

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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

# Editorial Comment

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I am delighted to have been asked to guest edit this special edition on closing and opening prisons. Having been Deputy Governor at HMP Gloucester during the time of the first set of group closures of prisons in 2013, I can empathise with prison staff going through this difficult experience. However, this edition goes beyond that experience with perspectives from prisoners, staff and managers affected not only by prison closures, but also those going through the demanding process of living and working in newly constructed prisons. This collective experience is extended with the thoughts of the people involved in high level decision making both for prisons, and the organisations that provide a service to them.

This edition begins with an article by Helen Johnston who explores the considerable history of some of the prisons recently closed. The article draws on the themes arising from the subsequent interviews in this edition and concludes with the assertion that, while history is not a significant consideration for those at the executive level, it does matter to the individuals living and working in the prisons that are closed.

The first five interviews in this edition are with those that have directly lived through the experience of a prison closure. The first interview with Chantel King, former Governor of HMP Gloucester, emphasises a Governor's desire to provide strong leadership to their staff during a rapid prison closure, whilst managing their own emotional reaction to the situation. In contrast to a speedy closure, the interview of Tony Lunn, an Officer at HMP Wellingborough which closed in 2012, highlights the impact on prison staff when rumours of closure continue over a protracted period. In the third interview a prisoner from HMP Kingston, a high performing prison, provides a unique insight into the impact of a prison closure on his own 'offender journey' through the system. The final two interviews show how prison closures impact on third sector prison providers and the wider local community. Firstly, the Dean of Gloucester examines how his city will manage the aftermath of a prison closure. Secondly, Jo Wells, a manager of the Footprints mentoring project in the South West, sheds light on the often forgotten impact of closures on those who are not directly employed by the Prison Service.

The following group of interviews concern those making the complex and difficult decisions around prison closures and opening new sites. Phil Copple, the Director of Public Sector Prisons for NOMS, talks about the strategic opportunity created for modernisation of the prison estate by the reduction in the prisoner population, coupled with managing the pressures of the government's public sector reform agenda. Jeremy Wright, Minister for Prisons and Probation at the time of being interviewed, expands on the modernising agenda, highlighting how public sector prisons have been withdrawn from market testing, whilst consistently reaffirming the importance of staff-prisoner relationships across the prison estate. Finally, Nick Coleman, Area Manager for NACRO, explains the importance of flexibility and adaptability within successful third sector organisations, when managing a significant programme of changes to prisons.

The final two interviews concern the views of a prisoner and a middle manager that lived and worked through the opening of England and Wales' newest public-sector prison, HMP Isis. Both explore the initial confusion as systems, regimes and relationships become established. In addition, both interviews are testament to the resilience of prisoners and staff, and demonstrate how new opportunities can arise to shape a culture.

The concluding article from Charles Elliott brings together the themes of the final two interviews, examining both the 'chaos' of a newly opened prison, and the process of staff and prisoners 'finding themselves' in a new environment. The article considers the opening of a new prison from a cultural perspective, whilst drawing out conclusions on practical areas such as staffing, procurement and partnership working.

As well as providing voices from a number of perspectives, this edition suggests that there is more to closing and opening prisons than just a managerial process. In particular, it provides accounts that assert that the opening, closing and operating of a prison has moral, cultural, societal and psychological implications. I would like to sincerely thank all of the people who agreed to interview, and be interviewed, for this special edition.