

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

November 2015 No 222



*Special Edition*  
**Prison Management**

# Interview: Laura Sapwell, Governor of HMP Huntercombe

*Laura Sapwell is Governor of HMP Huntercombe. She is interviewed by Dr Jamie Bennett, Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.*

**Laura Sapwell is one of the Prison Service's newest Governors, having taken up post at HMP Huntercombe in November 2014. The prison has changed roles several times in recent years, functioning as a juvenile establishment, an adult category C prison and currently as a specialist site holding up to 430 foreign national prisoners.**

Having joined the Prison Service on the Accelerated Promotion Scheme in 1996, Laura Sapwell worked in prisons around the South Central region including Grendon, Aylesbury, and Woodhill. She became Deputy Governor of HMP Bullingdon within five years of joining the Prison Service and was involved in leading the establishment through a performance test. After becoming a parent, she worked part time for several years before taking up a second Deputy Governor post at HMP Grendon and Springhill in 2011, until her promotion to Governor of HMP Huntercombe.

## **JB: What led you to prison work?**

**LS:** My father was in the Prison Service. I wanted to be a lawyer from about the age of thirteen. I went to university and studied law, but also with French so I had the opportunity to also study French Law at the university in Nice. As I went through that, I began to realise I didn't want to be a lawyer, although I loved my studies. I had some naive ideas of what being a solicitor was about, and also I wasn't at the top of the people on the course, who I thought were going to get the corporate law jobs I had originally dreamed of. I then stopped and thought about what I wanted to do. I wasn't sure what I did want to be but was sure I didn't want to be a lawyer.

I hadn't previously thought about working in prisons, even though my father had and I'd grown up around them. I began to apply for everything and anything I thought I might be qualified for. I looked at various graduate entry schemes, and Prison Service was one I applied for. Initially I wasn't sure but as I went through the process and spoke more with people who were applying, and visited a number of prisons, the more I realised I wanted to do it. I wanted something where I could make a difference, could be useful. The Prison Service offered that. It was a very structured progression into a senior position. My school report always said I was bossy! When I think about it, I have

always wanted to lead, be in charge and that is hopefully what my teachers were identifying.

## **JB: What is it like becoming a Governor? How does it feel walking in on the first day?**

**LS:** I was nervous, like anyone on the first day in a new job, you want to make a good impression. I was aware that coming in as a Governor, people have high expectations of what a Governor is like, what they ought to be like, and they are watching you. I felt that. No one wants to make a mistake or slip up on their first day, but I also wanted to create a good impression, I wanted people to get me, know what I am about and I wanted to be able to connect with people. You don't come in and start announcing your policy changes on the first day. It's about the people, making a connection. I made it clear I wanted to listen, look and understand what was going on before I could consider what I wanted to do and what my vision was. Those first days were about creating a connection and letting people know I was someone who wanted to be here, would do right by them and do right by Huntercombe.

## **JB: How would you describe the role of the Governor? Is it different from other management roles in other organisations?**

**LS:** There are bits that are like other roles, that involve management of people and processes, but it's not a management role like any other. It is very varied. With the combination of prisoners, staff and everyone else who is on the site at any time — this makes for a large community of people who all need to fit together. The role of the Governor is different from other leadership or management positions because of the complexity of the needs of all those people.

Primarily I am a civil servant, I have responsibilities I am required to deliver on behalf of the state and the public, and there are regulations and laws regarding keeping people in custody. That is my civil service responsibility. As with any large organisation, there is also the corporate responsibilities including regulation and financial management, and a lot of administration.

As part of the local organisation, in my case Huntercombe, you are the leader, providing the vision and deciding what we are doing, when and how, setting the direction of travel and making sure that staff know what we are doing and why, and helping us get there. It is also about the responsibility for prisoners.

What makes the role of Governor unique is that responsibility for prisoners: making sure it is safe, purposeful and provides the right environment to meet their needs. As well as their basic needs, it is also addressing those needs that have not been met in the past and taking the opportunity to meet them now, such as education and other work to reduce reoffending.

That variety makes it one of the most complex jobs there is.

**JB: What do you consider to be the purpose of imprisonment?**

**LS:** At its most basic level, this is society's form of punishment, which it deems appropriate for those who have broken the rules. Primarily it is a form of punishment. There has to be a consequence for those who break the rules, as well as protection from those who may be a danger to others.

We have a responsibility to keep apart those who are a risk to others.

The whole act of imprisonment creates damage in an individual's life, including their family life, their house, their job, their attitudes. That is not within my control. The decision to imprison happens elsewhere. What happens next is my responsibility. My job is to minimise the damage and use the opportunity to create something positive. While prisoners are here I have to keep them in custody and keep them safe, but prison can also be a place where positive things can happen if you have the right environment. You have a captive audience so there is the opportunity to provide education, work, reduce dependence upon alcohol and drugs, and also challenge the thinking and behaviours that have led them to be in prison. Given that they are here, I have to make it the most positive and useful experience it can be.

**JB: What are the most important risks you manage?**

**LS:** Managing a prison is a big responsibility and I feel the weight of being in charge. That is a responsibility for prisoners, staff and others who come in and out. I have the responsibility for safety of all of those people. There is a risk that they may be hurt, injured, assaulted. The biggest risk is safety. Security is also essential, making sure prisoners are kept in custody and are where they are meant to be. That not only relies upon physical measures but also people following the procedures and having the right relationships. There is also the risk of missing the opportunity for change or getting it wrong, failing to make a difference to the lives of prisoners.

**JB: How much power do you feel you have to shape your team and the prison? Who do you share power with? What constrains you?**

**LS:** 'Power' is a loaded word. For me it feels less like 'power' and more like responsibility for what is in my control. For example, I am one of the newest managers at Huntercombe and I have only been involved in selecting two of the team since I arrived. In effect they have got me and I have got them. I can shape the team but I can't select and create a team. I can set out what I want to achieve and how I want to do it. That creates an environment where everyone, including me, can do their best. I feel more of a responsibility for shaping the prison so it can be most effective. I share this with everyone else. I have tools such as 'poor performance' procedures, same as everyone else and sometimes the ultimate decision falls to me, such as dismissing someone. All of those decisions I am accountable for and can be challenged on, so it's not that I have absolute power. I rely more on persuading and influencing people rather than having control over them.

With prisoners, it is also about responsibility. I cannot control their actions, I cannot make them choose a direction if they don't want to change. For me it is about creating an environment where people are able to comply, feel safe to do so, and take the opportunities that are available. Equally, those who don't want to have to face consequences and there are tools and processes to deal with that too.

I am constrained by national policies which I have to comply with. There are also financial pressures which mean I can't do all of the things I would like to for staff and prisoners. I have to work within that.

**JB: What role do you have in shaping the experience of prisoners? Do you have much interaction directly with them? Has this changed in recent years?**

**LS:** I have less daily contact than when I was in uniform, but strangely more than I did as a functional head. I try to have as much interaction as I can do. It is important to be out and about interacting, observing, being present and available. I want to be able to see things as they are and as they happen. My role is to make sure that the physical environment is right, such as showers, meals, services are in place and we have a positive impact on the prisoners' experience. More importantly, my job is to set the tone, to create a culture where there are clear standards of behaviour, people know what they are expected to do and why.

There has to be a consequence for those who break the rules, as well as protection from those who may be a danger to others.

**JB: Are prisons places where prisoners can change their lives? What role do you have in influencing that?**

**LS:** Prisons can and should be, but they aren't always. Most managers feel that. There is always more that could be done given a free hand and the resources to achieve it. Prisons and the act of imprisonment can be damaging, but our role is to make sure that damage is minimised and the experience of imprisonment is turned into a positive. For some people, of course, their prison experience can be very harmful.

**JB: Has the role of financial and performance management changed in your day to day role?**

**LS:** The language has changed as has the emphasis. It has moved from 'performance' to 'delivery'. The previous competition strategies were about poor performance and driving an improvement in performance through market testing. The language of 'delivery' is more about performance with a purpose, we are delivering a service that people require rather than just putting on a performance in order to be viewed as a successful organisation. It feels that there is less focus on targets and more on doing the right things and achieving the right outcomes. That sits better with me.

With finance, I have a very good business partner who gives me sound advice, knows what I can and can't do and helps me in decision making. I rely upon that individual and our working relationship. Resources are limited so I don't have much discretion, it's more about making decisions about least worst options about what I won't spend money on, rather than making positive decisions about investment to improve our service.

**JB: How do you get people to do what you want? What is the right kind of relationship between staff and managers? Is this reflected in how you manage your staff and how your managers manage you?**

**LS:** You can't control what people do and how they behave, but you can create the right environment so that people feel able to engage. The first issue is that it is important that I understand, and can explain, why I want someone to do something and what is in it for them. Sometimes there won't be anything in it for them, but I still have to persuade them of why they should do it. Most people are sensible, rational, want the prison to be effective and want to be part of

something worthwhile. Sometimes there are bigger corporate messages about what is going to happen and you are not able to persuade them but you still have to explain that this is what is going to happen and this is why. People have to have confidence that I am in charge and I know what I am doing, so that they trust that when I explain what we have to do, that there is a reason for that and I am only asking because it is right to do so.

The relationship also needs to be built with a team. They need to know me and I need to know who they are and what they are about. They also need to feel that I will be honest and treat them fairly, not ask them to do anything unreasonable or unsafe and not expect

more from them than they are able to give. I try to build good relationships so that my team feel that they are listened to, that I trust them to do a good job and will give them support when they need it.

**JB: Do you have relationships with other organisations and the local community? What is the significance of these relationships? How do you approach them?**

**LS:** I've met with the senior police commander and had an article in the local press, but Huntercombe is a bit tucked away. We are in the community but not directly linked to it, because of our population, but I am working hard to try to raise

the profile and build connections.

We have organisations such as education and health where there are established relationships. At Huntercombe we also have a particular relationship with the Home Office Enforcement and Immigration Team. That is relatively new and we are working hard to understand each others objectives and work together to achieve what we both need to do. With all of those partners I rely upon them to deliver and whether they do or not will impact enormously on the business here. I need to know what their aims and objectives are, ensure that these align with mine, and when things go wrong I need to know about that because it has an impact upon prisoners and their experience, which is my overall responsibility. The partnership must be based upon good communication, sharing information and involving each other in decisions. Individual relationships also make a difference. I have worked with individuals in other organisations who have been fantastic, really motivated and they have built good

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bridges with my staff. I have also worked with people who don't do that and the partnership has been difficult. I try to be respectful of individuals and their organisations and build a relationship where we can both achieve what we need.

**JB: How have prisons changed during your working life?**

**LS:** Yes. I have worked in prisons for nineteen years. There are now more prisoners and prisons are much busier places. There is more activity and more opportunity for prisoners. It feels that there is more focus on the experience of prisoners and what it means to them rather than just process and custody. There are less staff, but we also work more efficiently than we used to. One of the main changes I see is that our relationships are more professional than they used to be. I walk around with my eyes and ears open and what I see now is more professional and appropriate relationships between staff and prisoners and between staff of different grades. That contributes to an environment where people can work more effectively. It feels that it is more co-operative and less hostile in terms of staff-manager relationships too. There is also more interaction with the outside world and we have more partner organisations working with prisoners. When I started prison staff were delivering education and health care services, that change feels healthier. There are also changes that are more frustrating, which are often outside of my control, such as my budget, media and public interest.

**JB: Can you say something about the relationship between your world at establishment level and what is going on above you? Do you feel 'in tune' with the direction the Prison Service is taking? Do you feel you belong to an organisation you are proud to be part of, or that you are comfortable with how the organisation is modernising?**

**LS:** I am new to this, having been a Governor for only nine months, but I do feel proud of what I do. That doesn't mean that I agree with and welcome all of the changes, but I know why they are happening. That is important because if I know why they are happening I can work through it. We have had to focus on the organisation in recent years, with changes to the structures, pay, how we are organised. I feel we have focussed on that and less time thinking about the work

itself; what we are doing and why, what is important for prisoners and the outcomes, and the quality of the work we do. There have been some unintended, and unhelpful, consequences along the way. For example, the impact of *Fair and Sustainable* on my staff has produced some difficult choices for people. 'New ways of working' at Huntercombe has staff all over the prison throughout the day, so they are on one wing for unlock, somewhere else for the morning, somewhere else at lunch time. That makes it difficult for those staff to build relationships with prisoners and their colleagues. Larger staff groups means lots of cross deployment, which most staff dislike. Staff always used to say that one of the best things about working in the Prison Service was the camaraderie and the good relationships with their colleagues. I don't hear that much now and many staff say they really miss that because they are not so much part of a team now, they are here, there and everywhere, they feel transient. That has an impact and could be an issue for us going forward.

We have a high turnover of staff here and we have lost a lot of experience with that. People from Huntercombe are able to get other well paid jobs in the local area. Our pay rates just aren't attractive enough to keep them. That is a real concern. In the new world we might see a higher turnover of staff, people coming and going. That has consequences, you lose experience and it is harder to maintain relationships and engage with a constantly changing staff group. My concern is that this will be a risk for decency, there is less time to spend with prisoners and people may be distracted by all of the changes that affect them.

At Huntercombe specifically, I also have a concern about the experience of foreign national prisoners. The changes in resettlement arrangements mean that there is a lack of services for those being deported. I want to see what we can do outside of the new arrangements with Community Rehabilitation Companies to meet this need.

**JB: What significance do issues of race and gender have in your working life?**

**LS:** I personally have never felt unequal due to being a woman in the Prison Service, other than specific one-off instances with individual colleagues, which would happen in any organisation. I have always felt I have been treated equally by the service and had equal

I walk around with my eyes and ears open and what I see now is more professional and appropriate relationships between staff and prisoners and between staff of different grades.

opportunities for progression. I have three young children and for a period of six years I worked part-time. I was very fortunate to be allowed to do that and I was supported by colleagues and the Governors I worked for at the time. I was enabled to work in that way and then supported to return to work full-time. My worry is that it would be difficult for a Governor to do that now; to have someone on their senior management team working in that way, because of the constraints of our structures.

For race, at Huntercombe, which is a foreign national prison, it does highlight how complex issues of culture can be. We have more than eighty nationalities here and over forty languages spoken. Staff are experienced and patient, they take care to ensure people are understood, can communicate and get the care they need. But like many prisons, we do still have issues where Black prisoners are over-represented in the use of force, adjudications and other outcomes. We work hard to understand the reasons for that and address it, including engaging with prisoners themselves.

**JB: How do you view political and media discourse about imprisonment?**

**LS:** In my view the media representation is not usually done with any intention to improve the circumstances, it is not intended to build understanding. Prisons are always going to be intriguing to people, but the media is more concerned about sensational aspects, so they want to know about particular prisoners, or present a view that prisons are easy or brutal even. It is about creating a story rather than identifying genuine issues and building public

understanding. In regard to politicians, they often talk about prisons when there is a particular reason, such as presenting an approach towards tackling crime, or responding to a particular event. That is the focus rather than changing people's lives. While it is important that as a public sector organisation we respond to public opinion, there isn't enough emphasis on helping the public to understand what prison is like and what the Prison Service can do for the good.

**JB: What are the achievements that you feel best reflect your approach to managing prisons? Can you describe your work at its best?**

**LS:** Ask me again next year. A lot of the good things here were in place long before I arrived. The establishment has been through a huge amount of change in recent years, including changing role, but it has remained a high performing and effective prison. That is down to my predecessors and many of those who are still here now. I want to build on that and sustain it. I want to engage with staff so that they feel valued and supported, and build our resettlement services for prisoners.

The foreign national group have not been included in the potential benefits of the new Through the Gate arrangements. They do have anxieties about their futures and need help with the basics of resettlement including housing and employment, whether they are being released into this country or another. That helps reduce the risk of them reoffending, but I also feel a moral responsibility to help those people in the same way that we would help those in this country. If I can put those services in place, that will be my work at its best.