

Volume 3 | Number 2 | June 2015

scottish justice matters

POLICING

Reflections on developments and
changes to policing in Scotland





A PRISON GOVERNOR

Rhona Hotchkiss, Governor of HMP Dumfries

Monday

Popped in to our lifeskills centre to see how the new Tenancy and Citizenship course is going. Developed in Dumfries by two of our own officers, the course has been accredited by the SQA and is in demand across the prison estate and third sector. The aim is to help people acquire skills that most of us learned from our parents or as we went through the process of leaving home, going to university, getting our first jobs and flats. Relationships, Sexual Health, Cooking on a Budget, How to Look After a Home, Basic DIY, Being a Good Neighbour, Budgeting, Opening a Bank Account – pretty standard stuff – and the kind of things most of our guys never had the chance to learn because they were too busy trying to stay alive while slowly killing themselves. Lots of them are learning now.

Tuesday

I had a conversation with a man convicted of truly dreadful crimes who says he didn't do it. I can only begin to imagine what it's like to be an innocent person in prison. I have no idea how many people there are in that situation, but it would be naive to think there are none. I haven't met many whose claims of innocence I thought were credible. Not many - but still - one or two. All I can do is trust that their lawyers are working for them, that there are systems in place to review their cases and that if they are innocent, the awful weight of that injustice doesn't crush them before they can prove it.

Wednesday

The 2nd edition of our local prisoner-run newsletter *Beans with Everything* is in preparation. Asked to write an introduction for it, I took as my inspiration an article from one of the Red Tops, bemoaning the lack of punishment in our 'holiday camp' prisons and complaining that 'Scottish Jail Bosses' had rejected the tougher approach being taken in English prisons. The article failed to make any connection between that headline and others highlighting the 'crisis' in the English system: increasing numbers, fewer staff, increased self-harm, rises in violence and assaults on staff. The writer claims that the gulf between public perception of what prisons should be doing and what they are doing has never been wider. I don't think that's true. The 'public' in my experience, are more reasonable and more practical, especially when they see prisons for themselves. They want the heartache and misery of crime to stop and they want us to do whatever we can to help that happen. Unlike some tabloids, they're interested in what works.

Thursday

Spent about an hour today, dealing with a complex complaint. I've been with the Prison Service for six years and can honestly say I have never worked with anyone who resented the fact that prisoners complain. Everyone recognises it is quite correct that people who have few of the usual outlets available to them have access to an open and transparent means of airing frustrations and grievances. However, there are a few prisoners in the system - no more than a handful - who are not interested in right, wrong, improvement or progress. Their aim is to cause maximum disruption to 'the system' and in the process, prove they are smarter than us. In our rush to ensure that everyone has access to every possible avenue of complaint, we are facilitating truly awful behaviour by that handful and ultimately, allowing them to behave in ways that would not be tolerated 'outside'. Is it a price worth paying for the good complaints system we have? Of course it is. I wonder though if we can't find a better system, one that is more finely nuanced and able to discriminate between protecting the vulnerable and fuelling frank megalomania. Good luck with that one to anyone who wants to try!

Friday

I showed a group of criminology Masters students round the prison, encouraging them to speak to staff and prisoners. One man aged 26 told them that he had been in and out of prison numerous times since the age of 17 and that it never used to bother him – he just kept his head down and did his time. "This time", he said, "it's different, it's been fantastic – I've never been given opportunities like this in jail before and now I don't want to come back because I think I can do better". I enjoy my job every day, but on days like this, I love it.