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*Special Edition*  
**Closing and Opening Prisons**

# Interview: Chantel King

*Chantel King is currently Governor of HMP Leyhill. At the time of the prison closures she was Governor of HMP Gloucester. She is interviewed by **Monica Lloyd** from the University of Birmingham. The interview took place in March 2014.*

**ML: How did you first hear about the plans to close Gloucester?**

**CK:** There was a lot of speculation about an announcement for about two weeks before I was told. I actually found out by means of a telephone call the evening before from the Regional Director. He said 'Hi kid'. I can remember that. There are some things I can't remember but I can remember that because of the way he said it and because we know one another well I knew immediately it was going to be Gloucester. I said 'it's me isn't it?' and he said 'Yes, it is. You're one of the jails that are closing.' People assumed I had a lot more notice but that was 7.45 pm the evening before. I had another call about an hour later from the person who was to be my lead from the MoJ asking me if I'd had a call and I said yes. He phoned to introduce himself and to say he would be arriving first thing in the morning with a briefing pack. From the time I took that call at about 9.30 pm to the following morning at about 6.30 am that was all I knew; that there was going to be an announcement the next day.

**ML: So the very next day you had to front this up with your staff and prisoners?**

**CK:** Yes, the following day was actually my three year old daughter's first day in pre-school and the plan was to take her into pre-school and pick her up and have a nice afternoon together. No-one knew that and it was irrelevant to most people but for me that day was hugely important. On my way in I was desperately trying to behave normally and not give anything away as the news is embargoed until you get a code word. I came through the gate and it wasn't so long after Christmas and I walked through with a Senior Officer who was carrying a bag of sweets. To make conversation I said 'have you brought your old Xmas sweets in?' and he said 'No, it's my 30 year anniversary in the job today.' It was almost as if everywhere you looked somebody had something about that day. It makes you realise how little you know about other people's lives and it made me more anxious about what I was about to do. Then eventually the two people from the MoJ arrived, which I think we handled quite well because I had booked them in as visitors first thing in the morning so people wouldn't automatically think that they were turning up with bad news. They arrived with a huge information pack and I had a very short window of

time in which to get practical things like notices to staff and to prisoners prepared, and then I had to phone in to a telephone conference of all prison governors at which the announcement was going to be made. We weren't allowed to leave to brief our staff until we heard Michael Spurr say 'Good morning everybody' because that was the code to say that it had been accepted by ministers and I could begin the briefing.

**ML: So how did you feel about all this? It must have been a bit surreal?**

**CK:** Yes, I was very anxious because of the importance of what you were about to do. You get used to being a wee bit in the spotlight but you're about to stand up and everybody is going to be looking to see how you are responding and you're aware that what you about to say is going to devastate people. So I was very anxious about it.

**ML: Did you get all the staff together?**

**CK:** Yes, I gathered all my senior team first (I had permission to do that) and told them about the closure and asked them to gather all the staff together. When all the staff were ready and waiting in the room I had to walk through them to get to the front. And they all knew that this was the day that announcements were going to be made and that they would hear whether or not we would be closing. There was huge tension around what I was about to say.

**ML: Do you remember what you said?**

**CK:** No! Because the previous evening, despite not having a lot to go on I spent a lot of time writing things down that I wanted to say, but when it came to it I stuck to the script. I was given quite a bland script and that helped me quite a lot because it was very emotional and if I had started to talk about things that were very personal to me, about achievements, it would have been even more difficult. At the time it was very important that I got the message across clearly and that it had some consistency with what other prisons were hearing.

**ML: How did the staff respond?**

**CK:** They were very quiet. At the end of the meeting, I had made a decision with my Deputy Governor that we would not expect staff to leave the room straight away and resume their duties, but we would leave them to spend some time together, to get

over the initial shock, to have some Functional Heads there and the Care Team, so if they wanted to talk and to have an opportunity to deal with the information they had just been given they could do that with the right people.

**ML: Was that your decision to have the Care Team present?**

**CK:** Well, first thing I checked who was on duty and would be around from the care team as we did need them. There were people who were very upset about it.

**ML: But you couldn't tell them in advance, so it was their responsibility to switch into care team role at the same time as absorbing the significance for themselves? That must have been very challenging for everybody.**

**CK:** Yes. I didn't stay. I left as soon as I had delivered the information. I gave them the opportunity to ask any questions but there weren't any. I was expecting that; that it would be such a shock, particularly how quickly it was going to be.

**ML: How quickly was it?**

**CK:** Well the announcement was made on the 10th January and our last day when we were to hand over was the 28th March. Ten weeks from start to finish.

**ML: That really is quite fast when you consider the logistics involved. How many prisoners were there?**

**CK:** 321. So quite small, this is one of the reasons why it shut. But a difficult mixed local population with lots of different needs. There were lots of things to think about but for that hour after the delivery I just needed to get people to refocus, deal with what they'd just heard, and then refocus on the fact that we still had a full prison. I think that worked quite well, having the time to talk about it before returning to work.

**ML: So how about telling prisoners?**

**CK:** Well, I left the staff briefing and then had a series of people I had to call. So I called the Chair of the IMB, the Chief Executive of the PCT, all the people who we had key relationships with or contracts with, and immediately after that I met with the PCC (the prisoner consultative committee), which is a group of about a dozen men. And the same time we were behind the scene preparing the notice to offenders. I met with them as a group and delivered the message, and at the same time as I was meeting with them it was announced on the radio. So by the time the guys had returned to the unit a lot

of the other offenders had heard it on the radio anyway. It was that quick.

**ML: It feels like you're describing a tsunami, like riding a wave.**

**CK:** Yes. It's a really short window as well. On top of everything else I was checking whether I had told everybody who needed to know as you know they will be offended if they didn't hear it from me. There wasn't a contingency plan for closing a prison, though there might be now actually.

**ML: So how did the prisoners react?**

**CK:** A lot of the men had been in and out of Gloucester most of their lives and many were very attached to it. They were thinking about how it was going to impact on them. Where will I go? What happens if I get into trouble again? There was a lot of worry about families. But on the whole they were really good. We didn't have any difficult reactions. The staff and prisoners managed it really well, I was so proud of them all.

**ML: Let's talk a bit of the practicalities of it, because suddenly you're faced with a big logistical challenge. What were the implications for other prisons?**

**CK:** Because Gloucester was one of nine to close I think some of that had been missed and there was an assumption that all of these people could go to Bristol, but no-one had thought

about the Young Offenders for whom we had a huge catchment area. There were small pockets of offenders who had really been missed out of the planning and could have had better attention. But Bristol did take the brunt of Gloucester's closure. Their whole demographic will have changed to much more of a remand population. I think a lot of my young offenders went as far afield as Reading.

**ML: How about the Unions? Were they part of the closure process?**

**CK:** Not directly. On the first day I called in the POA, the PCS and all the unions who were represented. They were brilliant actually. While lots of people disagreed with the decision, they accepted it. They understood why the prison closures were happening, and had a really mature approach to the bigger picture, which is sometimes unusual. I felt very lucky about that. It still didn't stop them absolutely being on top of the personal issues and wanting to make sure that people were managed properly and that their members got the best deal. And that's right as that's what they're there for. With regard to how

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they worked with me as the Governor, they were very supportive as they always were once they realised I was doing the right thing. There were no issues with me about the trade unions. They were an important part of the closure.

**ML: What did happen to the staff? Do you know how many were relocated and how many took redundancy?**

**CK:** No, the HR was all managed separately. Everyone had a one to one interview and I wasn't involved in that, which is the same for all Governors. You sit outside the HR process which is managed centrally, which is quite right. You have to make non-judgmental decisions about people's lives and it's important that that was very clinical. I was kept informed about how many interviews had been completed and what people were asking for but I didn't know the details about anybody's posting before them. Quite a few people did take voluntary exit. I had some long serving staff and for lots there were some opportunities to take a different path and I hear that some have done really well with new ventures.

**ML: So you were confident that the HR side was managed professionally?**

**CK:** I was very confident in it. It was very slick.

**ML: How was the transfer of prisoners managed?**

**CK:** We stopped taking prisoners from courts immediately so we took no new men in from the very next day. We then did a huge piece of work about scheduling the emptying of the prison. We knew we had to be empty four to six weeks ahead of the last day to do the decommissioning. We worked out who would be going to court and not coming back over the next four to six weeks, who would be eligible for HDC, who would be time expired. Then for the rump of men who were serving ongoing sentences they were moved on to Category C prisons in the South West. There was a different strategy for all. It worked really well. Each day we came into work there were fewer prisoners. Then when there were very few left we co-located them so that rather than having people in different areas we brought everyone together. That was much better so they didn't feel like they were rattling around. Because it was quite eerie as the jail emptied, particularly when we were down to the last 20 prisoners. And there was about the same number of

staff. We knew we would have one very small self contained area that was newly refurbished and held about 25 men so we identified that as the last bit to close. A lot of the offenders were volunteers. They said they would stay and help. There were some amazing examples of goodwill. A small group stayed on to the very end. Some were listeners, some were peer mentors. They were those who had given a lot back. It was a sort of siege mentality; we were all in it together.

**ML: So, once the prison was empty, the decommissioning started?**

**CK:** Yes, as the prison emptied we started it in small areas. I can't give you the definition of what decommissioning is even though I've been through it! It's just a grand way of saying get everything out. We had to remove everything that identified it as a prison, which sounds like a small thing to do, but every little notice that might have said HMP had to go. Anything that could have identified the building as a prison had to go. Then the real biggie was the stuff around emptying rooms, archiving and destroying, so reams and reams of paperwork, logging everything and if it had to be stored archiving it. It was a massive piece of work. I'm still not sure how we did it but we did. As our offender group reduced and staff who knew

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where they were going and were really excited to go went, we moved staff on to archiving. So we had staff working right outside their comfort zone. I appointed leads so I had someone leading on archiving, someone leading on furniture; they were taking on roles that were completely new to them, but just got on with it.

**ML: What was the general mood? Was there a can-do attitude?**

**CK:** Absolutely. I like to think that, if there was one thing I did when I was there; it was that even though the staff knew we were going to shut, I wanted them to believe that we could do it well. I wanted them to leave thinking that and they really bought into it so that everybody could say that from the moment we started this to the end we did the best we could. And they really bought into it. I couldn't have done it without the team I had around me.

**ML: And they couldn't have done it without the leadership that you gave them.**

**CK:** It could have all gone wrong and it didn't. And that's down to the people buying in to let's make sure we do this right for the offenders and for the staff and just let people know that we just wanted to do a good job. And they did, they did it brilliantly.

**ML: That's a really positive story. Can I personalise it a bit and ask about you?**

**CK:** I didn't know what was going to happen to me, not for some weeks and there's no reason why I should have been treated differently than anyone else. I say that because you still have to get on with your day job, and it's hard and you are thinking am I still going to have a job? You just have to keep pushing that to the back of your mind and get on with whatever you're doing and know and trust and have faith that it's all going to be OK.

**ML: So you had to absorb everyone else's uncertainty at the same time as managing your own.**

**CK:** It was really hard in my circumstances because I have a really young daughter and I didn't want to move. It would have been incredibly difficult for me to move. In fact I don't know whether I could have done. Although there was a vacancy here everything had to be done fairly and others may have been interested in this post. I get that but it doesn't stop you wanting personal reassurance. I was getting a lot of personal support from the very top and I was being reassured but it doesn't help until someone says there's a job for you. It made me acutely aware of what others were feeling and allowed me to say to them what was being said to me with legitimacy. Everything is going to be OK. These are the parameters you are working within; you will get a posting within an hour of your home, so don't worry about it.

**ML: So the way you were being treated you were able to pass on to your staff, which presumably went on down the line, even to prisoners as often what happens to staff is mirrored in the way prisoners are treated.**

**CK:** Yes, for lots of people it was just about the opportunity to say how they felt. They knew I wasn't able to suddenly pull a posting out of my pocket but they just needed to be able to say it. It made them feel better. I do genuinely think that most people got something good out of it, although they did not want to leave Gloucester. And a lot of jails got a lot of good staff out of it as well.

**ML: Did you mark the closure at all on the very last day?**

**CK:** We did but we kept it very low key, for lots of reasons. One is that many of the staff had already left to take up new postings, and another reason was that I

didn't want to make it a sideshow. I didn't feel that it was something that should be totally celebrated. It was the marking of the end of something and that was important but I didn't want it to become a marching band. The local MP wanted to attend and I wanted it to be about me and the staff being able to say this was really important to us. It was just with the staff that were left and we did it on Maundy Thursday so that some people were able to come. We did it outside of the prison in front of the flag. I made a small five or ten minute speech and we had the longest serving unified member of staff take the flag down and fold it, followed by a big round of applause and we went to the pub. It was about saying Gloucester city is losing something now, and those who had had anything to do with offenders and their families or children were losing something dear to them. The local MP came and two Mayors came because they had personal connections with the jail but I didn't want it to be a ceremonial event. I wanted it to be for staff so they came along in their ordinary clothes without chains of office. The press came too and a photographer.

**ML: Was that helpful?**

**CK:** Yes, I am sure there were people thinking we wanted a big party but it just didn't feel right, so I didn't do it.

**ML: Are there any key learning points that you would pass on to anyone else in your position?**

**CK:** I think what's been really good is that has been a lot of debriefing of the governors involved in the first round of closures. We were all offered as mentors for the governors of the next round of closures. One thing that has changed has been the filling of the gap between being told the evening before and the next morning when you receive your briefing pack. Now they courier it to your home the evening before so you can read it and digest it in advance. They provide a more detailed plan that incorporates our feedback. I would just say to those who are going through it make sure you have people who are close to you supporting you. Not just colleagues but also family and friends who are there to look after you. You need a support network. But it's exhausting. It really is exhausting, so take some leave at the end of it would be my best advice. The day after you shut the door take two weeks leave! You run on empty, you personally have to check so much because there are so few of you there. Once the jail is empty it's vulnerable from the outside in a way that it wasn't before. There's so much new stuff that you have to think about.

**ML: What are the plans for the building now?**

**CK:** It's just gone on the market in the last few weeks. There's a lot of interest not just in it as an historical building but in the castle ruins that are underneath it too. I would like to see something nice done with it rather than seeing it just left to decay.