



How I got here

PRISON GOVERNOR **Ali Barker** ON HER CAREER JOURNEY

It was while studying geography at the University of Oxford that Ali Barker found herself thinking about two potential career paths: becoming a social worker or a role in the prison service. After enrolling on a training scheme at HMP Pentonville in London, she has spent the last 20 years working in prisons up and down the country, rising to the rank of governor. She currently works at HMP Bedford.

I WAS AT UNIVERSITY WHEN I SAW A POSTER IN THE CAREERS OFFICE ADVERTISING ROLES IN THE PRISON SERVICE. It was quite explicit – it said: ‘Burglars, rapists and murderers. But they’re people, too. Can you work with them?’ And I instantly thought, ‘Yes.’ We often think of victims and perpetrators of crime as two separate categories, but the reality of why people commit crimes can be more nuanced – any of us could make a split-second decision that might lead us to end up in prison.

THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS INVOLVED LOTS OF ROLE PLAY, to see how you might de-escalate and resolve conflict, which I found really engaging. For example, somebody might shout at you and they monitor how you respond. After that, there are a few months of training

actually it’s about being able to listen and empathise, and constructively challenge prisoners. Society and the prison service are recognising more and more that women have a lot of skills to bring to working in the system. I don’t necessarily think these skills are gendered – the job is guiding people to develop. There’s positive and negative feedback, but you have to maintain a good relationship. **AFTER THREE YEARS, IN WHICH I SERVED AS AN OFFICER,** then principal officer, then junior governor, I became the deputy governor of HMP Coldingley in Surrey. Then I was given a governor role at HMP Send, and I’m now at my sixth prison as governor. A big part of the role is line managing and supervising the senior leadership team, but also establishing clear management structures – every prisoner has a key worker responsible for their welfare and an offender manager responsible for their sentence management.

I’LL BEGIN EACH DAY WITH A MORNING OPERATIONAL BRIEFING WITH MANAGERS. I’ll attend meetings to ensure we’re delivering on safety, security and staff training, and see external partners, such as the police chief constable and the NHS.

‘It’s in everyone’s best interests to develop good relationships’

before you go to a prison for the first time and begin a week-long induction.

ON MY FIRST DAY OF TRAINING, I was introduced to the prison alongside 10 male new starters. As the only woman, I was keen to prove I could do the job, so I was embarrassed when, at the end of the day, I had to ask for their help as my car battery had gone flat. I’ve always felt safe and supported working in prisons, because you’re working with known risks. We have general alarms, radios and body-worn cameras, but most importantly, vigilant and ever-ready colleagues.

OVER THE 23 YEARS I’VE WORKED IN PRISONS, it has become increasingly common for women to be officers, managers and governors. There are a lot more women joining the prison service – around 40% of governors are women, a very different picture from when I first started. A big misconception is that the job is mostly physical when

PEOPLE THINK THAT PRISONS MUST BE DARK AND DEPRESSING BUT THERE IS A LOT OF BANTER, chatter and jokes between the staff and the prisoners. It’s in everyone’s best interests to develop good relationships and make life as pleasant as possible because it’s those relationships that help the prison to run smoothly.

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS IN PRISONS HAS REALLY GROWN OVER THE COURSE OF MY CAREER. Every prison now has a dedicated mental health team, and there are established systems to assess and support prisoners at risk of self-harm or suicide. It’s my job to ensure we do all we can to support that person. **I COULD NEVER GET BORED IN THIS JOB.** Every day is different, and there’s the potential of being able to make a difference to someone’s life every single day. The most fulfilling part is seeing people take positive steps.

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