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PRISONS AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

## EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

### Sue McAllister

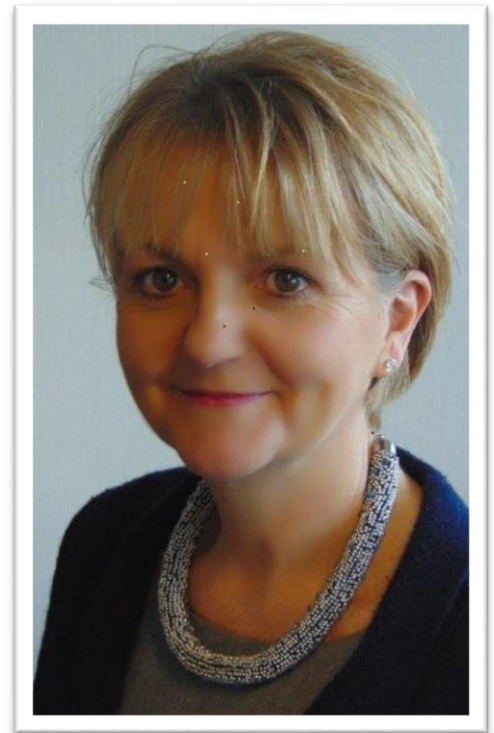
EuroPris talks with Sue McAllister, Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service

Sue McAllister was appointed Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) in July 2012.

She grew up in South Yorkshire and attended St Andrews University, from where she graduated with a MA in Arabic. She joined the Civil Service after university and, following three years working in GCHQ in Cheltenham, joined HMPS as an Assistant Governor trainee in 1986. Sue worked in a variety of roles in prisons in England, including as Governor of HMP Gartree, a prison for adult male life sentenced prisoners, and of HMYOI Onley, which housed juvenile and young adult offenders aged between 15 and 21. She also worked in policy roles in the Prison Service and the MOJ and as Head of the Public Sector Bids Unit before leaving what was then the National Offender Management Service in August 2011.

As Director General of NIPS, Sue is the Accounting Officer with responsibility for an operating budget of around £149m and an estate comprising three prison establishments, a Prison Service College and Prison Service Headquarters. She provides leadership to around 1960 staff. In 2014, Sue also assumed responsibility for the Youth Justice Agency as Director of a newly formed Reducing Offending Directorate.

Sue is married with two adult children and, when time permits, likes to travel, garden and do just enough running to stay moderately fit.



#### **EuroPris: Could you tell us about your career path? Why have you chosen to work in the prison and correctional field?**

**Sue McAllister:** I have worked in the Prison service for almost 30 years, spending most of that time in England but, since 2012, as Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS).

I began my career as an Assistant Governor and rose through the governor grades to become Governor of an adult male prison for life sentenced prisoners, then of a centre for juvenile and young adult offenders. Later, I was an Area Manager responsible for 12 prisons, and I have worked in policy and strategic roles in The Ministry of Justice.

After leaving the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) in 2011 I was recruited to the post of DG in NIPS in 2012.

I have always worked in public service and believe that, working in the prison and corrections field, I can make a contribution to wider society. When I applied to join the Prison Service, I know very little about prisons, nor about what the job of a prison governor would entail. I have never regretted the decision I made to join and I am still proud to work in this area of public service.



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**How many Prison establishments do you oversee?**

In Northern Ireland we have three prison establishments, two for adult male prisoners and a third shared site for young adults, aged between 18 and 21, and women of all ages.

**How many prisoners are in prison at the moment in Northern Ireland?**

Our total population, at 15 February 2016, is 1454. This figure is about 300 less than at the same date last year. This is partly due to industrial action by some lawyers, which has created a backlog in the courts in Northern Ireland, and partly due to work we have been doing with other agencies to reduce the overall prison population.

**How many staff do you manage?**

The total number of staff in NIPS is 1100. This figure represents prison officer grades, other staff working in prisons, and colleagues who work in HQ.

**What are in your opinion the required attributes and qualifications of someone wanting to be a prison officer?**

In my view, formal qualifications are less important in a prison officer than the right attitudes, values and the desire to support people to change positively. For many years in NI, the focus of the prison service was on security and control but now, as we reform our service post conflict we require our prison officers to do a very different, more complex and challenging job. Prison Officers have to be positive role models for the prisoners in their care, they have to support and challenge prisoners to use their time in prison to address their offending behaviour, and to plan for their release back into the community. This requires the prison officer to show empathy, but to remain professional. They must be caring, but must remember their purpose and, probably most importantly, they have to demonstrate resilience, both physical and emotional, in what can be, a difficult, sometimes violent, environment.

**What is your opinion on the role of women in the European correctional field?**

I believe an individual's competence in, and suitability for, any role in the field of corrections should not be influenced by whether they are male or female.

With the right training, men and women can make equal, and valuable, contributions to our work. A workforce made up of both is crucial to a healthy prison, where the environment better reflects society outside the walls. Men and women can bring different attributes to the role of a prison officer, for example, but both can be effective and the right gender balance brings real benefits.

**What is the biggest concern with regards to security in prisons in your country?**

In Northern Ireland, prison officers are subject to threats from dissident groups, in some cases specific threats against individuals. In November 2012 one of our officers was murdered on his way to work; in total 30 prison staff have been killed since 1974.

This threat makes it difficult for us to recruit staff from some parts of our community, it means many prison officers feel unable to tell friends and neighbours and, in some cases family members, that they work in the prison service.



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**What do you consider to be the biggest achievements for your service in 2015? What challenges you had to overcome?**

In 2015, as we entered the final year of our four-year programme of reform, we delivered more transformation in NIPS. A secure college model to replace the traditional young offenders centre, a step-down house for women and more partnerships with all sectors to provide work placements and employment for our prisoners.

Some of the challenges we met will be familiar to others working in public sector prisons; less money, an aversion to risk that prevented us from moving as quickly as we would like and, still, some people in our service, and others outside, who resented and resisted the changes we were making. In Northern Ireland, we operate in a highly politicised environment, where prisons have a symbolic and ideological importance, and we have to deliver our reforms in a way which respects, and is able to navigate, this situation.

**What are the challenges for your service next year?**

Probably the greatest challenge for us in the coming year will be to continue to drive reform in our prisons, to support the reducing offending agenda, and to deliver improved outcomes for prisoners, with a reduced budget. Since 2011, our operating budget has reduced by more than 25%, allowing for inflation, and we have to reduce the operating costs by a further 7% this year. That will be a real challenge; until we have new buildings, which require fewer staff to run safely and which are more efficient in other ways, we may have to stop doing some of the work which we know impacts on safety, on reducing offending, and on the way we work with other organisations.

**In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for the European prison and correctional services at the moment?**

In common with other public services, prison services across Europe are likely to face the same challenges in operating with reduced budgets. Austerity is a reality for all of us working this field, and the need to make smarter decisions about what we do has never been greater. Robust data and evidence to underpin our planning will be crucial, as will an appetite for creativity and innovation to drive us to work in different ways, harnessing the skills and experience of all sectors and all stakeholders.

One of our challenges will be to identify, and remove, the bureaucracy that has made us sluggish, risk averse and reliant on too much governance, whilst still remaining accountable for the public money that we spend, and for the outcomes we deliver.

**What benefits do you see being linked to an organisation such as EuroPris?**

Belonging to the EuroPris family gives us access to knowledge and practice across Europe, and to colleagues who have a wide range of experiences in the criminal justice field. As a small service, we value being able to link into the data which are available and to have access to information about what works in other jurisdictions.

**Do your prisons engage with NGO's / Charities?**

NIPS currently spends £3,534K, about 3% of our operating budget on NGOs and charities. The voluntary and community sector has, historically, been important in NI, delivering valuable services to prisoners' families and working in partnership with NIPS staff in our prisons.



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Voluntary and community sector partners are active in delivering employment and mentoring services to prisoners both during their time in custody and after release and we work hard to maintain our relationships with other sectors.

**What are the most important personal satisfactions and dissatisfactions connected with your occupation? What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying? Most challenging? What do you like and not like about working in the correctional field?**

I find my job interesting, challenging and rewarding and feel I am doing something which really does make a contribution to society, specifically, in my current role, to helping to build a safer Northern Ireland. I work with a very talented and energising team of people, have the support of a forward thinking Minister of Justice, and am part of a proud prison service which has experienced troubled, dangerous and difficult times. As we reform our service, I feel fortunate to be leading colleagues in some genuinely ground breaking initiatives, for example in prison design, in our use of technology for prisoners and in our cross-government work to support desistance.

At a personal level, I find it most satisfying to spend time in prisons, talking to colleagues and prisoners. I spend time “back to the floor”, working alongside prison officers and experiencing at first-hand how the new ways of working feel for them and how they improve outcomes for prisoners.

**If you could be remembered for one thing whilst being in charge what would it be?**

I have been fortunate to be given the opportunity to build a strong and capable team, and I hope that all of us will be seen as the team that delivered a reformed prison service in Northern Ireland.

My personal contribution, as well as bringing the experience of 30 years working in this field, has been to build and nurture relationships with partner agencies, with organisations and with individuals, and to open our prisons to people who want to work with us, to help us to support prisoners to change and to become better citizens on release.

I believe I have given colleagues the permission to think differently, the confidence to take appropriate risks, knowing they have my support, and the appetite to be part of this new prison service, fit for a post-conflict Northern Ireland in the 21st century.