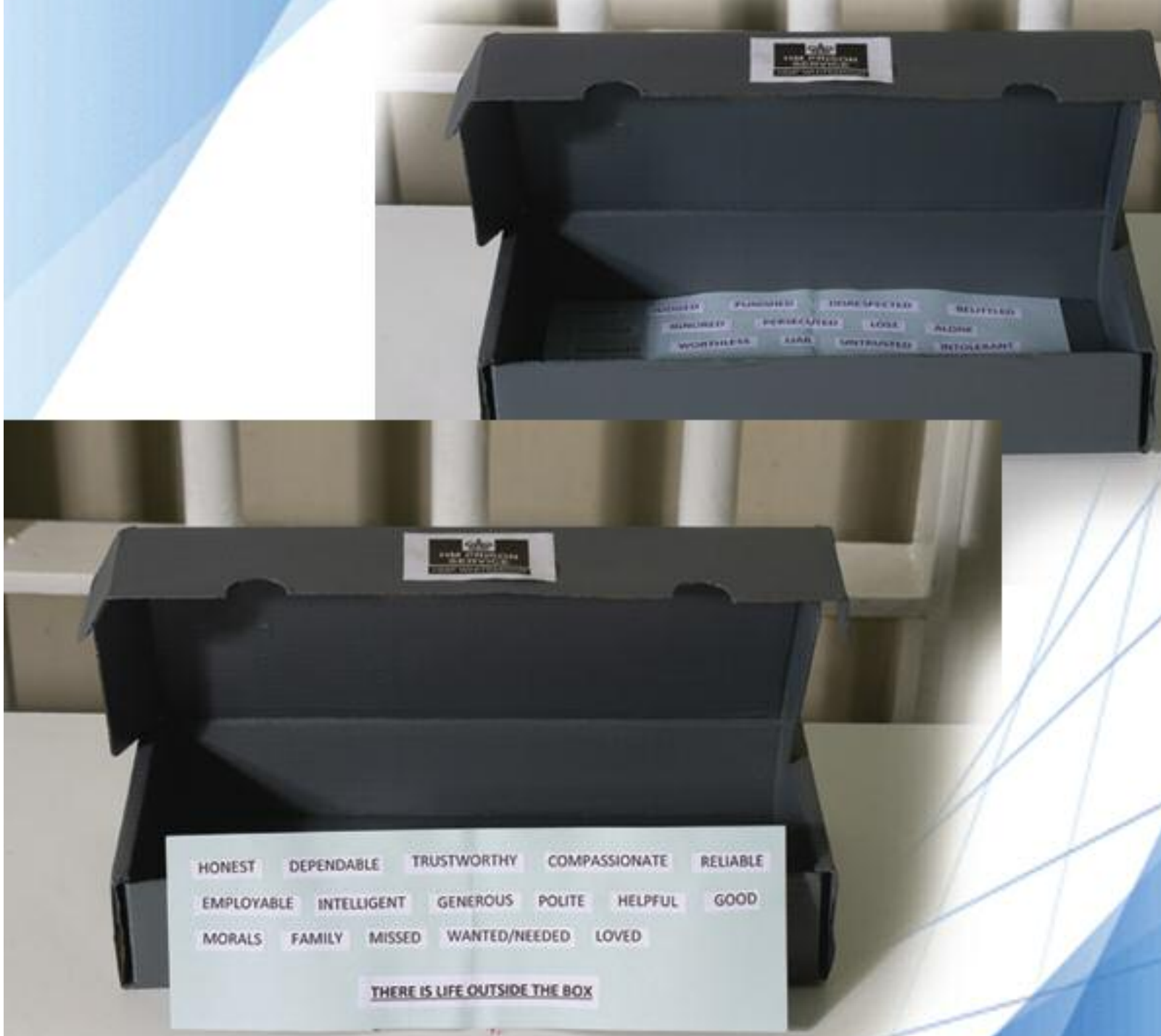
PRISON SERVICE
JOURNAL
September 2019 No 245



Interview: Pia Sinha

Pia Sinha *is Governor of HMP Liverpool. She is interviewed by* ***Paul Crossey****, Deputy Governor of HMP Huntercombe.*

Pia Sinha joined HMP Holloway as a qualified psychologist twenty years ago, before taking up a similar role at HMP Wandsworth. From there she completed the Senior Prison Manager Programme, a fast track scheme designed to recruit those with considerable experience from outside of operational roles for development towards becoming Governors of the future. From HMP Wandsworth she became Head of Reducing Reoffending at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, before taking Deputy Governor positions at HMP Send, HMP Downview and then HMP Liverpool in 2012. Pia's first in charge position was as Governor of HMP Thorn Cross, from where she became Governor of HMP Risley before returning to HMP Liverpool as Governor in 2017.

The interview took place in February 2019.

PC: What do you consider to be the purpose of imprisonment?

PS: When I first started working in prisons, I understood that my purpose as a member of staff was dealing with an individual. This would include discovering what was distressing for them, what their life experience was like, and working out how to get them from a place of crisis to a place of stability by instilling in them hope for their future. Fostering hope was the mission of the prison service then, and I believe that perception is unchanged now. My philosophy, that I would explain to prisoners, was that whatever chaos has happened in your life prior to coming to prison, that has lead you to being here, your arrival marks at some level the end of something bad in your life and you have this period of time to get a fresh start. My purpose is to encourage that in any way that I can so that when you leave you have a more hopeful vision of yourself and your future. The purpose of prisons is to be catalysts in a moment in someone's life where we could try and affect as much change as we can. This may take multiple attempts, but each time we are chipping away at whatever is holding you back. As a governor, my purpose is about creating an environment, systems, and developing people who start to think that way, so that we are all working towards that goal.

PC: There are are many leadership models in use across the Civil Service, Ministry of Justice and the Prison Service. How do you conceptualise leadership as a governor?

PS: My personal journey to governing has been a very iterative process. When I took charge of my first prison, I approached it based on what I understood to be the received views and perceptions of being a governor. I carried this baggage of what a governor should be initially because I think that for me it had to be a very immersive experience. At the time, I arrived with all sorts of ideas about what the leadership challenge would be and I focused on taking ideas and practices from those I considered my role models as governors. Through trial and error, I attempted to fit these with my values. However, in the end I asked myself what was personally important to me and I found that I simply wanted to be a leader who people wanted to work for. I reflected on the times in my life when I enjoyed work, felt engaged and motivated. I considered the times when I had a cold and decided to come into work as opposed to staying in bed. I used those principles to try to create an environment where people feel included, that their voice is heard, and their ideas are accepted. People want to be in place where they feel they are making a contribution. My role is to model a person who is energetic, enthusiastic, motivated, and genuinely affected by the work, and that has the impact of inspiring others to do the same. Occasionally, I realise the enormity of my responsibility as a governor, but I push that to one side and ensure that I trust my instincts and be authentic.

PC: Given that you had that immersive instinctive approach did you plan for your first 100 days?

PS: By taking an instinctive approach I quickly realised that I could draw on a range of experiences, some of which were buried in my subconscious. My initial focus was about moving from that unconscious competence to a position of conscious competence. At my first prison, HMP Thorn Cross, I quickly got a sense of what the prison might need and what the next steps might be. It felt like 'prison heaven'; a perfect cat D, nice physical environment and everything working well on the surface. However, underneath that I sensed that both prisoners and staff were not happy and I took time to reflect on it. Thorn Cross had been a young offender institute and

had been the 'jewel in the crown' before its purpose was changed. It became a standard cat D establishment with adult prisoners, but staff keenly felt the loss of the special role they had had. Staff still treated most of the adult prisoners like young offenders and that had a negative impact on relationships. I quickly realised that what this jail needed was to mature, to have its own identity but in a way that felt congruent. Once you have this big picture, I approach it with my psychologist's perspective: I reduce it to strategies, priorities and the focus of communication that needs to happen so that everyone can get on message. Then I look to break it down further by looking at how we can improve relationships, the geography, alter processes and procedures that will all subtly start making those changes happen. Some of that is quite a conscious process, some of it is quite unconscious which is why I think being authentic and congruent is the key. I've never stopped thinking about prisons in that way; I did the same at Risley and Liverpool. Governors are always under pressure, especially in your first 100 days, and that is good because it structures your thoughts. I always spend the first few weeks just immersing myself in the establishment to get a real accurate sense of what the prison is about, what makes it tick, what are the skeletons in the closet, and who is going to tell me about those.

I think the best part about being the Governor is that when you arrive your vision becomes the whole prison's vision.

PC: How do you make hard choices about who can help turn a prison around and who might be holding it back?

PS: I think the best part about being the Governor is that when you arrive your vision becomes the whole prison's vision. Once I have outlined my vision to the team, people tend to quite obviously fall into three camps. There are those that share your vision, those that do not share your vision but will work with you and those who will not be converted. The latter group will never 'get it', probably because their vision is completely different and they are entitled to that. However, if their vision is too incongruent, then the conversation needs to be focused on whether this is the right place for them. It is not about them being a bad or an incompetent person. There really are only two options. Either they work hard and separately keep their belief system or if they are not prepared to do that then I will help to find them somewhere where it feels more congruent. That was what I did at Liverpool. As Liverpool was under intense scrutiny at the time, I was given quite a gift to be able to get the team that I needed to fix the prison, which is something governors do not normally have the ability to do. I had those open conversations with people saying this is the deal here, do you think you are up for it?

PC: What do we need from new officer recruits and what more can we do to make sure they are best prepared?

PS: Whatever we try and do, whether it is simulating an experience through training or coaching, nothing prepares you for what the first day feels like. What is more important, therefore, is to select people on their values and resilience. Our selection should focus on recruiting the right type of people that will cope in this environment rather than just getting through high numbers. We lose a lot of people in that process and we may damage people too. A more considered recruitment process would be higher risk as we select only the right people in the first place, ensure they know what they are letting themselves in for and additionally they will 'self-select'. When I joined the service, I knew quite quickly whether I would like this environment or not.

I did the standard training and it was satisfactory. However, when you 'went live' the most important thing was your first 'hair-raising' experience and whether you can bounce back from it. It was also whether personally there was something about that experience that pulled you in to this world. I am not quite sure how you select for the people with that attitude. In terms of training the Norwegian model of two years of training, akin to social workers, seems right when coupled with periods of on the job experience, but Norway is a very different type of country.

PC: How do prisoners have a voice and involvement with improving Liverpool?

PS: It is something that I feel proud of and our improvement journey would not have happened without us including our men as a vital cog in this process. They are involved in their environment; cleaning, painting, decorating and repairing. It creates jobs and pride. We have men involved in every single meeting. They are not aware yet of how best to use that voice but they have the platform.

Recently, we included our user voice as part of the interview for healthcare positions. We have inspection representatives that test our evidence in anticipation of the next inspection. There are no better people that will tell you how it really is. Men are also involved in our radio station. Our journey has been shaped by the voices that we are hearing and getting men involved in everything we do.

When I toured the prison when I first started prisoners would complain about not receiving what they were entitled to, the lack of response to applications, the ignorant attitude of some staff. Now it is all about being involved and getting a job. It is about finding opportunities to contribute to the prison and they are excited by it. They may be proud when I escort visitors and they show me how clean their wing is and they compete with each other across wings for the cleanest. We make sure that they get praise and recognition for it. It is also more than just cleaning floors or putting a window up, as these activities can lead to better outcomes for the men here. For example, we have a refresh team who fix our broken windows. There is a man on the team who had a trade on the outside and thanks to his work with us, our contractor Amey wrote a reference for court which led to a more compassionate sentence. He has continued working here with our improvement work alongside Bagnalls (who are providing work here) as an apprentice, and on release he is going to get a job with them. When that became known across the prison, more people want to help and we uncovered a number of tradesmen we were unaware of. As they take ownership of the work, our vandalism has come down and littering has reduced.

PC: Is it possible to improve a prison that is in the situation Liverpool was in at the time that you took charge, without getting additional staff or reducing the population held there?

PS: We have had a significant financial investment, although we are only now reaping the rewards. Previously Liverpool's story was of the forgotten prison; unloved, no investment, poor facilities. Importantly, the investment has shown someone does care about us, and that is powerful. I have used that as the message to staff and it is part of our logo, securing the future of Liverpool. We have reduced our capacity but maintained our staffing levels and that has been helpful to us. It is always a risk, depending on what is happening externally, but we have been able to refurbish at pace. It is not unique to Liverpool, but we have had to be worthy of it. Senior management want to invest wisely and therefore Liverpool needed to be a plausible place worth investing in. You can save bricks and mortar but unless you feel that there is something to believe in within the culture, it is a waste of money. The culture is the most important thing to get right.

Ironically, reducing the population has given us more problems with safety because our churn has increased. We are still serving the same courts. However, as the churn increases, we experience more self-harm, violence, and short-term prisoners including more people on remand.

PC: One of the key factors in the Strangeways riot in the 1990s was overcrowding. Do you think reducing the population here has directly made the prison safer?

PS: Ironically, reducing the population has given us more problems with safety because our churn has increased. We are still serving the same courts. However, as the churn increases, we experience more self-harm, violence, and short-term prisoners including more people on remand. We operate similarly to a reception prison and we have had to invest in front end services. Key work has been crucial including the new staff. Liverpool has healthy attitude to new staff. Peter Clark (the Chief Inspector) said to me he could often tell the nature of the culture of a prison by how established and new staff interact with each other. Key work means talking to prisoners in depth and we connect with them as people and vice versa. All of those things are more significant in making Liverpool feel safer, as well as cleanliness, decency, getting our systems right, and having an engaged senior team. It then becomes a virtuous cycle.

PC: What do you think will be the impact of introducing PAVA here?

PS: I was governing Risley when PAVA was piloted and I was nervous about it. The research seems to be mixed. I think the readiness assessment linked with PAVA, including safety diagnostics, body-worn video camera use, key work and five-minute intervention roll outs, is helpful and sensible. It is a measure of how mature you are as an establishment to handle PAVA which is vital. Our use of force governance in Liverpool is getting better and we have fewer inappropriate instances of force. If the establishment is moving towards a mature attitude towards use of the force then I think that PAVA would be a useful addition but I do not think we are quite there yet.

PC: What challenges do you face with substance misuse, particularly psychoactive substances, and what is your strategy for dealing with it?

PS: We face significant challenges with drug use in Liverpool. Originally, it was exacerbated because nearly all of the cell windows were smashed out, giving easy access to move drugs around. Since then, we have fixed the windows, which prevents drone deliveries, and made the prison more generally decent and purposeful for the men. Drug use has lessened, but it remains a cat and mouse game, requiring constant attention. The suppliers switched to paper forms of psychoactive substances (PS) which caused a significant amount of disruption across the prison. We reacted by photocopying all mail and that forced a switch back to the use of drones. Cannabis seems to currently be the drug of choice partly because we have closed the route for PS and partly because they have seen the impact of taking PS and think of it as a 'dirty' drug. The smoking ban has also had an interesting impact because it easy to smell anybody smoking anything now. However, the demand for drugs is the more interesting aspect, and it is obvious to me how we reduce it. Prisoners should be busy, tired out from work, engaged, and spending time out of their cells. Apart from a small group of people who are really invested in criminality, all most people want to do is get on with their time in prison, and be safe while they are here. If you believe that, then you can be imaginative in your response, rather the reverting to simple punishment which on its own, does not work. We are persuading staff to use a restorative approach, a recovery-based model, and it is showing some green shoots.

The smoking ban has also had an interesting impact because it easy to smell anybody smoking anything now. However, the demand for drugs is the more interesting aspect, and it is obvious to me how we reduce it. Prisoners should be busy, tired out from work, engaged, and spending time out of their cells.

PC: What has been the Liverpool experience with key work is it sustainable?

PS: It is sustainable, because we have purposely designed it to be more sustainable. Previously, when it failed it was because there was no ownership, we did not value the work and we were not holding people accountable for non-delivery. Residential custodial managers are now responsible for making it happen and are supported by a technically good regime management plan (RMP) (which tells us what regime can be delivered depending on our staffing levels). Many prisons which operate poorly, do so because they do not manage central detailing of staff properly. The way that our orderly officers think and manage the jail is a little antiquated. However, if they have the right tools like the RMP, then it starts working quite mechanically. Prison management is largely about getting the right people in the right places at the right time with clear objectives. The RMP gives us that. Staff respond to that because they know exactly what they need to be doing, why they're doing it, who will check on them and what will happen if they do not do it. That almost formulaic part of prison management does not mean that it is always delivered, but we do know when, who and why it is not delivered, and then we can then do something about it.

We can also see a correlation between when key work takes place and incidents. It may not stand the rigour of an academic assessment, but we started correlating incidents with when key work uptake was at its best and the graphs literally show a positive

straight line. If you speak to our men, they will say that they notice the same.

PC: Overall, what are you most proud of as governor of Liverpool?

PS: I am incredibly proud of our staff. I am absolutely blown away by the way they have gone from the lowest point in terms of their professional self-worth, self-esteem and experiencing what had happened to the prison, to the journey that we have all taken. They have trusted me to make the right decisions, even when they have not liked some of them, but they have rolled their sleeves up. Liverpool's personality as a prison is very much like Liverpool's personality as a city; it is creative, vibrant, and all about the heart. I am very similar but the staff have made things happen.

There never really was a resistance to trying something different, trying something new, taking a risk and so much of how you progress or not is on the good will of your staff. You can still do it but it becomes very hard work. That has got a shelf life while we are still on a high. However, I said in my new year full staff briefing that this year the focus will be on engagement. I said that during the last year, while we were in special measures, it was a bit of a benign dictatorship. I thanked them for trusting my decisions and following through with it. But we have not consulted them enough, and we have only focused on prisoners and I do not want to get that prisoner/staff divide. Now we need to do a lot more around consultation and we need to focus on those everyday things that matter to staff. They don't care if you paint the walls blue and make the carpets fluffy, but they want to get their leave on time, they want to come on a shift where they are with the colleagues that they know and working in an area that they know. That is where I am going next because I want to say thank you to the staff. We need to look after them now or I will lose that good will.

PC: Do you feel empowered as a Governor to be able to do the things you need to? Has the new Prison Group Director (PGD) model had any impact on this?

I am incredibly proud of our staff. I am absolutely blown away by the way they have gone from the lowest point in terms of their professional self-worth, self-esteem and experiencing what had happened to the prison, to the journey that we have all taken.

PS: Liverpool is a special case and I have taken advantage of it. I have had a lot more freedom, autonomy, and power because I said if you want me to fix this you are going to have to allow me to make some decisions and think outside the box. I have not had a lot of resistance about it. It could be because it is Liverpool and they want Liverpool fixed or it could be because I have credit in the bank. Either way I used it to my advantage so I have felt fairly free. I have not experienced some of the scrutiny, micromanagement, regular ministerial visits where you have to drop everything to prepare. I do experience the copious amounts of action plans, but I recognise that I need to feed the machine and I do not give it too much energy.

We have only recently moved to the PGD model but I think that it is more about the person who is your PGD. If they see their role as, with fewer prisons, they can do a lot more strategically and enhance the direction of travel, while leaving individual prisons alone and their governors to govern, then it is a great model. I know it was put in place to give better assurance to the centre, but that should not become the whole reason for the change of model. We have a good PGD who was a governor of a local prison for a very long time. He knows our business and he is respectful of the governor's skill. My fear is that the PGD's become the new level of assurance providers and so the scrutiny that they are under will obviously become more enhanced.

PC: Do you think governors should spend a minimum amount of time in one post?

PS: There are some that should and some that should not. You need to be a round peg in a round hole. For me, I will get bored after a long period of fixing the same types of problems, because a lot of prison governing is repetitive. You return to the same issues and tinker with them, trying to make them better, unless you are in a lovely place like an open prison where you can be a lot more creative. Some people like that, they know what they are doing and they just want to keep repeating that process and making it better and better. But there are others who go in, give it all their energy, make it better, and then

need to do something else. I think it very much depends on what you need, what that prison needs, and whether there is a match between the prison and the governor. The next phase in Liverpool's development is stability. You do not want someone coming in and changing everything because it will just cause chaos. Whether I am the person to do that I do not know, but it needs to have that. Other places you could have someone in there for too long and you stop seeing the problems and you can become blasé about it.

PC: As a female, BAME, former psychologist, governing a large local prison, do you think HMPPS embraces diversity at a senior level?

PS: Well there are not many of me around so I think that it is an aspiration. I think that HMPPS wants more diversity but I am not sure it knows how to. The will is there but maybe the how HMPPS goes about encouraging more diversity, it needs to really think about it in a different way. I personally have felt I have been valued. I feel valued as a woman, as a woman of colour, I feel valued as someone who has come from the non-traditional route. However, I do not know what it would be like beyond my level. Also, I am a governor doing a good job, so is that what is driving the valuing because they are thinking it does not matter that Pia is an Asian woman who is a psychologist, she is doing a good job for us and that is all that matters. Really that is all that should matter. As far as that is concerned, I feel that I enjoy a really trusting relationship with the senior members of our organisation but I have not tested it.

PC: Is it the same post Lammy with BAME prisoners?

PS: In some ways it is easier with prisoners because, as a governor, you can really introduce systems and practices within your jail that will have an immediate beneficial impact on your men, as long as you believe in making it the centre of all you do. We have done this before. Post Mubarak there was a shock wave in the service about how we look after our BAME men and women in prison. It became the front and centre of every governor's thinking. You paid a lot of attention to it and we saw the benefits of it. It has fallen away because of everything that has happened in the last 6 or 7 years but, if we want to resurrect it in prisons, you have to have the right governor's really believing in it.

PC: What are your thoughts on the current media approach to prisons and do you think the public really understand prisons?

PS: I think that the media and the public have a very ambiguous relationship with prisons. I really noticed this whenever I went to inquests and things like that. Whenever something really bad happens in prisons, it pricks the collective conscience of society in general. Society then suddenly feels their responsibility for putting people in prisons and then they think we must treat them well, and we must hold prisons to account. Then when you talk about prisoners having televisions and we try to get them employment through twining projects, then the attitude is 'so I have to offend to get the best from life'. The same person would shout about privileges in prison and vilify prisons if we messed things up. I think that reflects our really confused view about incarceration generally.

The media reflects that view because we don't know we feel. There is a human being behind every single cell door, in a small room that is locked at the end of the day. It is quite tragic to think about and we therefore try not to think about it because it is difficult. Every now and again we are shocked into not being able to get away from that reality check and it makes us really question ourselves and our morality. In Liverpool we have tried to engage the public. We have taken some risks with our Twitter account and the good news stories that we are putting out there. We are just trying to make small conversions and chip away at the perceptions of what actually happens in prisons. I think as a service we are trying to be more extrovert and prouder of our professionalism. It is a very difficult job and there are some highly skilled individuals working here.

For a long time, we have undermined our professionalism and the value of our work by just battening down the hatches, thinking that no one cares about us so we do not care about them and continuing in our bubble. But now we are saying 'come in and have a look at what we're having to deal with'. I think that Rory Stewart was excellent as an advocate because every time he gave an interview about prisons, he praised our frontline staff. He sent a message to everyone that you are worth something and I will continue to carry that message, regardless of how the media or public react.