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Behind the Scenes of Her Majesty's Prison: Aylesbury

Interview with Kevin Leggett

Kevin Leggett is Governor of HMYOI Aylesbury and is interviewed by Dr Jamie Bennett who is Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.

Kevin Leggett has been Governor of HMYOI Aylesbury since 2010. He joined the Prison Service in 1988, working as an officer at Aylesbury for five years before becoming a manager through the Accelerated Promotion Scheme. He has subsequently worked in a number of prisons in senior positions, including being Deputy Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill and Governor of HMP Huntercombe.

In 2013, HMYOI Aylesbury was the subject of the latest instalment of the Wild Pictures *Her Majesty's Prisons* series, which have been screened on ITV to audiences of between five and six million, making them amongst the most watched prison documentaries of recent years. Previous entries in the series have included *Holloway* (2009), *Wormwood Scrubs* (2010) and *Strangeways* (2011).

HMYOI Aylesbury occupies a site that has been used as a prison since 1847.

It holds up to 444 young men aged 18-21, serving sentences between two years and life.

JB: How were you first contacted about the Aylesbury documentary?

KL: The Ministry of Justice Press Office contacted me in order to say that Wild Pictures who had filmed the *Her Majesty's Prison* series were interested in making a further instalment looking at young offenders. They said that everyone involved felt that HMYOI Aylesbury would be a good subject for the film. I was asked to meet with the production team and discuss how they would do this. I took the opportunity to speak to some colleagues who had been through the experience of filming in order to find out what that was like for them. My colleagues reassured me that the process would not be that painful and we would be able to control to a reasonable degree what was finally aired. I was also reassured about what would happen with the footage, how it would be stored and so on.

JB: Had you seen the other films in the series? What had you thought of them?

KL: I had seen them. *Holloway* was the one that had the biggest impression on me because of the subject matter including self-harm. I was offered the option to see them again before committing to the

project. They were entertaining for the public and seemed like high quality productions but I was wary about how they would decide what to show, what themes and agendas would be emphasised. I was trying to understand the mechanics of how they got to the final cut and how much I could influence that.

JB: What were the discussions and agreements with the film producers and press office about access and content?

KL: It was set up that there were three people involved and there would be two cameras would be in the prison. They were granted full access, so we would not limit what they would film but we would have a veto over what made the final cut. Press Office reassured us about the granting of 'access all areas'. We did see the final episodes and offered comments on the content, including what we were and were not happy with.

JB: What discussions took place with staff and prisoners about content and access?

KL: We let people know what would be happening, including telling staff at a full staff briefing. Notices were also posted around the prison. The production crew, having been involved in similar work, drew upon that experience and spent about a month walking around the prison talking to staff and prisoners, obtaining consent notices. They also were trying to get a feel for the place. They said that they didn't have any agenda, but did have some ideas about what they might find. A lot of their time was spent trying to identify the people they considered to be the 'characters' in the prison, both staff and prisoners. They decided to follow those people around rather than generally filming in an unstructured way. They spent that month reassuring people. By walking around with a camera, albeit turned off, was a way of trying to desensitize the place to those cameras. They had clear guidelines from Press Office about who they were content could be seen in the programme, for example restricting those that raised sensitive victim issues. We had to work through a list of prisoners they were interested in and then we had to say who we were and were not willing to be filmed.

JB: Were staff and prisoners given the opportunity to consent to their involvement? Was

there any assessment of their fitness and suitability to participate?

KL: They tried to talk to every member of staff and establish whether or not they gave consent and then there were prisoners that they thought may feature in the films in interviews or incidents and they sought consent from them. It was a show-stopper if they did not give consent. Of course, we are looking after people in our care. We have to apply maturity tests and on some occasions we sought advice from mental health in-reach in order to ensure that consent was given with full understanding of the potential ramifications, including what might be said to them or about them should they feature in the programme. We had to ensure that the interests of individuals were protected and consent appropriately given.

JB: What consideration was there of the views of victims?

KL: Everybody who had significant victim issues was excluded from being part of the programme. They were some of those blotted out if they came into shot. This included for example people who had committed murder or sexual offences. The producers did make a case that one of those featured in episode two they wanted to make an exception for. They therefore wanted to seek consent from the family of the victim. The production company made contact with the family of the victim, visited them and explained why they wanted this consent. The family said that they were content for the image and words to be shown as long as the victim was not named. That was signed off and agreed.

JB: How did the filming proceed during the time they were there, was there any ongoing supervision of what they were filming?

KL: No, we had a rough idea of what they were doing on a daily basis as we met with them at the start and end of each day. I had a media liaison officer who was the primary contact who would hold these meetings and feedback. However, we did not have anyone escorting them around; they were given key clearance and had a remit to go around. They carried radios so that they were aware if anything was happening. This was to ensure that they were safe, but also provided them with the opportunity to film incidents as long as it was safe. There were two cameras in the prison for three months, going around

the prison, which generated some 210 hours of footage.

JB: Did you get to see the film during editing and did you or anyone else have any say in that process?

KL: Yes. Myself and my media liaison officer were invited to the offices of Wild Pictures to see the first cut of episode one. There were also members of the Press Office there. We watched the film in its entirety but made notes about any concerns we had, or any areas where we felt a narrative was required to explain what had been depicted. The first version I felt was disappointing. I accused them of lazy editing as they filmed hours of footage but the episode appeared to be incident after incident after incident. That wasn't representative of Aylesbury, so we wanted them to

rebalance that by showing some of the better work that we do. They focussed on the hostage incident which they filmed and permission was given to show that but we then wanted to balance that. As a result they incorporated the scenes of a prisoner having a fathers' day visit, interacting with his family. We saw that episode three times. The second time it was more balanced and the third time included the narration. We also had to ensure that the depiction of the hostage incident was assessed so that we weren't disclosing tactics. A representative from the Ministers' Office also attended, watched the film and represented their views. In the end it was more

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balanced but we had to accept that sensational element in order to prevent people channel hopping at the start, it's a bit like a *Die Hard* movie where you have all the action at the beginning to attract people in and then settle down. With episode two we only saw that twice as they had better understood our expectations from the first episode, so it was only fine tuning required.

JB: What did you feel when you first saw the programmes? How do you feel it represented Aylesbury?

KL: I felt the staff came across very well. They came across as knowledgeable about prisoners, quite caring, dynamic in their approach to dealing with problematic people, whilst also explaining that it is only about 20 per cent of the prisoners that cause 80 per cent of the problems, whilst the vast majority of prisoners get on with their sentence, try to develop

themselves and move on to the adult estate or the community.

JB: The first programme revolved to a great extent around violent incidents including a hostage incident? Is that an accurate representation of the prison and prisoners?

KL: We do have more than our fair share of problematic and damaged people. That seems to be our role within the YOI estate, although every other YOI governor probably says the same thing. In relation to the hostage incident, we don't have hostage incidents every day; they are few and far between. They had been in the prison for two months and nothing of significance had happened. I remember having a conversation with the producer about the problems that could cause them because they were concerned it would not be a gripping programme that the general public would want to watch. Then, fortunately for them, they filmed the initial arrival and induction of the prisoner who then led the hostage incident and they were there at the time when he and his accomplices pushed their way past an officer into a cell and started the hostage incident. It was almost manna from heaven for the crew. It isn't representative but happened to be a stand out incident that they were very keen to show as part of the programme.

JB: What ethical concerns or questions did you have, if any, about the filming of an ongoing hostage incident?

KL: The cameras were there for the initial start of the incident and were then withdrawn as we didn't want their presence to agitate those involved. Hostage incidents are very sensitive and the slightest thing such as a noise or a bang can set you back or cause a problem for the perpetrators or negotiators. Once we knew they were there, we withdrew them. The ethical issue then was that if it was shown, our duty of care to the perpetrators and hostage because much of what they felt about what had happened was in the programme. We had significant concerns about the hostage, so we did a lot of follow up with him, including through the psychology department. He had moved on since the incident so we had to make him aware of what the content of the programme would be, make sure he was okay with it, and ensure that the staff where he now is were aware that he was the hostage. I understand that he chose not to have the TV

in his cell that night as he did not want to watch it. We made follow up contact in the weeks after in order to ensure he was well. It was the same with the perpetrators, ensuring that the prisons holding them were aware and could manage the risks.

JB: The films did not show very much rehabilitative work such as education and training. Is that an accurate representation of Aylesbury?

KL: No. We have a lot of rehabilitative work going on, including one wing that focuses exclusively on rehabilitation, working with those who are about to be released or moved to the adult estate. We also have an active education department. Unfortunately, there wasn't much footage taken on the rehabilitation wing and unhelpfully our education provider at that time said that they did not want to be part of the filming. They refused to sign the consent form. In the last week of filming they said that they were reassured but by that stage it was too late. It was unfortunate that was not there. It didn't give a fair representation of the work we do here.

JB: How did prisoners and staff respond to the film?

KL: Wild Pictures brought the final version to the prison and showed it to staff that were significantly involved a couple of days before it aired. This meant that they didn't have to hide behind the couch, it gave them a heads up as to what would be in the show! The staff were reassured by that and pleased with their own involvement. Prisoners were aware of the broadcast date and many watched the programme. A few got a bit of stick about what they had said on camera. One of the guys saying he would stab someone up was one of my race equality representatives and was wearing his official t-shirt! He is someone who is not involved in any gangs or violence, so I don't really understand why he said that. There was also someone who said 'welcome to Hell' as he walked towards the camera, he ended up on 'own protection' in the segregation unit because of the jibes he was getting from other prisoners as a result of the grief they were getting from their families. Many families were saying, 'you need to get out of Aylesbury' and prisoners were explaining that it is not like it was shown and that it is in fact a good prison that they want to stay in. There were a lot of prisoners on the Tuesday morning asking to ring their parents to

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reassure them. We even had some staff getting calls from their parents!

I felt that the second episode, focusing on self-harm, was more hard-hitting. Staff were very proud of this, in general. I had a lot of emails from people saying how brave they thought we were showing that kind of material, how it represented work they were doing and how they felt proud to be part of the Prison Service. We had lots of press interest and in general this reflected positively upon the staff working in prisons and recognised the hard job they do.

There was criticism of the sensationalism and violence. They had filmed some incidents but they could not show them as they were the subject of criminal proceedings. We gave them historical footage, which they then edited together into a montage, which made it look like we are having a fight every minute. I was disappointed by that as it wasn't explained or placed in context.

JB: Did you have any contact with prisoners' families or victims after the films were broadcast?

KL: No. We didn't have formal contact. I did have some contact from prisoners who had been at Aylesbury many years ago. There was one man who wrote in saying he had been a prisoner here thirty years ago and he wished that the caring staff depicted in the programme had been around when he served his sentence as he felt it would have been a more positive and rehabilitative experience. I thought that was kind. He also wanted to apologise to an officer he had assaulted in the early 1980s. I had another prisoner who had been a cleaner for me when I was an officer at Aylesbury in 1990, saying how pleased he was that I

was the Governor and how he enjoyed the conversations we shared all those years ago and how they had helped him to stay on the straight and narrow. That one card I was very proud to receive and made it all worthwhile.

JB: How did the local community and media respond?

KL: Similar to the main tabloid press. There was interest reflecting the press release and observations on the programme. I had a few letters from local people who weren't previously aware of the work we do and were complimentary about the staff. We also had a couple of people saying that they hadn't expected prison staff to be so caring and felt that the work we did with people who were self-harming, was something that they weren't aware that staff had to deal with or the emotional impact that such work has.

JB: What would your advice be to a Governor approached to host a film crew in their prison for a documentary?

KL: You have to get yourself personally involved right from the start. There has to be clarity about the objectives and assurances about how they will work. If it is Wild Pictures guided by Ministry of Justice Press Office, there shouldn't be too many problems as that partnership is well established. I didn't have to go through the pain that other colleagues have had to in getting film crews to understand the environment. I would also say that you can put a lot of trust in the Press Office being able to guide, cajole and if necessary be robust in managing the production team and shaping the content that is finally aired. You do have the ability to police the final cut.