

Vicky O'Dea, director of Ashfield young offenders' institution, is this year's People's Champion at the CBI/Real FD Human Capital Awards. She explains how she has led the transformation of the Serco-run prison. By **Jon Scott**





The timing could not be more apt. The day of my visit to Ashfield, the Serco-run young offenders' institution (YOI) near Bristol that holds around 400 boys aged between 15 and 18, coincided with the unauthorised strike by the Prison Officers' Association. While public sector governors and the few non-striking officers are struggling to serve meals throughout the land, staff at Ashfield are carrying on as normal.

Coincidence perhaps – but the staff at Ashfield are running what has been hailed as the best YOI in the country by chief inspector of prisons Anne Owers, following the latest inspection in September 2006. Commenting on the standard of education, she said: “The amount and quality of activity available is a model of what ought to be expected and available for all 15-to-18-year-olds.” Owers also noted the “excellent” healthcare provision – especially for the 92 per cent of boys suffering from mental health problems – and recognised Ashfield’s “many areas of good and innovative practice”.

But it wasn't always like this. Only five years ago, Ashfield was on its knees. Self-harm was horrifically prevalent, staff and prisoners felt unsafe – a perception borne out by the level of assaults – and, according to one spot check, less than one-quarter of the young people attended lessons. In short, everything shouted “unhealthy prison”. Things got so bad that the Youth Justice Board, which commissions and purchases custodial places for juvenile offenders, limited how many children it sent there. Summing up an inspection in 2002, Owers

PRISON BREAK THROUGH

said it was probably the most depressing report she had issued. "The scale of the problems will not make it easy to transform Ashfield into a safe and positive juvenile establishment," she warned.

Yet that is what Vicky O'Dea has achieved since being appointed director by Martin Narey, then director-general of the Prison Service, in October 2002. Five months earlier, he had wrested control of Ashfield from Premier Custodial Group – the company that was running the prison, and that Serco half-owned – and temporarily installed a four-strong Prison Service team. It was Ashfield's fourth leadership in three years. He then returned it to Premier with the proviso that he chose its director.

Five transformative years on, O'Dea and her employer Serco – which acquired the remaining 50 per cent of Premier in July 2003 – are trumpeted as the ultimate proof that private prisons work.

Greater autonomy

O'Dea is a genial, grounded Welshwoman with a penchant for cutting through the procedural protocol that clogs up much of the Prison Service. For her, the turnaround is due to common sense: supporting and encouraging staff, meeting targets, fostering trust and respect and, above all, encouraging an entrepreneurial culture. Only towards the conclusion of our meeting do I point out that these are, in essence, the four principles enshrined by Serco. O'Dea feigns surprise, but does so convincingly. If such values

Private prisons in England and Wales

Private prisons are a recent phenomenon in England and Wales, and they still account for only 11 of the 139 establishments. The first, called the Wolds and operated by Group 4 Remand Services, opened in 1992, a year before the Prison Service became an agency, giving it greater managerial freedom. The 11 private prisons are run by four different companies: Serco has four, GSL and UKDS run three apiece, and G4S Justice Services operates one. Not all private prisons are high performers. Rye Hill, for example, received a particularly poor Prison Service Inspectorate report and has experienced a number of serious problems.

Despite prisons' purported focus on rehabilitation, recidivism remains very high: 75 per cent within two years among young offenders and 60 per cent among adults. Even so, another 8,000 prison places were announced in February, and half are expected to be provided by the private sector. Many, but not all, of those places will come from two new prisons planned for London and Merseyside, most likely using the private finance initiative. As with current arrangements, once the 25-year contract expires, the buildings will become the property of the Prison Service.

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pervade the prison, she says, it's because they reflect her own core beliefs, not simply because Serco demands it.

Betraying scant nostalgia for her 19 years in the Prison Service, she says that she finds working for a private company "liberating". "Don't get me wrong, there is a lot that's good about the public service: staff training and development, race relations, offending behaviour programmes. And it does teach you to use your resources well, human or otherwise. But everything is made so difficult. If you need something, you spend time writing a business plan, persuading the area manager, and so on. Now, I just go and buy it."

At first, such spontaneity seemed odd. O'Dea recalls a seminal moment soon after her arrival when she was showing around a Serco board member and mentioned how she'd love to soften the staff uniform. "Why don't you?" he asked. "Only then did it sink in that I no longer had to consult the Prison Service," says O'Dea, whose hands-on senior managers also now wear the uniform. Today, O'Dea is used to the space and trust that Serco grants within its clearly defined operating structure. In fact, the company insists on devolved management across all its divisions.

O'Dea says that she feels at home with Serco's culture. That's perhaps unsurprising given that with 90 per cent of its business in the public service, the company employs many former public sector senior managers. Indeed, O'Dea's line manager, John Smith,

spent more than 20 years in the Prison Service, even leading a successful bid to keep Manchester prison in the public sector. He now oversees Ashfield, Serco's four adult prisons, its secure training centre for young people, and two immigration centres.

The resources and support that a private company can provide are also important. That might be Serco's new SAP finance system, external legal advice, or creating multi-disciplinary teams at short notice for specific projects. An example is the bid Ashfield made to the YJB four years ago to build and staff its Learning and Resources Centre.

High achievers

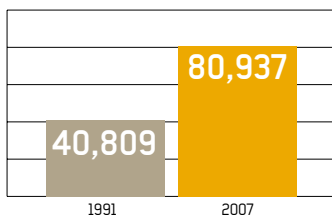
Reams of achieved and surpassed key performance targets tell much of Ashfield's current state. The majority are shared with the state sector: a minimum daily average of ten hours out of their cell for each young person, and a minimum of 25 hours' classroom-based education a week. Ashfield's contract with the Prison Service and the YJB includes more than 100 performance measures, reviewed on a quarterly or annual basis. For every breached baseline, the prison receives a fine. For every unreported breach, that fine is multiplied by five. "As a private provider we are under far more scrutiny than our public sector colleagues," says O'Dea. "We have two full-time Home Office controllers monitoring delivery, plus one part-time YJB monitor, so there is no escape."

£32,888

Cost per prisoner place
in England and Wales

Source: HM Prison Service (2005-06)

Prison population in England and Wales



Source: HM Prison Service/Home Office

“This year, for instance, we got £150,000 to £200,000 back from Serco as a bonus for the prison’s performance, which averages out at about £400 per employee,” she says. “That’s not how I divide it, though. We have a focus group comprising staff from all departments, which recommends an amount for each of their peers to the senior management team. They can be tough, especially on some of the long-term sick. Equally, they tend to reward those who go that extra mile. Senior managers may tweak their recommendations, but in essence it’s their call.”

Winning ways

Just in case employees are not sure how they are viewed by management and peers, O’Dea runs an employee of the month scheme – the winner gets £100 and the best car-parking space for a month – and makes numerous nominations for awards, on behalf of individuals and the prison. Of note is the Merrill Lynch Raising Achievement in Young People Award 2007, which hailed Ashfield’s strategy of reintegrating youngsters into the community through vocational placements with partners such as Bristol City

Council, Avon & Somerset Fire Brigade and the Chef’s Forum. None of the 15 young men who have temporary placements with Bristol City Council has reoffended which, given Ashfield’s average reoffending rate of 80 per cent within two years, makes impressive reading. And this month O’Dea herself was named the People’s Champion at the CBI/*Real FD* Human Capital Awards.

It’s a significant difference from the allocations department O’Dea once ran in Swansea prison. There, when her team achieved a stunning 100 per cent in the

general audit, O’Dea celebrated by inviting colleagues to the unveiling of a framed certificate. But hardly anyone turned up. “There’s so much cynicism in the public service. The difference here is the sincerity – we all want to help each other.” This is what is especially impressive about O’Dea’s tenure: how she is fashioning that team spirit.

Quite a few of the senior team that O’Dea picked to work alongside her came from the Prison Service. Ask prison officers on the landings about their prison careers, however, and it seems most have only worked at

Prisoners per 100,000 people (2006)



Source: International Centre for Prison Studies, King’s College London



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Ashfield, and then only for a couple of years. It might not seem long, but staff churn stands at around 17 per cent, having plummeted from nearly three times that. Sickness is also down, to levels that must arouse envy among many Prison Service governors. The Prison Service's overall sickness target is 12.8 days a year per staff member in 2006-07. O'Dea's current figure is five.

Strong support

By her own admission, she does little different: she supports decent staff and turns the screw on the few who abuse the system. It's just that, once again, she can exercise discretion, granting extra days for recovery, or adhering to the shorter phases (relative to the Prison Service) required before pay can be halved, then stopped. "It's not all Shangri-La, I do have to be tough," she says. "But whistle-blowing is big here – we now have that critical mass."

In other words, O'Dea enjoys the groundswell of support that anyone running a prison simply must have. Yet she admits that not everything she has done has been universally popular. "As any governor will tell you, there are traditionally three areas from which to keep away: staff lockers, car parking and the smoking policy. However, I wanted a clean, healthy environment for all and so wanted to ban smoking. I knew that if I told the YJB, the Prison Service, or even Serco my plan, they'd have feared a riot."

So she simply introduced the ban



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overnight. There was no riot. In fact, the boys were the least of her worries: they were just told that policy had changed. The staff were her main concern, hence a stockpiled supply of nicotine patches and acupuncture treatments. Two and a half years on, it seems bizarre to most that they ever could smoke at work. For once, that staff churn was welcome, as it helped erase memories.

Creative thinking

For O'Dea, Ashfield is work in progress, and ideas still flow forth. Witness the replacement of in-cell breakfast packs with communal dining, and the controversial introduction of boxing. Now, however, she can also rely on her staff to generate ideas, and refine hers. In fact, it has got to the

point where O'Dea is sometimes the conservative one, trying to rein in her employees' creativity. "I like people to challenge me, to force me to consider an issue from a different angle," she says. "As I keep saying to staff, it's always easy to say no. It's far harder to say yes and to find a way of making it happen."

This embedded culture of change is behind the proposed transformation of the segregation unit – or reorientation unit as Serco terms it – into a unit for resettlement, one of the few areas criticised in the 2006 inspection report. At present, this is being delayed by YJB concerns that if a riot broke out at nearby Stoke Heath YOI, the culprits could not be sent to Ashfield as per procedure.

"My answer is we'd deal with them as we do other upset young people here," says O'Dea. "Right now we have two young men who have smashed up the cell they share, and we've left them there. They're safe because their cell bell still works, and they have running water. By not giving them a new cell, they may learn to respect property."

In the same report, Owers says Ashfield's managers are to be congratulated on the improvement brought about. So is Ashfield's success down to its governor and her team, or to its private status? O'Dea does not answer immediately. Instead she canvasses colleagues' opinions as we tour the prison. Later on, though, it's clear she has mulled it over. "I suppose it's like what Al Gore said about needing good people and good systems," she says. "Without my team, I could not have achieved what we have done. But nor could I have achieved it as easily in a public prison."

Jon Scott is a freelance journalist and a former governor of Feltham young offenders' institution.

Working together

G4S' DRUG INTERVENTION PROGRAMME IN SOUTH WALES

Privatisation has greatly improved the quality of links between the prison service in South Wales and drug treatment programmes. G4S provides a range of joined-up services, including the Criminal Justice Integrated Teams (CJIT) services within the Swansea probation area. It also works with the public, private and voluntary sectors in South Wales to engage with clients from the point of arrest through the entire judicial process. If a client receives a custodial sentence, the CJIT caseworker liaises with the holding prison to ensure continuity between the treatment and support plan in prison, and the personalised care plan after release.

Sue O'Leary, drugs education manager at the G4S-run Parc Prison in South Wales, welcomes the continuity. "This has made life easier for us. It makes working together and developing protocols much easier for our Counselling Advice Referral, Assessment and Throughcare (CARAT) teams and for prison workers," she says.

After a prisoner is released, the CJIT caseworker supports the individual through a 14-week programme, which offers intensive interventions, including one-on-one counselling, and practical help to find housing and employment. O'Leary argues that the privatisation of the process has made it more efficient. "In Parc Prison we now have a directly recruited CARAT team. This means it is easier for us to manage performance criteria than some prisons that are tied into recruiting from agencies. One problem for public sector prisons struggling with standards is managing staff provided by agencies."