

CS36: HMP BIRMINGHAM PRIVATISATION, MOBILISATION AND TRANSFORMATION

by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball

Context

Prison Dialogue (PD) had a long-standing relationship with G4S (and previously with GSL, which had been acquired by G4S), who operated a number of existing private prisons in the UK. In 2009, the UK government announced their intention to solicit tenders from private companies, not-for-profit organisations and public sector entities for the operation of a number of new and existing prisons, including HMP Birmingham (also known as Winson Green), which at the time was widely recognised to be an institution that was struggling under its current prison service management.

G4S was among the organisations which submitted a bid to operate the prison. G4S recognised the significant cultural challenges already facing the prison which would need to be addressed by the winning bidder, and the likelihood that these would be exacerbated by the so-called 'market testing' process, particularly if this resulted in operation of the prison being transferred to a private sector company. In particular, the Prison Officers Association (POA), the union representing most Birmingham staff, had a clearly stated policy of opposition to privatisation, and had threatened to take industrial action should this be the outcome. Given this, G4S included provision in their bid for the active involvement of PD in facilitating cultural change at the prison and helping mitigate the risks associated with the prevailing organisational dynamics. At the end of March '11, G4S was announced as the winning bidder, and handover of the prison's operation to G4S would take place on 1st Oct '11.

Aims and Objectives

PD's objective was to contribute to the successful transformation of Birmingham prison into a more humane and effective institution by engaging with prison management, staff and prisoners, facilitating and supporting the longer-term cultural changes being sought, and helping manage the risks and impediments to these.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

PD committed to work in HMP Birmingham with G4S for 2 years from April '11 to March '13. This covered: the 'Mobilisation' phase, which was a preparatory period from April '11 to the end of September during which the prison remained under public sector operation; the 'Transition' phase which followed G4S's takeover of responsibility for the prison's operation and extended into early 2012 throughout which period the established public sector regime continued to be employed; and then the 'Transformation' phase, during which G4S sought to implement and embed their own way of running the prison, not least with a substantially reduced workforce, and achieve some of the broader changes in culture, behaviours and relationships they were seeking.

Principal PD activities during the period consisted of:

- Maintaining a regular on-site presence at the prison, enabling continuous interactions with staff, prison managers, and other G4S personnel
- Undertaking a programme of workshops with staff to provide them with an opportunity to explore different perspectives on their situation and the changes taking place
- Undertaking workshops with prisoners to help provide them with a better appreciation of the changes taking place and manage their expectations
- Providing coaching and support to G4S management inside and outside the prison
- Facilitating monthly 'Alignment and Reflection' meetings during the Mobilisation phase for the G4S Mobilisation team, off-site at the PD offices, as a means of ensuring coherence of the different streams of activity underway, raising and resolving issues, and managing risks. Following G4S's take over of operations, these meetings metamorphosed into the 'Transformation Board', charged with overseeing and guiding the progressive transformation of the prison.
- Documentation of the transition activities and assistance to G4S in identifying lessons learnt from the process
- Active participation in the management of specific issues and risks. Perhaps most significant among these was the threat on the part of the POA to take industrial action in response to the decision to transfer the prison to G4S, which was described as 'disgraceful' by the POA national chairman, who refused to rule out strike action, even though strikes by

prison service staff are illegal. At the prison itself, hundreds of officers held an impromptu meeting outside the gates expressing their anger at the move. The local POA branch chairman stated that *“Our union has a policy of industrial action, up to and including strike action, should a public sector prison be handed to a private sector operator. The policy of the union will be followed by this branch.”* The Justice Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, confirmed that military personnel had been placed on standby to provide cover in case prison officers did decide to go on strike. PD provided support and guidance to G4S on the crisis and were able to broker a sufficiently good relationship with the POA, particularly as a result of a meeting they facilitated at the PD offices in Chipping Campden involving G4S and national and local union representatives, to mitigate the risk of industrial action. The work undertaken by PD throughout the Mobilisation Phase contributed to improving staff relationships throughout the period, such that the actual handover of the prison to G4S was widely described as a ‘non event’.

Outcomes

PD were acknowledged to have made a major contribution to what was widely considered to be a much smoother transition from the public sector to G4S than was generally anticipated. Subsequent to the transfer of responsibility for its operation to G4S, PD also continued to play an important role in helping to bring about and support some of the significant changes being sought at the prison, and thus making it a ‘safer, more secure, and more purposeful place’ than previously. This is illustrated by the prison’s scores on the Prison Rating System (PRS), staff and prisoner surveys, and other independent reviews, which have all pointed to an increase in prison efficiency and performance, and which in part reflect the improvements in prison culture, behaviours and attitudes, as well as better relationships between managers and staff, and staff and prisoners.

Learning

The Birmingham experience illustrates that while Dialogue is critical in building relationships such that breakdowns and major crises are avoided, the importance of this and the effort required to bring this about can easily be overlooked or downplayed, given that no crisis took place. To some extent, despite their importance, these activities are invisible, in a way that responding

to a crisis once it has occurred is not, and even though such an outcome, (where a breakdown takes place and then has to be resolved, with all the disruption this entails) is a much inferior one to prevention. Another key learning from the activity was the importance of appropriate mechanisms and structures being in place to ensure alignment of and communications between all the different organisational sub-units involved in a multi-faceted change initiative such as this one.

A question which this project required PD to confront concerned their attitude to highly politically sensitive issues such as prison privatisation. The approach taken here was practical and humanist rather than ideological. PD is neither for nor against prison privatisation. The key is to ensure that the outcome of any changes occurring, regardless of the form they take (which could equally be a transfer from the private sector to the public sector), is an improvement in the effectiveness of the prison in terms of safety and security and their success in rehabilitating the prisoners in their care so that they do not reoffend on release, to the overall benefit of society.

Related to this, PD learned the importance and value of taking a stance to be on everyone's side – to be supportive of all parties and encourage them to make the best of the potential in their situations. This is not the same as adopting a neutral stance, which implies a degree of distance and disengagement, in contrast with the involved and proactive one adopted by PD.