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Special Edition
Closing and Opening Prisons

Interview: Nick Coleman

Nick Coleman is NACRO's Area Manager for the criminal system contracts. He has worked for NACRO for 10 years, prior to that he was employed by the Apex Charitable Trust. He has worked in various custodial settings, most notably HMP Onley (with Apex as part of resettlement work (funded by Custody 2 Work) and HMP Wellingborough. He is interviewed by Tony Corcoran, Governor of HMP Haverigg. The interview took place in January 2014.

TC: What is the process for engaging the VCS when opening a new prison?

NC: Mainly speaking from my own experiences, the core role is fairly integral to prisons work, with the likes of a new build at Littlehey and the opening of Bure. In those examples we were already engaging in area on area-wide resettlement contracts. The process was about bringing other prisons into the existing contract and management in the usual way. If I had been looking to contract organisations to deliver work in those new prisons, I would have been operating through NOMS Procurement. That is how we would have moved it forward. To some extent, speaking from a Prime focus charity, that is a slightly different experience.

TC: How do you go about identifying how the VCS can contribute to a new prison?

NC: For much of the resettlement contracts, because NOMS have a specific need that they would like fulfilling, as an organisation we are well placed to respond. We would look to adapt that to suit the establishment we were looking at. It is difficult to identify how we would look to do something and get the funding.

TC: What practical challenges are there to operating in a new prison?

NC: At Bure and Littlehey the feedback from the staff who were around in the early stages was variable in terms of expectations. They were appointed 5 weeks ahead of the opening and had a lot of training and established relationships in advance. All of that preliminary work was happening in advance of the opening. At Bure particularly, there were delays in security clearance, which had a knock on effect. Recruitment hasn't been an issue for us but because we are fairly established in region (66 Managers within the contract) existing experience and expertise assisted with this. Having identified people to appoint the difficulties were in terms of accommodation, i.e., office and interview space.

TC: Are there any good examples of how the VCS and new prisons have worked particularly well together recently?

NC: Bure and Littlehey, on the whole, are good examples. Bure was more successful than Littlehey due,

in part, to being on site prior to the opening and delays in security clearance; also there were new officers in large numbers. There was a sense that everyone was essentially 'finding their feet'. Bure was more of a challenge for various reasons, including issues with training.

TC: What type of training?

NC: I would be speculating a little, as I was not directly involved. I would expect security clearance, some job specific training and peer training on legislation, etc. Areas that we were involved in and staff expectations about how a prison operates, how to work within the establishment — building relationships with staff, which helps.

TC: What are your hopes/aspirations for the VCS regarding the proposed new prison in North Wales?

NC: To some extent it feels that it depends on how successfully it will link to the government's agenda. It is a changing backdrop to CR which will determine how successful a large prison is. It is well documented that large prisons have logistical problems. From the point of view of our work, thinking about crime reduction, the issue about distance from home is probably the biggest challenge. The fact it is in the North West and therefore has opportunities to be closer to home for Welsh prisoners is welcome, but other prisoners may be further from their home area. The brief for resettlement on such a large scale will depend on how successful moves closer to home towards the end of their sentence are facilitated.

TC: Do you believe that a prison could be effectively run entirely by the VCS? Are there any international examples of this? Why or why not?

NC: I can't see it happening, not exclusively a VCS organisation. The role of prison officers would be something a VCS organisation would struggle with. Expertise and experience generally ... so in terms of knowledge experience and expertise, no.

TC: Do you believe that it is possible for enough VCS organisations to come together to competitively bid to operate a prison?

NC: Not that I know of. I'm coming from an operational background and I'm not aware of anything.

TC: NACRO are a large organisation with good resources — would they bid?

NC: I suspect not, I think even allowing for the size of some organisations, there's still a huge financial requirement there. It feels as though there is still a role there for the Prison Service. From a VCS point of view, we would want to be involved, in that with any new jail there is potential for involvement. We would want VCS input from the outset — but I suspect not at the moment.

TC: Do you feel that larger prisons provide the best balance between rehabilitation, efficiency, safety, decency and security? Is there still a role to be played for the small prison?

NC: I think so, again, it comes back to transforming rehabilitation and how successful that model will be implemented. 2000 prisoners seems to be too large a prison and challenges that I think would be the 'what are the mechanism for moving back to home areas closer to release dates' — if that works well, then a large prison negates some of that risk.

TC: Jails smaller than 400 perform better — best outcomes for prisoners ...

NC: It is a great challenge. It seems to me that the ideal is a larger number of smaller prisons, all operating in a better way within communities and discharge areas, closer to home — essentially every jail working as a resettlement jail holding prisoners and discharging more locally, and then in a position to develop local interventions and links. But that is a very expensive way to run prisons. That brings us back to transformation and outcomes for individuals. Clearly there's some clever thinking that can be done with technology.

TC: Is that what you mean by innovation?

NC: Could be both — in terms of what really is important about new build prisons, is that they need to have successful interventions for prisoners, and dedicated space to deliver them, and there needs to be space to conduct private interviews — particular things that allow VCS organisations to operate in an effective way. There are opportunities to build that in at the planning stage.

TC: Do you consider yourself part of a pressure group, enforcing political views?

NC: It is an aspect of our work, yes.

TC: Is the VCS involved in the decision making regarding prison closures or opening new prisons?

NC: In terms of decisions, the policy element of the organisation about opening new prisons. In terms of closure, it has not been necessarily reactive but on a practical level we have been involved where we have had staff in closing prisons, withdrawing services, etc.

TC: How is the decision to close a prison communicated to the VCS organisations that work there?

NC: In every instance the manager, whichever of our managers was local to that site, was informed. Usually delivery staff and other staff in the establishment are briefed, and then it comes back to the manager to make arrangements from there out.

TC: In terms of Staff surveys, engagement, etc — how do you measure morale? What happens to staff?

NC: Our staff, when we have contracts that cut across a number of prisons within a region, a lot of that is work that we have to do to consider whether we can find a suitable post. We haven't got huge numbers of staff in any one location so we look at whether there are vacancies, or there are likely to be in the near future — but in some cases there's no option but to make someone redundant. In terms of managing

morale, it works best when there is open dialogue with prison managers — in terms of timescales, etc, so everyone can have a clear idea of what is happening. There is also the possibility for directly employed — it is a time of uncertainty for all involved — often Prison Service colleagues that they have been working with for some time, so there is a collective understanding.

TC: What impact does a closing prison have on the VCS workforce and any associated funding?

NC: It presents a challenge for us. Where we have contracts that span a number of jails, often we have certain staff within a management structure that reflects an area of responsibility in a number of jails and it tends to be smaller, more remote jails that close. The number of

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delivery staff affected is low and if we can negotiate some balance in terms of the price, we often still need the same management structure so there is a risk. It is a bit of a balancing act and we tend to go back and negotiate.

TC: Have the recent two rounds of closures made VCS organisations more reluctant to get involved with certain prisons?

NC: It is difficult to say at the moment, it is a competition environment and in the next year or so it may prove to be. Our preference is for contracts that cover a number of establishments, therefore allowing for a management structure that oversees that. A single isolated jail is difficult to manage. These are factors in our risk assessment but wouldn't necessarily put us off. If one of those jails was part of a wider area, we may just have to plan in the knowledge that there is a chance it could close, but it is difficult to second guess these closures. We need to know all of the considerations so it is not a perfect scenario.

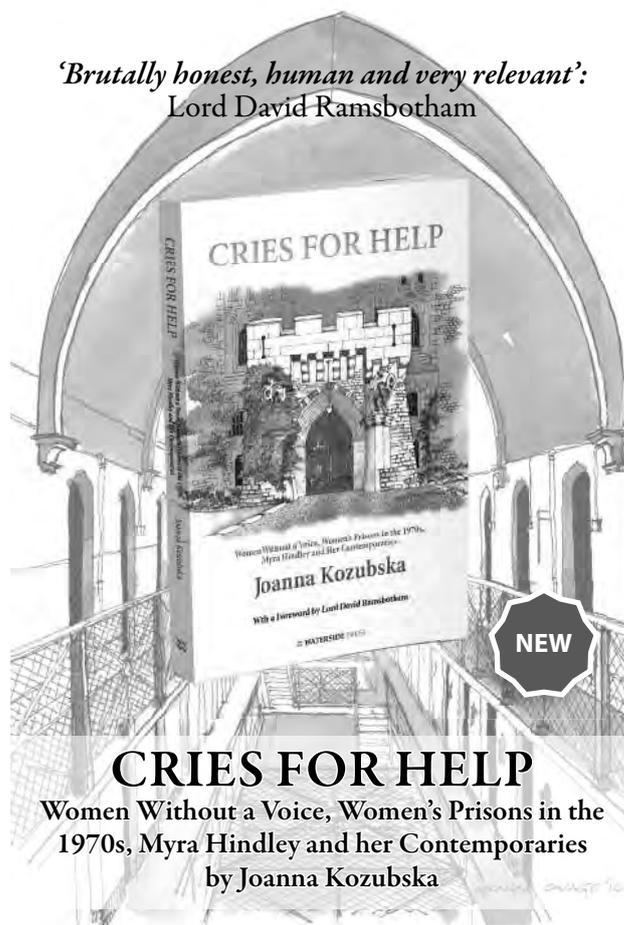
TC: What are the key learning points from a VCS perspective following the recent closures and newly opened prisons?

NC: For prison closures I would suggest create a model that allows enough flexibility to anticipate closures. For most of the contracts we hold, prison closures were a reality and our model didn't necessarily anticipate that. Communication with managers and prison managers, and with NOMS procurement and making sure that operationally, what we deliver continues to deliver up to the closure, and make sure we are looking at reducing the roll, where prisoners are going, etc. That allows us to plan interventions accordingly. Communication about contractual implications for both parties. For opening prisons I would suggest plan from the outset to include VCS. Build prisons in a format (structure of buildings) that anticipates the needs of interventions — office space, interview rooms, etc.

TC: How do you make that decision? Have you got access to information? How do you know what programmes?

NC: In terms of planning the build of the prison, it doesn't matter which interventions, but that there is physical space for those interventions to be delivered. In terms of the planning of the building, they need to anticipate that those things will be happening. They need to think about the group delivery and interview space that is provided and that there will be a requirement for office space to respond to that. Where we have started in each prison, the staff are using OASys, NOMIS, etc, and those things become more integral to the prison service work but also to us. In terms of how successfully they operate, there's still a lot that needs to be ironed out.

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