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Special Edition
Closing and Opening Prisons

Interview: Tina Taylor

Tina Taylor is the Head of Drug Strategy and Healthcare Provision at HMP/YOI Isis. She was posted to Isis over a year before it opened, and performed a Custodial Manager role as part of the commissioning team. Tina joined the Service as a Prison Officer in 1998 at Wandsworth. She was promoted to Senior Officer in 2002 and to Principal Officer in 2005, and was a member of the POA Branch Committee for a time. She is interviewed by William Payne who works in Business Development Group, NOMS. The interview took place in February 2014.

WP: Would you tell me about the role you performed when you were posted to Isis, before the prison opened and you started taking prisoners, and the role you have performed since?

TT: Initially I was recruited as the security manager — I was transferred from Wandsworth in my substantive grade (Principal Officer) but it was a little strange because in practical terms we didn't actually have a prison let alone any prisoners! But because Isis was being built within the perimeter of Belmarsh, security was clearly important. We had prison staff on site to maintain security. It is quite challenging actually, I learnt a lot about managing what were at times the competing interests of the contractors, on the one hand, and ours in preserving the integrity of a Cat A prison on the other. We had probably about 12 OSGs (Operational Support Grades) at the time recruited by Belmarsh as 'casuals' to enable the construction and these were supplemented by agency OSGs. It was interesting making them security conscious in a prison way without unnecessarily impeding the work of the constructor and the many sub-contractors. Construction was scheduled as a '77 week build'. It started October 2008 and it was handed over in April 2010. In addition to managing the OSGs, my role was to provide the interface between the contractors and the Governor. During this time I also started drafting security policies and procedures that we'd use in the prison. It was a strange combination of things but really interesting.

WP: What was most interesting about that period then because as you've just pointed out you're a prison manager and you didn't actually have a prison to manage: what were the lessons you learned during the construction phase?

TT: I guess in development terms it was really good actually liaising with other agencies, stakeholders that kind of thing, learning how to juggle people's priorities. The contractors wanted to build a prison and we wanted to maintain security and sometimes those two objectives weren't co-terminous! From a very practical point of view, we needed to find ways of ensuring our policies and procedures were adhered to but without imposing such constraints on the contractor that added delay and therefore cost.

WP: Were you still the Security PO when the prison began to take prisoners in 2010?

TT: I was temporarily promoted on Residential when we prepared to open the prison.

WP: So you were centrally part of the reception of the first group of prisoners and settling them all in.

TT: Yes we outnumbered them, which was a novel experience! The prison opened as it was always designed to be — for the 18-24 age group with the over 21s as Cat Cs — on the assumption that it was going to be roughly two thirds Young Offender and one third adults.

WP: What were the biggest challenges that you personally and the establishment faced in opening?

TT: Recruitment and we still haven't recruited a full complement three and a half years later. In the last calendar (2013), we continued to have significant staff turnover, and not just because we were a new prison. Some people chose to leave the Prison Service, some were dismissed and many gained promotion, all of which made staff stability more difficult to achieve. In 2013, 64 per cent of all Band 5 managers were newly promoted or appointed in the year; all Offender Supervisors were newly appointed; 64 per cent of the residential Supervising Officers were either newly or temporarily promoted; and we experienced a 55 per cent turnover in Band 3 Prison Officers; a 22 per cent turnover in administrative staff; and a 34 per cent turnover in the OSG group.

WP: Compared even to an average for London and the South-east, that's extraordinary. I will return in a minute to the implications of this but would you first say something about one or two of the other challenges?

TT: I guess there's a natural fear that you don't have everything prepared. We did have a huge project plan so in theory everything was on there — every policy we needed to write, everything we needed to order and so on. We had a few disasters along the way. We realised that people had ordered the wrong things because the descriptions on the catalogue were a little bit woolly and thought we had ordered key pouches for staff only to discover that actually we'd ordered the

kind of sealed pouches that you use for a cell key on nights and things like this so there were last minute panics around that. But by and large these were small hiccups in what was a pretty big project. The biggest preparation problem was the staffing. Lisa Smitherman, the Governor, had made very clear that she wanted an 'Isis ethos', that it would be community-based with an emphasis on being 'Isis friendly' — informal but with discipline. She did much to set the tone. For example, we have a 'Segregation Unit' — it was never ever going to be called anything else 'Care' or 'Separation Unit' or anything else' — it would be, and is, a Segregation Unit. We aimed to recruit 50 per cent of the officer group internally and the other 50 per cent from external campaigns. There were a number of other factors around in NOMS at the time, such as restructuring which also affected us. We also suffered as those prisons sending us staff couldn't recruit fast enough to backfill the vacancies we were creating, which meant they wanted to keep their staff for the maximum possible time. This meant that the internal candidates didn't arrive when it would have been most helpful to us.

WP: What was the proportion of new staff it was hoped that you'd have?

TT: We'd hoped to have about 60-70 per cent new staff across all grades and it probably wasn't that far off it when I look back on it although that feels very high to a lot of other people. Looking back, we also struggled to get staff with sufficient experience, many officers were relatively new recruits themselves, very few had more than five years service. With the exception of one Dog Handler, everyone else's experience was in single figures pretty much apart from the managers. We went through about nine recruitment campaigns in the first year or so. Many staff arrived only just before we opened making it more difficult. The other thing that was challenging was that everything was on paper. It's was not like having a prison which was already in operation which has become accustomed to its institutional routines and there is a natural confidence in the way things happen day-to-day. When you join an existing prison either as a new member of staff or on transfer, there is by and large a routine and well-established system to slip into: everyone knows what happens, and the challenge is just for you as the new person to learn. Opening a new prison, it's all new to everyone. In spite of all the preparation we did — we had all the policies,

procedures and systems written down; and we'd walked through things and undertaken various exercises — it still felt new and unfamiliar when we opened. Of course, that's the nature of operational work in prisons, it's not until you 'go live' and start actually doing what you've planned that you find out what you don't know and how well things are going to work.

WP: Let's return to the issue of staffing which is such a fundamental part of building culture. You mentioned how difficult it was to recruit, why was that do you think?

TT: I suspect it's a London issue because to the best of my knowledge London prisons have always been short staffed. The last time that I know Wandsworth was fully staffed was in 1998 and that was in preparation to open refurbished wings. I think pay may also have something to do with it, especially for new staff — they don't get paid much more than they would for doing a lot of unskilled jobs in the area and it's pretty hard going. Also, a number of the new recruits weren't particularly well-prepared in terms of their own expectations — and that may be because a lot of the staff we recruited are a lot younger than you used to see. When I started I sensed there were more people joining as officers with a bit more life experience behind them. A lot of the officers we recruited were

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in their early twenties, and many didn't see being an officer as a job for life which is more likely to be the case if you join in your thirties or forties. On the other hand a lot of them were very highly qualified — and it's the same with the OSGs. I did 17 days of interviews and huge numbers of them have got psychology, criminology degrees, that kind of thing so it's probably not something that they were planning on doing for life either. It's a foot in the door somewhere within the criminal justice system and some experience but not necessarily what you got that degree for.

WP: What sort of lessons would you say the Service has got to learn from what Isis has experienced, about the way in which it recruits and what it does to recruit people?

TT: What amazes me — and I know one of my colleagues raised this at a QandA session with Michael Spurr a couple of years ago at Scrubs — was the fact that we don't interview our officers. They go along to an assessment centre, but we don't sit down with them and actually spend 10-15 minutes just getting a feel of

what they're like and what they're expecting. It comes as a shock to some people that you expect them to be at work at half past seven on a Sunday morning! It seems that it just didn't occur to them! I was on the POA Committee at Wandsworth and we actually found that a lot wouldn't join the POA until they were subject to an investigation or disciplinary proceedings over their attendance — an awful lot of those centred on basic work discipline, coming to work when you are supposed to that kind of stuff. It seems completely obvious but somehow we have forgotten to test those sort of 'job ready' skills we need as well as the aptitude and ability which the assessment centre can assess. I think there is more we should be doing to ensure people we are recruiting join with their eyes wider open than they sometimes are.

WP: Would you tell me about the training or induction and familiarisation you prepared for new staff here and how well that worked?

TT: I've mentioned the planning — which included walking through situations and running various scenarios like pretending there was an alarm situation somewhere so responding from one area to another so that they would learn the routes around the prison and the quickest way to get places — but we also tried to think of the small things which oil the wheels of operational routines. But there are so many and it was only when we can't put them into practice that we realised that we had assumed there was a common way of doing something only to find out that there are various different ways.

WP: An awful lot that happens in prison turns on tiny little things happening or not happening. What's the way round that, is it a bit about opening a new prison requires a bit of try it and see it and we will find it's a bit of trial and error?

TT: I think we always knew there was going to be some elements of that. We wrote a set of 'know your job sheets' for almost everything we could reasonably think of so you could walk into a different area of the prison, pick up the folder, pick out the sheet and know what to do. It's still a puzzle that we missed things. Several of us had visited other YOIs to learn some lessons from them as well as keeping our hand in operationally but what we discovered was that, although we were dealing with the same prisoners what we learned at other establishments didn't always

apply in Isis. For example, in the new wing at Rochester we learned prisoners there didn't like the smoke detectors in the cell, they keep covering them up and blocking them thinking they're cameras, so we thought we must learn that lesson. But at Isis they weren't bothered by them, sometimes the same prisoners. Why on earth would prisoners in Rochester think that about their new build and not come in here and say the same thing. You just can't work out the logic of it sometimes or the lack of logic.

WP: Were there other big challenges you recall, perhaps things which proved more challenging than you'd expected or vice versa?

TT: With staffing levels we have a constant challenge around actually making sure prisoners can have enough access to showers and so on. We always knew we'd never have in-cell showers — that was a really big design fault — the cells here are the smallest that comply with Prison Service standards. The new units at Rochester have in-cell showers and it was built before we were. If you were building a prison now, we have to ensure there are showers in cells otherwise ensuring prisoners get showers becomes a regime activity in its own right rather than a personal hygiene issue we can expect prisoner to address. And, I'd say the same about access to telephones — put them in the cell.

WP: What else did you learn about the design of the prison that you would have changed if you had had the benefit of hindsight?

TT: There were just all sorts of small things such as discovering that each of the four spurs on the house block itself is very much sound proof from the hub office in the centre of the spurs. When you're on a spur you can only hear what's happening on there, you can't hear anything from outside. So if you're on the hub in the centre between the spurs all you can hear is a general hubbub but you can't hear anything specific. Also, as the spurs weren't designed with an office, communication between the staff on the spur and what we call the hub officer (the old 'movements' or 'admin officer') was difficult. We ended up putting a radio onto each spur and put it onto a separate net without having to bother comms to say 'can you switch the showers on and off'. We also converted what had been a kind of storeroom on each spur into a little office and installed a telephone and a computer.

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Additionally, because of the teething problems we had with prisoners' kiosks, there were other things staff on the spur needed to be able to do otherwise it would cause frustration for prisoners when you can't give them an answer about their spends or visits for example. And we discovered that the more astute prisoners were booking up every visit they could according to the VOs that they had, with no intention of actually using them but actually sitting on it and using it as a form of currency.

WP: Going back to opening the prison, in what numbers did prisoners arrive?

TT: We had an agreement and we received probably between 24 and 36 prisoners every week until round about December/January after opening. We were quite conscious that Littlehey had had real problems with their YO side after they'd opened that and certainly didn't want to take the risk of having the roof off the place just after we'd opened it.

WP: And did that work?

TT: It was pretty good. It meant that obviously the staffing levels felt quite heavy at the time and there were more staff than we required for things but it did let people double up on jobs, get to learn from each other and so on. If you've got someone competent in a job someone else could then shadow them and give you that kind of time that you don't have necessarily in an operating prison.

WP: Conversely did that cause a problem when the population built up did staff feel more stretched?

TT: Probably, I think it came as a shock sometimes to find that there weren't people to hold hands anymore, this was life in the real world. Walk into any prison and the prisoners will know that you're new and some of them will pick on that and try and push things. But in a brand new prison, the staff don't really know the routine because we haven't set it in stone, and the prisoners don't know it; nobody knows it. You have a situation where a lot of people aren't quite sure and are constantly doing a bit of 'suck it and see', all of which can become quite unsettling for staff and for prisoners.

WP: What were the things you did in those early days that went really well?

TT: What we did do well which paid dividends was spending time training to respond to alarm situations, running round the prison and occasionally rolling on the floor with each other and actually letting people try out their Control and Restraint on each other in a cell or on a floor as opposed to a nice padded dojo. That was

quite useful, giving people confidence and learning to deal with the adrenaline rush. Also, just preparing new staff for some of those experiences and the noise. That was useful, we did that well.

WP: In terms of incidents, was it every day, was it really hard work?

TT: In the early days there weren't lots of incidents but it was pretty busy. The first big incident we had was on ED association probably in the September. A young man managed to start a big fight one evening on association. There's something about this age group, quite often it's a bit of a pack mentality. It was the first time that a lot of the staff had seen an incident like this. There were three or four managers on duty that evening as well as the staff that were profiled to be there for association, so we all ended up in the middle of it. Staff do bond together in difficult incidents. We

had two hospital escorts that evening so we did almost everything that we could have thought of in one incident. The incident gave staff confidence in one another, in their training, in our systems and in dealing with behaviour that several of them were worried about.

WP: This was probably good for prisoners as well because they actually could see that something as big and horrible as that was controlled and contained?

TT: Yes, that's right. Nobody was backing off anywhere and

there was certainly no element of anybody watching other people doing things. During the incident, I didn't at any moment feel like there was going to be a riot and we were going to lose the wing but we certainly knew that we were going to have a tough evening. We quickly learned what the staff were made of, who was going to volunteer to do things and show willing because it took a certain amount of bravery for some of them.

WP: Did people recognise at the time that it had had that effect?

TT: Yes it was immediately obvious. I think people suddenly felt that they actually had something to be proud of and suddenly realised being a prison officer isn't just about opening cell doors, getting people to exercise or getting them to work or whatever but actually getting involved with things as well, we have some great days and we have some horrible days and it's just a real mixture of stuff.

WP: It's getting on for four years ago since Isis opened, where is the prison now in terms of its development?

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TT: In some ways it feels really different, some things are very settled, some of the routines are quite settled and so on but there are other things that feel like we haven't moved on. We've gone through constant change as a service which has felt relentless. We hadn't much fat on the bone in staffing but by 2011 we had to open the second house block a bit quicker than we'd wanted and were absolutely reliant on detached duty staff. This meant we probably didn't progress in a lot of ways during that period. And here we are again, we've got six staff on detached duty from Downview but to be absolutely honest while it's nice to have them, it's not the same as having your own staff and you're dependent on whether or not they buy into doing things while they're here.

WP: You have pointed out how constant change and staff difficulties have frustrated the bedding in of early achievements. Can you point to particular things that if there wider issues hadn't arisen you would have prioritised in getting bedded in?

TT: I think it's probably around staff-prisoner relationships. We have been heavily criticised on this by the Inspectorate and in the Measure of the Quality of Prisoner Life. We know this was an issue and we laid on training and while we are getting there we haven't yet got the confidence to get this right. We have learned that we didn't have enough people with experience of working with Young Offenders. It's different from working with adult men and women. There's a particular knack in being able to speak to young offenders sometimes especially when you're saying something they don't like and sort of pre-empting how they're going to react because they do go from 0 to 60 in a nano second. It's about learning how to plant your idea into their head so they suddenly think it's their idea and they've decided the outcome themselves and it's quite a skill getting staff to learn that as well and getting prisoners to take that on board from you.

WP: Just stepping back a minute from the immediacy of your experience, if it was said we're going to open a brand new prison in London and we want you to open it for us, what would you do differently?

TT: We'd need to be a bit cuter about the design, understanding from the plans for the buildings what the operational implications will be. For example, if I show you what are meant to be the segregation

exercise yards you'll look at them and realise there isn't room to swing a cat, literally. Somehow on paper, it wasn't obvious. Fortunately, we converted something that was on the plans as being a landscaped garden into an exercise yard.

WP: What about the organisation, what more could NOMS do better to support the opening of Isis?

TT: The recruitment's the obvious bit and that was difficult. We couldn't even recruit a Head of Learning and Skills, we really struggled with that so there were some issues at those kind of levels and it felt very last minute to having the healthcare provision agreed as well. I think probably the hardest thing we had for a long time was the lack of kindness from colleagues elsewhere, not necessarily among managers elsewhere and so on but just in general. I think we always knew it was going to be difficult to open a prison, it was going to be bumpy and we thought it would probably realistically take us two or three years to settle in. Kennet and Bure were also new but and while we did learn some lessons from them, they had different cohorts of prisoners. The first inkling of how difficult things would be was probably Littlehey, which opened its new unit about six months before we opened.

WP: A minute ago you used a really interesting phrase that there was 'a lack of kindness' from colleagues elsewhere, what did you mean by that?

TT: Every time staff went out to a meeting somewhere or were on a course somewhere, as soon as people knew where you were from, they didn't cold-shoulder you but appeared to slightly mock us. It may have been operational humour — and we did pop up regularly on the ops report with incidents — but we appeared to be picked on because we were new. It was as though colleagues were constantly doubting out operational competence. It's a huge milestone that we are no longer seen like that. People don't appreciate that it's not easy opening a prison — most places have had decades to try it and get it right, we'd had six months. It was hard having colleagues constantly tell you that it is bad. However, I remember one of the IMB saying that your staff are really proud of the fact that it's hard here and they've stuck it out and they've managed it and they've survived. So it sort of bred that mentality amongst some people and kind of strengthened them. But on the whole, it was very wearing being told by others about their perception of what Isis was about.

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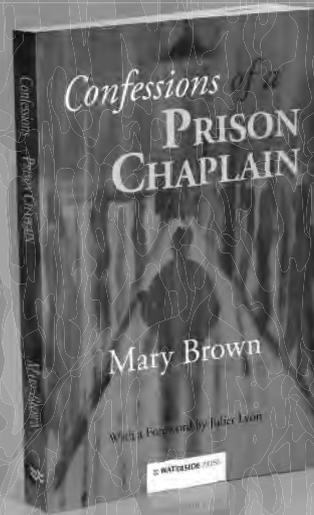
WP: How do you manage the gangs issues?

TT: It such a small site so it is difficult to try and separate people. We didn't have a designated vulnerable prisoner unit when we opened. We said we're an integrated prison, we don't do separation. But actually, if you're a member of a minority gang and you're hated by lots of other people, we have a duty to try and do something to make sure you're not going to get assaulted every time you show your face out of your cell door. One of the ways we are better at managing this is that the Police Intelligence Officer now automatically looks at all our new receptions and tries to pre-empt some of the gang issues which may arise. It took us a long time to get there and do that kind of thing. What happens in the community affects what goes on here. So, if there's tension between gangs outside, we get tension in here. We learned the hard way about the importance of gathering this information before and how you're going to manage it. So we do things like a monthly gang meeting with Trident to keep on top of that.

WP: Inevitably, we haven't been able to cover ever aspect of such a large and complicated achievement, so is there anything else you would say about the experience from which others could learn?

TT: Enjoy it, you'll probably never do anything like this again. It is a privilege to be involved in opening a new public sector prison. Be proud of what you've done. Remember not to let the good stuff get overshadowed (it's very typical Prison Service to get weighed down by the negative) and remember that although you've put everything into it, one day you will have to hand your baby over to others so don't be disheartened when people want to change things. Expect the unexpected — honestly, you can't think of everything and nothing will prepare you for things like the phone call as duty manager to tell you that a crane's toppled over into the infrastructure of a building!

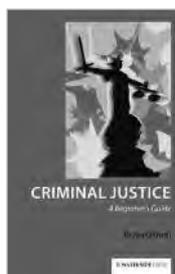
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