PRISON
REFORM
TRUST

Potential Unlocked:

building a sustainable prison workforce

Peter Dawson

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT)

PRT is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. It was founded in 1981 to inform and influence public debate on prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners, amidst concerns about a projected prison population of 48,000 by 1984. With the prison population in England and Wales now approaching 88,000 and projected to rise to 94,400 by 2025, PRT remains as important to civic society today as it was then. We are one of the few organisations willing and equipped to hold the state to account for its treatment of vulnerable people in prison. Our reputation, built over four decades of knowledgeable, reliable analysis and presentation of the facts, gives us influence behind the scenes that few organisations can match. Our main objectives are:

- Reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime.
- Improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families.
- Promoting equality and human rights in the justice system.

We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. Whilst often working alongside the prison service and maintaining close links with government departments including the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), His Majesty's Treasury (HMT), and the Home Office, to retain its independence, PRT does not seek or accept government funding. The structure and rigour of programmes are agreed with those trusts and foundations that generously fund our work.

https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Acknowledgements

This report has been made possible through the generosity of the John Armitage Charitable Trust.

Particular thanks are also due to:

Deborah Kant, University of Cambridge
Paula Harriott, Soruche Saajedi, Femi Laryea Adekimi and PPN Volunteers
Governors, staff and prisoner participants at HMPs Hewell, Coldingley, Frankland, Swaleside, Swinfen Hall, Drake Hall, Five Wells and Wayland
Natasha Porter and colleagues at Unlocked Graduates
Andi Brierley, Leeds Trinity University
Khatuna Tsintsadze, Zahid Mubarek Trust

© 2024 Prison Reform Trust

Contents

Introduction 5
The issues 7
Methodology 15
What the literature has to say 17
What we heard from prisoners 21
Good practice and innovation 33
Wider issues 41
Conclusions 45
Recommendations 47

Introduction

No one recognises a good teacher more accurately than a pupil, or a good nurse more gratefully than a patient. And no one understands the differences between a good and a bad prison officer[1] better than a prisoner.[2] This report, made possible through the generosity of the John Armitage Charitable Trust, seeks to bring the wisdom of prisoners to bear on the central challenge facing prisons of how to create an effective and sustainable prison workforce in England and Wales.

Changes in sentencing over the last two decades guarantee that prison officers will in future be caring for people spending a much larger portion of their lives in custody.[3] Those prisoners will also be subject to far greater uncertainty about when they may be released and whether they will be permitted to remain in the community when they eventually are. Simultaneously, confidence in traditional operating models for prisons has been undermined by a decade of violence, self-harm and disorder, and the physical withdrawal of staff from face to face contact with prisoners legitimised during the pandemic. In this radically altered context the prison service faces a more profound question about the composition of its future workforce than simply whether it can recruit and retain enough people.

We will argue that being a good prison officer is a much more sophisticated and skilful job than the prison service currently reflects in its critical human resource processes. If the prison service is to recruit and retain a workforce that can rise to the multiple challenges that it faces over the next decade and beyond, it must develop a new and explicit vision for the role of the prison officer and the way that role needs to be supported. We will argue that prisoners can help both articulate that vision and in some respects support its delivery.

The prison workforce is of course very diverse and many people other than officers are crucial to making prisons work. We have chosen to focus on the prison officer role because, more than any other, it affects the day to day life of the prisoners to whom we have listened, and therefore the families they have left behind and the communities to which most of them will one day return. Developing a vision for the role of the prison officer starts with being clear about purpose within a prison. We hope that what prisoners have had to say on that subject will inform every aspect of the prison service's approach to its employees, and all its partnerships with the many statutory, private and voluntary organisations who also contribute to the prison workforce.

---

1 For simplicity, this report uses the term "prison officer" to refer both to those employed in that role in public sector prisons and to "prison custody officers" employed to do the same job in privately run prisons. In the public sector, we are generally referring to "band 3 prison officers" – that is, the majority of prison officers – rather than band 4, with supervisory or specialist responsibilities, or band 5, also known as custodial managers, who have line management responsibilities for other prison officers.

2 We also choose to use the word "prisoner" throughout. For some, this term is in itself considered dehumanising, and there are prisons where not using the term forms part of an attempt to stress the importance of seeing people in custody as individuals. But as the report will discuss, the intrinsic coercive power within the role of prison officer is part of what makes it distinctive, and the vulnerability inherent in the fact of being imprisoned and subject to that power is an inescapable fact of life for those subject to it. So we use the term both as a constant reminder of where authority ultimately lies, and of the suffering which forced exile is designed to inflict.

3 From time to time the government updates a clear factual account of changes in the prison population, most recently in October 2020. Although there have been further changes since, "the story of the prison population remains a good account of how sentencing changes have been a principal driver of population growth and dramatically changed the composition of the prison population overall. GOV.UK (2020). *Story of the prison population 1993 to 2020*. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/story-of-the-prison-population-1993-to-2020

The issues

Why the prison officer matters so much

One of the great attractions of working in a prison – and one of the challenges of leading one – is that the workforce is so varied. There are directly employed staff, from support grades through prison officers to administrative staff and specialist colleagues from psychologists to chaplains. But there are also many people employed by other organisations – nurses and substance misuse specialists for example – with a wide variety of different contractual or other governance arrangements. There are also volunteers, some in the prison regularly, others more sporadically to deliver programmes or events. At any given time, any one of these people could be making the biggest difference to an individual prisoner's life.

However, we have chosen to focus predominantly on the prison officer role. The prison officer is one of the few roles in a prison that is required by statute, and embodies both symbolically and in practical terms the coercive power inherent in imprisonment. Prison officers can use force on prisoners, and control access to and out of a prisoner's cell. They are most likely to be the people enforcing discipline or giving direct orders, and in the event of serious disorder it is prison officers who are trained and equipped to respond. But prison officers are also most likely to be first on scene in cases of self-harm and suicide, and most likely to have to intervene to protect prisoners or their colleagues from violence. They have to respond to any emergency at night, when only a small handful of people may be looking after many hundreds of prisoners. They too often have to find ways to care for people in acute mental health crisis for whom no hospital space can be found.

From a prisoner's perspective, their quality of life can be radically altered - for better and for worse – by the actions and attitudes of a single officer. Prison officers can and do save lives. But a single inaccurate report from an officer can follow a prisoner for years afterwards, affecting everything from where they are held to whether they can be released. The life of a whole prison wing can be determined by the collective attitude of the prison officers who work on it.

Prison officers are often also the oil in the machine. It is the presence or not of prison officers that determines whether a landing is locked or unlocked; prison officers provide supervision for movements to and from daily activities, and enable education, work and programmes to take place safely in different locations across a prison. Prison officers oversee the service of meals and keep an eye on the queue of prisoners receiving daily medications. They make sure that prisoners of all faiths can attend prayers and worship, and that families and friends can visit their loved ones in safety. Organisations visiting prisons to deliver events and courses often depend on the availability of a prison officer to access the people they want to help and to use a space within the prison to do so. Manifestly, if officers are unable or unwilling to play this facilitation role, the opportunities for a prisoner to complete even the most mundane tasks autonomously are compromised, still more the idea that they might take a proactive role in preparing for a crime-free life on release.

In short, if the prison service doesn't get the prison officer role right, all its ambitions for what prisons should be like and what they might achieve are likely to remain unfulfilled. What we heard from prisoners is that there is a substantial journey to be undertaken before that now common outcome can be changed for the better.

A troubled history

For many decades, the management of prisons has been dominated by questions concerning the prison officer role. Typically, the leadership of the prison service has seen this in the context of how to secure greater efficiency, whether that be through the abolition of restrictive practices in the "Fresh Start" reforms of the 1980s, or the much more recent "Fair and Sustainable" and "Benchmarking" reforms that ushered in a period of austerity from around 2012 onwards. The

spectacular decline in all measures of safety over the last 13 years has frequently been ascribed to the drastic reduction in officer numbers during that period, with officer numbers cut by 25% between 2010 and 2017, before a partial reversal from 2018 onwards.[4]

There is no shortage of information or commentary on the struggles the prison service[5] has faced in recruiting and retaining its workforce. The government publishes quarterly bulletins giving detailed statistics about the strength and composition of the workforce in public prisons[6], and the House of Commons Justice Select Committee took copious evidence on this issue in late 2022 and early 2023.[7] The announcement of the 2024 general election prevented publication of a report but the committee chair wrote to the then prisons minister Edward Argar MP expressing a wish that the department update his successor, the new chair of the committee, in a new parliament on progress against various initiatives described by the prison service in its evidence.[8]

The boom or bust approach to officer recruitment that has characterised the last decade has had the wholly predictable effect of stripping out experience from the ranks. The rush to reduce the pay bill in the long term led to generous severance arrangements for more experienced (and therefore expensive) staff. The necessary correction some years later replaced those officers with new recruits and as a consequence, four out of every 10 prison officers currently have less than three years' experience in the role.[9]

The pressure to recruit quickly and in unprecedented volumes opens the door to a variety of threats to retention. We heard frequently from prisoners that new officers were starting work with little clear idea of what the job involved, so were vulnerable to feeling overwhelmed, or easily tempted by less stressful opportunities in other sectors. The justice committee is critical of the support available to new officers (while acknowledging steps the prison service has taken to improve that) and also found an alarmingly high level of allegations of bullying of staff by their colleagues. The figures on retention of newly appointed prison officers certainly support the view that there is a serious problem. In 2023, over half of officers who left the service in the last year had stayed in the role for less than three years. Nearly a third left after less than a year.[10]

The picture is not universally bleak, however. After several years in which its recommendations were not implemented, the independent Prison Service Pay Review Body (PSPRB) finally saw its advice implemented following its 2022 report,[11] which highlighted broader economic pressures, including high inflation and a tight labour market. Prison officers are therefore significantly better paid now than when this report was first commissioned.[12] Job security remains good and there is an established hierarchy which allows for career progression. Indeed, one of the complaints we heard from prisoners was that in the current climate, officers could be promoted very rapidly to more senior positions for which they seemed ill-prepared. There are some signs of progress

4 For a comprehensive summary of trends in safety and prison resourcing, see the indispensable Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile 2024, published by the Prison Reform Trust https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2024/

5 Throughout this report, the term "prison service" refers to that part of His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) responsible for delivery in prisons, both public and private, in England and Wales. The "prison workforce" is a varied mix of people directly employed by HMPPS and people employed by contractors from public, private and voluntary sectors, with a very wide range of professional backgrounds and expertise. For reasons the report will make clear, its main focus has been on the prison officer (or "prison custody officer" in privately run prisons).

6 GOV.UK. (2023). *HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly*. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-december-2023/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-december-2023

7 UK Parliament. (2023). *The prison operational workforce.* https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7099/the-prison-operational-workforce/publications/

8 Justice Committee. (2024). *Letter to Edward Argar MP*. committees.parliament.uk/publications/45092/documents/223457/default/

9 GOV.UK. (2023). *HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly*. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-december-2023/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-december-2023

10 GOV.UK. (2023). *HM Prison & Probation Service workforce quarterly: December 2023*. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-december-2023

11 GOV.UK. (2023). *PSPRB Twenty Second report on England and Wales 2023*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/psprb-twenty-second-report-on-england-and-wales-2023

12 HMPPS. *Prison officer pay*. https://prisonandprobationjobs.gov.uk/roles-at-hmpps/prison-officer/prison-officer-pay/

on numbers overall, with around 1,250 more officers in post as of June 2024 than there were 12 months before—however, there are still more than 1,200 fewer officers in post than there were in 2010, following the reduction in the Ministry of Justice's budget in the 2010 spending review.[13]

Running to catch up

Those glimmers of hope for a very hard pressed prison service fade when set against the impact of an apparently insatiable political appetite to lock more people up for longer. While officer numbers may have increased by 1,250 in the last year, prisoner numbers have increased by 1,900.[14] The delays and missed targets on prison building are well documented, but they have largely saved the department from the embarrassment of having new buildings with no means of staffing them. Even so, there have been times when useable accommodation has been left temporarily unoccupied for precisely that reason, and overcrowding levels have risen across the board, meaning that officers have more people to care for in worse conditions. In September the prison population reached its highest ever level, with 88,521 people in custody. The most recent projections for the prison population have a mid-case scenario that sees nearly 106,000 people in prison in three years' time.[15] The higher scenario foresees a breathtaking 114,000 and the lowest case a still very challenging rise to around 95,000.

The implications for recruitment, whether to public or private prisons, are eye-watering, and have to be set against an approach to public expenditure that will see the Ministry of Justice required to find very significant savings as an "unprotected" department. The current situation, with high levels of recruitment just outpacing high wastage levels, especially of recently appointed staff, cannot be sustainable.

Safety – the indispensable foundation

Perhaps because the prisoners we met had largely found ways to navigate the day to day demands of lengthy custodial sentences, they spoke surprisingly little about officers' roles in maintaining safety inside. That was not because they considered prisons to be safe, but rather that they had found their own ways of insulating themselves from the harm that they witnessed around them. The fact is that people in prison are dependent to an exceptional degree on prison officers to secure their safety.

Sometimes, this requires the use of powers specifically invested in prison officers to use force or to bring disciplinary charges that may result in prisoners being punished. Both international and domestic standards require officers to maintain a safe environment,[16] and officers are regularly required to put their own safety at risk in pursuit of that objective, intervening to protect prisoners as well as, on occasion, their colleagues. But prevention is infinitely to be preferred – in the words of the justice committee in a 2014 report:

> *The main foundation of a safe prison is dynamic security, established through consistent personal contact between officers and prisoners, enabling staff to understand individual prisoners and therefore anticipate risky situations and prevent violence.*[17]

---

13 Table 3, Ministry of Justice. (2024). *HMPPS workforce quarterly: June 2024*. and earlier editions https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-offender-management-service-workforce-statistics

14 Table 1.Q.1, Ministry of Justice. (2024). *Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2024*. https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/offender-management-statistics-quarterly

15 Table 1.1, Ministry of Justice. (2024). *Prison Population Projections 2023 to 2028*. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-projections-2023-to-2028

16 See the training requirement in Rule 76 of the United Nations standard Minium Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules) The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (unodc.org), and the Expectations of the HM Inspectorate of Prisons, specifically that *"Staff supervise prisoners, confront unacceptable behaviour and are consistent in challenging these behaviours"*; and: *"Staff have the necessary training and skills to promote positive and supportive relationships, and to consistently identify and challenge problematic behaviour."* https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/02/Mens-Expectations-2023-FINAL-4.pdf

17 Parliament.UK. (2015). *Justice - Ninth Report. Prisons: planning and policies*.

Perhaps the most compelling description of the way good officers "keep the peace" in prison can be found in "The Prison Officer", by Alison Liebling, David Price and Guy Shefer, 2nd edition published in 2011.[18] It explains in detail how the skilled exercise of discretion enables good officers to restrict the use of both force and "formal power", such as the issuing of warnings or disciplinary measures, and move from "tension to peace without incident". In a foreword to the first edition in 2001, the then Director General of the prison service wrote this:

> *Their (prison officers') most important role involves direct, sustained and frequent contact with prisoners, and in ways quite unparalleled in some other jurisdictions where the officer-prisoner relationship is much more remote.*

This traditional operating model in England and Wales, where every aspect of the prison's success depends on the quality of relationships between prisoners and staff,[19] including safety, has been severely challenged in the decade leading up to the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. The need for safety is reciprocal – prisoners cannot be safe unless officers are safe, and officers cannot be safe unless prisoners are safe. Where that paradigm breaks down, it manifests itself in many well-documented indicators of harm to both. For example, as HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) frequently points out, prisoners rely on staff to identify and challenge apparently low level anti-social behaviour which, left unchecked, escalates to more serious problems, including self-harm and violence. But between 2012 and 2018, the inspectorate's prisoner surveys showed the proportion of prisoners reporting that they were victimised rising from 27% to 47%. The overall trend in safety could not be any clearer. In 2010/11, the Chief Inspector of Prisons concluded that safety outcomes were poor or not sufficiently good in 11% of prisons inspected. In 2015/16 that figure had risen to 42% and in 2022/23, to 51%.

While disentangling all the causes of a shocking and sharp deterioration in safety is beyond the scope of this report, there is no dispute that many prisons became much more frightening and distressing places to live and work as officer numbers were reduced by 26% between 2010 and 2017. Both staff and prisoners have suffered, with assault rates against both rising very sharply, and self-harm and suicide rates also climbing to record levels.[20]

The pandemic response in 2020/21 in prisons caused and then legitimised a sudden and extreme physical withdrawal of staff from face to face contact with prisoners, as well as prisoners from other prisoners. That brought about a predictable but inevitably temporary reduction in reported assault rates in particular. However, the prison service recognises that it cannot achieve its rehabilitative goals or provide a humane environment unless it restores the ability for staff and prisoners to communicate. The chief inspector identifies in his 2022/23 annual report the corrosive impact of continued enforced separation:

> *We judged that violence was still too high in over two thirds of prisons we inspected. This was usually attributable to the frustrations caused by long periods locked up, a lack of purposeful activity and staff shortages that left many prisoners without the support and help they needed to progress.*[21]

What has changed is that close to half the officer workforce now has no direct experience of working in a prison prior to the pandemic. It is not surprising that some might feel nervous at the

18 Liebling, A., Price, D., & Shefer, G. (2010). *The Prison Officer*.

19 For another description of this model, the 1985 paper, "A sense of direction" by Ian Dunbar – a former governor and then senior manager in the prison service – remains a good starting point. He argued that a prison depended on treating prisoners as individuals, forming good relationships between staff and prisoners, and providing an active daily routine. In 1992, the then Director General of prisons, Joe Pilling, reinforced the theme in his lecture "Back to basics: relationships in the prison service".

20 See pps 24-25 of the 2024 Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile for a summary of the trends. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2024/

21 GOV.UK. (2023). *HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Annual Report 2022–23*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hm-chief-inspector-of-prisons-annual-report-2022-to-2023

prospect of returning to a model which many of their only slightly more experienced colleagues will have felt to be dangerous and chaotic.

Why it's not all about numbers

The impact of the mismatch between the demand for prison places and the ability to provide sufficient capacity is apparent in other areas apart from safety. The current Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, Charlie Taylor, remarked in his most recent annual report that "prisoners remained locked in their cells for long periods of time without the purposeful activity that would support a successful reintegration back into society at the end of their sentences".[22] The prison service has no reliable measure for the time prisoners spend in purposeful activity, or even how long they spend not locked up in their cells, but the evidence from inspections shows a pattern of inactivity in prisons of all categories and in all parts of the country. In 2022/23 just one of 37 prisons inspected received a positive rating for purposeful activity.[23]

A staff survey conducted for the justice committee enquiry mentioned earlier found that prison officers attributed major operational failures to staff shortages. 84% said that there were too few staff to ensure that prisoners could engage in purposeful activity; 50% of band 3 prison officers did not feel safe in the workplace.[24] However, the chief inspector chooses not to lay the blame for this parlous situation wholly on staffing shortages, highlighting the impact of good leadership in improving the way of life in some prisons despite challenges in both human and physical resources. Prisoners we spoke to for this report had a similarly nuanced take on the importance of staffing numbers to the quality of the regime. Many cited both a lack of numbers and a lack of experience amongst officers as reasons for inactivity and a decline in safety, but all could point to multiple examples where poor organisation or a lack of professionalism were the root cause.

Like the chief inspector, this report will argue that something more fundamental than just numbers is at stake if prisons are to operate as they should in the future. There is a clear requirement to rebuild staff confidence in some, perhaps many, prisons. But that is about more than seeing more "white shirts" around you. One of the many problems with a way of life in prisons where staff and prisoners interact less is that it feeds the very shortage of resource that has created it in the first place. A lack of activity creates boredom and frustration, which in turn generates a resort to both prescribed and illicit drugs.[25] A failure to operate systems to deliver basic everyday necessities, from showers through to visits, mail delivery and getting a newspaper on time produces complaints, which then devour resource to investigate and resolve. Reduced communication between prisoners and staff cuts off the supply of intelligence which might pre-empt bullying and violence, and means that prisoners in distress are not spotted early enough to prevent self-harm or worse. Where staff are fearful of unlocking prisoners, expensive education and work facilities sit idle, and individuals and agencies who want to do good in the prison become disillusioned or have to leave because they cannot deliver their contracted activity.

Particularly in a context where confidence has been undermined over a decade or more, and where so much experience of a less chaotic system has been lost, staff need to know that their colleagues are close and available if they need help. But we heard repeatedly from prisoners that the best officers not only solved more problems than their peers, but that they prevented problems arising in the first place. Prison workplaces where prisoners are busy and engaged – kitchens being a good example – require less not more supervision by officers. Where staff know prisoners well, they are able to take better and safer decisions about work that prisoners can do to help the prison run more smoothly. They can grant freedoms – particularly in terms of movement

22 GOV.UK. (2023). *HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Annual Report 2022–23*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hm-chief-inspector-of-prisons-annual-report-2022-to-2023

23 Ibid.

24 UK Parliament. (2023). *Justice Committee Prison Operational Workforce Survey*. https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7099/the-prison-operational-workforce/publications/

25 User Voice. (2016). *Spice: The-Bird Killer*. https://www.uservoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/User-Voice-Spice-The-Bird-Killer-Report-compressed.pdf

around the prison and time unlocked – confident in the knowledge that they will not be abused. Paradoxically, where prison staffing is stripped to the bone, a prison wastes resource; a properly trained and confident officer complement saves it. So it is wholly realistic to expect that, in time, a re-investment in officer numbers and, crucially, in their training and support, can lead to a more efficient prison service overall. But in the current crisis that can only be a question of significant investment now, in the expectation of a future dividend some years ahead.

A changing context

There have been dramatic changes in sentencing policy over the last two decades which any strategy for the future of the prison workforce must take into account.[26] The most relevant features are:

- An increase in the number of indeterminate sentences, hugely inflated by the Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentence during the first decade of the century. Over 11,000 people now fall into this category.
- An increase in the range of other sentences where release is dependent on an assessment of risk to the public and the moment at which a prisoner might return to the community can be delayed for many years as a consequence. Almost all sentences passed now have some element of discretion surrounding release, with home detention curfew (HDC) relevant to most determinate sentences, and a Parole Board assessment required for the existing population of around 8,000 serving extended sentences.
- An increase in the severity of punishment for more serious offences, reflected in:
    - higher “tariffs” for life sentences (for murder rising from 13 years in 2000 to 21 years in 2021).
    - longer determinate sentence lengths (for indictable offences up from 38 months in 2010 to 62 months in 2022).
    - and most recently an increase in the proportion of any sentence of four years or over which must be served in custody.
- An increase in the use of recall powers by the probation service, resulting in a current population of recalled prisoners of over 12,000 – around 12 times as many as at the turn of the century.[27]

Clearly, these changes contribute to the overall mismatch between the demands on the prison service and its capacity in terms of prison places and prison staff. But they also have a significant impact on the challenges a prison officer starting their career now will face for the foreseeable future. Some of the older prisoners we spoke to, who had spent decades in prison, reminisced about “lifer officers”. These were officers in the 1990s who were trained to deal with life sentenced prisoners – of whom there would have been fewer than 3,000 in the whole system, with an average expectation of spending around 12 years in custody. Prisoners remembered their skill in forming relationships and understanding the different pressures on someone serving a very long time in prison (as it was then considered) with no fixed date of release. Those skills are now required in every prison, and for officers serving in any training prison of whatever category it will be normal to be having to respond to the needs of someone for whom release is a very distant and uncertain prospect. They will also undoubtedly be dealing with people who have been released but then recalled to prison, with recall more likely to have been the result of an administrative decision than conviction for a further offence.

26 The best guide to how sentencing changes have affected the prison population is Story of the Prison Population 1993 – 2020 England & Wales, although this dates from 2024, and therefore does not capture some of the more recent changes which have exacerbated the trends it describes. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/story-of-the-prison-population-1993-to-2020

27 For an accessible and expert summary of how sentencing affects the size and composition of the prison population, and how it has changed, there is no better guide than the Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, published by the Prison Reform Trust. Pages 8 to 21 of the 2024 edition are invaluable. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2024

The composition of the prison population fluctuates. Currently there is a spike in the population of unconvicted and unsentenced prisoners following the delays to trials during the pandemic and a much delayed recovery in the court system. The number of people serving short sentences has in fact reduced dramatically during this century and from time to time politicians float proposals both to accelerate and reverse that trend. But the growth in the number of people serving what by historical standards are very long periods in custody, with no fixed date of release, and a strong possibility of recall following release, are all features that are now "baked in" to the work of prison officers for the foreseeable future.

It is worrying, to put it kindly, that the last major government publication setting out a strategic direction for prisons – the 2021 Prisons Strategy White Paper – not only made no mention of this change, but contained no analysis at all of the likely composition of the population of people for whom the prison service will be caring.[28] That omission was not corrected in the Ministry's evidence to the justice select committee, submitted in January 2023.[29] It is an omission that is hard to explain. In 2020, the government committed to ensuring that all prison officers working with children would have to obtain a specialist degree-level qualification to do so,[30] recognising that dealing with a 17-year old serving a long sentence represents a complex and difficult challenge. But it seems disinterested in whether a prison officer faced with an 18-year old in the same situation might need something similar by way of investment in their knowledge and skills.

Change on the horizon?

We have been encouraged during the process of compiling this report to believe that the prison service is examining the future of the prison officer role from first principles, alongside all the urgent work it has been undertaking for several years to try to recruit more staff and keep those it has already. It is vital that it should do so, and we hope this report – drawing on a prisoner perspective which the prison service itself might struggle to access – will assist in that endeavour.

28 GOV.UK. (2021). *Prisons Strategy White Paper*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prisons-strategy-white-paper
29 Parliament UK. (2023). *Written evidence submitted to the Ministry of Justice*. committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/114656/pdf/
30 GOV.UK. (2020). *Specialist Youth Justice degree for all officers working with children*. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/specialist-youth-justice-degree-for-all-officers-working-with-children

Methodology

In 2018 the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) launched the Prisoner Policy Network, bringing the wisdom of prisoners to bear on policy issues affecting them. The network has published 12 reports since then, including a series of reports during the pandemic which sought to reflect what was happening to prisoners at a time when physical access to prisons was very limited.[31] It is open both to serving prisoners and to people who have left prison. The network does not claim to be representative of all prisoners and certainly not to express a single "prisoner view", only to offer fresh insight based on their engagement. It uses a variety of methods to glean insight, ranging from some groups meeting regularly in prison (both with and without a PRT facilitator), to written consultations across the prison estate, to targeted exercises aimed at particular groups of people or focused on a particular opportunity (such as providing evidence to a parliamentary committee). There is also a regular flow of correspondence between individual network members and PRT, and a regular newsletter.

For this report, we visited seven prisons where there was an existing network group or we knew there was a culture of prisoner involvement. In each prison, we held a discussion group and in all but one returned to discuss emerging findings and to canvass possible recommendations. The prisons were:

- Frankland – a high security prison
- Hewell – a local prison
- Coldingley – a category C training prison
- Swinfen Hall – a category C training prison holding younger men
- Five Wells – a privately run category C training prison
- Swaleside – a category B training prison
- Drake Hall – a closed training prison for women

We also visited a specific project at HMP Wayland, another category C training prison.

The people we listened to were all sentenced prisoners, and more likely to be serving indeterminate and long prison sentences than short. They were typically engaging with the prison constructively, often already involved in local consultation work. Most of the discussions took place in the absence of staff, but in some staff attended and took part. We are very grateful to the prison service and to the governors of the prisons involved for giving us this access.
The question we asked was "what makes a good prison officer?", but all the discussions then continued into the issue of how to recruit and retain good prison officers.

In every group, the perspective of people who had spent a long time in prison was invaluable. Almost all the groups included people who could draw on experience of prison from as far back as the 1990s. But participants also brought a wealth of experience from outside prison, sometimes as people who had held management and leadership roles in other organisations and had considered issues of organisational culture.

In addition to these discussion groups, we met a small number of interested stakeholders, including HMIP, the Butler Trust, Unlocked Graduates and the Zahid Mubarek Trust. Our intention was never to conduct a comprehensive consultation, but rather to bring a fresh perspective to the work that the prison service is undertaking and to a public debate about the future of prisons. We also commissioned a review of relevant literature from Deborah Kant at the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University. That review forms an online annex to this report and its main findings are discussed in the following section.

31 For more information on the Prisoner Policy Network see: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/prisoner-policy-network/

What the literature has to say

The brief for the literature review was as follows:

To identify and summarise the key research relating to best practice in the role of prison officer in England and Wales, and in particular to establish the extent to which perspectives on best practice overlap between prison policy makers, managers, prison officers themselves and, crucially, prisoners.

And to highlight within the relevant research, any examples or findings that illustrate formal or informal participation by prisoners in the selection, training or performance appraisal of prison officers.

Core idea behind project:

- What do prisoners, officers, and others identify as best practice in officers.
- How can prisoners help make staff better officers.
- Evidence that prisoners are good assessors of the qualities of a good prison officer.
- Evidence of that knowledge facilitating the involvement of prisoners as agents in various aspects of staff recruitment and development, or comparators from reasonably associated fields (health and education for example) where the recipient of a service plays a role in the selection and development of the people delivering it.

The review finds strong corroboration for the thesis that the relationship between prisoners and prison officers is a key determinant of a prison's culture. It also finds that the prison service has contributed very significantly to that corroboration through the work of Mann and Howard (2018), which in turn found expression in the development of practical guidance for prisons on the development of what they called a "rehabilitative culture". Their work centres the voice of both staff and prisoners as experts and clearly describes the development of a healthy prison culture as a collaborative enterprise.

The review also finds evidence to support the benefits of involving those to whom a service is delivered in the design of that service and, in some respects, to its delivery. Interestingly, the most developed and relevant evidence comes from the mental health field, and in particular work with people with personality disorder and other complex mental health needs.

In relation to service design in particular, two different models for involvement emerge from a study of well over 300 papers. One envisages one-off consultations for specific change projects, while the other aims to develop capacity within the user community for continuous engagement. The benefits of user involvement for both users and staff are well-evidenced, and tend to feature improved understanding amongst staff, and increases in agency and a sense of purpose amongst users. Benefits in terms of organisational performance are harder to evidence, with no studies attempting what would be a complicated evaluation task.

On the specific topic of the attributes of a "good" prison officer, the review finds a strong overlap between the opinions of staff, managers and prisoners. Key attributes include:

- Pastoral or domestic care, readiness to engage in talk, listening, and emotional support.
- Empathy, interpersonal skills, 'emotional intelligence'.
- Interest in and ability to understand the roots of and reasons for prisoners' behaviours, knowledge and recognition of prisoners as individuals.
- Resilience, the ability not to take or make things personal.
- Recognition of the powers at their disposal, and the scope and impact of their use of discretion, when to enforce and when to under enforce.

- Conduct that is procedurally just, consistent, 'straight', and fair; maintaining 'right' rather than merely 'good' relationships.
- Command of a broad 'toolkit' of skills and approaches, flexible and adept at knowing what works best with different people and in different situations.
- The ability to balance flexibility and consistency.
- Confidence, approachability, and the skill to wield 'expert knowledge' about policies, programmes and procedures.
- 'Moral dualists' who are able to negotiate the conflict between security and care.
- Everyday respect and decency.

As will become apparent, our discussions with prisoners for this report corroborated all of these features. In the literature from authors with experience of having served sentences in prison, the impact that officers can have is especially clear, both positive and negative. Former prisoners are typically sympathetic to the pressures officers face and surprised by the paucity of training and, even more so, by the absence of support for officers in coping with the stresses of their occupation. But they also emphasise the need for relationships to be founded on an appreciation of shared humanity, and for officers to live up to values and behaviours that they expect from prisoners. A key outcome should be trust between officers and prisoners.

The review included a specific attempt to find out more about international models of training for prison staff. This proved to be very challenging, and it is fair to say that nothing emerged which could be considered best practice or even a norm. Length and format of initial training vary widely, though extended periods, mixing on the job experience with periods of classroom training, are common, with formal qualification as an officer postponed until that extended period is complete.

Finally, the review sought out examples where "service users" have contributed to staff development.

In prisons, the literature on prisoner engagement largely describes three types of involvement, none of them amounting to a contribution designed to assist staff development. They are:

- Peer advice and mentoring initiatives, where prisoners contribute to the welfare of their peers and the prison.
- Prison councils and other consultative arrangements, designed to improve the running of the prison and prisoners' experience.
- Research.

During this project we became aware of one initiative in a prison where staff and prisoners were collaborating to trial a simple intervention aimed at fostering an awareness of shared humanity, designed and delivered in partnership between prisoners and staff. Interestingly, prisoners told us that other less ambitious forms of involvement, including peer advice schemes and formal consultation arrangements with senior management were crucial in creating the conditions for what they were now planning.

In the readily comparable field of staff working with people with complex mental health needs, the "Knowledge and Understanding Framework" (KUF) developed between service users, staff, the NHS, the Department of Health, and the Ministry of Justice, provides a rare example of user involvement in staff training that has been evaluated. The evaluation has found significant benefits for both users and staff, but also that those benefits for individuals fade over time, hinting at the importance of an underlying culture that supports engagement as "business as usual".

Perhaps the most important conclusions to draw from the literature are that being a good prison officer requires a subtle and complex range of skills and knowledge. There is a high degree of correlation between managers, staff and prisoners in describing the attributes required. The literature shows that prisoners recognise and value highly those officers who are able to perform this difficult job to a high standard and whose impact can be transformative. In at least one closely related field, the potential for that understanding to contribute practically to training that improves staff performance has been both implemented and evaluated.

What we heard from prisoners

The reality of punishment

There is a very extensive literature on the "pains of imprisonment", a term first coined by Gresham Sykes in 1958. The academic understanding of how imprisonment is experienced by prisoners has developed profoundly since then and in relation to people serving very long sentences, the study of their experience has been particularly detailed in England and Wales.[32] We did not invite prisoners to tell us about how painful they found imprisonment, and for the most part we were listening to people who had already served a long time in custody and had found ways both to survive the experience and often to contribute to the wellbeing of those around them. But it is impossible to have these conversations and not to be struck by the reality of suffering, especially for those in prison for long periods, and especially given the impoverishment of regimes even in prisons for whom the care of long sentence prisoners is ostensibly their primary role.

Public and political debate frequently reverts to the question of whether life in prison is sufficiently painful, both to exact retribution for crimes committed and to deter those in prison from returning and those out of prison from going there in the first place. We found prisoners we listened to – even those who felt that they were wrongly convicted or that their sentences were excessive – phlegmatic about the inevitability of suffering. But they never considered that it was part of the officer's role to exacerbate the pain that imprisonment inflicts. The prison service takes the same view,[33] as does the caselaw concerning the proper limits of the deprivation of liberty through which imprisonment punishes.[34] Rule 3 of the "Mandela Rules" (formally the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners), reads as follows:

> *Imprisonment and other measures that result in cutting off persons from the outside world are afflictive by the very fact of taking from these persons the right of self-determination by depriving them of their liberty. Therefore the prison system shall not, except as incidental to justifiable separation or the maintenance of discipline, aggravate the suffering inherent in such a situation.*[35]

The political or public view of how unpleasant the prison experience should be may fluctuate, but the reality of the punitive impact of imprisonment should be a permanently liberating force in considering the role of the prison officer. Whatever else they may need to do during their working day, deliberately increasing the suffering of a prisoner is not and should never become part of any prison officer's job. But it's a two way process, as one prisoner pointed out:

> *Everyone that comes to jail has to realise that staff here didn't send us to jail.*

In other words, both physically and symbolically, prisoners and staff are all in it together. Each has the ability to make life a misery for the other. The environment in which they live and work is ultimately always the product of the choices both groups make.

---

32 For a very recent example of how the direct testimony of prisoners is shaping our understanding, this lecture on the "Texture of Imprisonment" by Professor Ben Crewe at the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University represents the leading edge of current research. YouTube. (2024). *Public Guest Seminar with Professor Ben Crewe*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YedzeoKej9o

33 HMPPS. *Become a prison officer: overview of the prison officer role*. https://prisonandprobationjobs.gov.uk/roles-at-hmpps/prison-officer/

34 *Raymond v Honey* [1982] AC 1, [1981] UKHL 8.

35 The United Nations. *Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*. https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson_Mandela_Rules-E-ebook.pdf

The search for purpose

In our very first discussion group for this project, a prisoner said:

> *Prisoners are confused because they don't know the purpose here…and if prisoners are confused then of course prison officers are confused, so that's the issue.*

While the majority of discussion thereafter concerned the day to day interactions between officers and prisoners, it became clear that the issue of purpose permeated every aspect of what it takes to be a good prison officer. It was possible for both officers and prisoners to have very different views of what officers were supposed to be helping the prison to achieve. With no clarity on purpose, any definition of "good" was bound to be uncertain.

The purpose of imprisonment is an exhaustively debated topic. Academic and operational opinions have swirled continuously ever since the early proponents of prison reform started to worry about what punishment was meant to achieve in the late 18th century. So far as parliament is concerned, the purpose of prisons remains undefined, but section 57 of the Sentencing Act 2020 sets out five purposes of sentencing for England and Wales:

- The punishment of offenders.
- The reduction of crime (including its reduction by deterrence).
- The reform and rehabilitation of offenders.
- The protection of the public.
- The making of reparation by offenders to persons affected by their offences.

All of these purposes have relevance to how prisons should operate. We have already considered punishment, and the fact that it is the one purpose which the public can always be confident is being delivered.

The reduction of crime, including the idea that prison deters, is far more controversial. A very large amount of crime is committed within prisons, not least in daily acts of violence and the distribution and use of illegal drugs. Very little of it is prosecuted, and a good deal of it goes undetected. The actual impact on crime in the community of removing prolific offenders from public circulation is hard to measure with confidence, and in relation to the most serious crime – murder in particular – its incidence in the community appears to bear no relation to either the number of people convicted or the length of sentences passed. Deterrence has never been shown to be an outcome of imprisonment, for all the political faith placed in it.

Reparation is hard to achieve when the person who might provide it is in prison. Admirable attempts have been made both to facilitate restorative justice both as a specific exercise involving victims of certain crimes and more generally as a way of building safer communities within prisons. But it would be hard to assert that making reparation to victims formed any significant part of our current approach to imprisonment.

Which leaves reform and rehabilitation on the one hand, and public protection on the other, as statutory purposes that might help to answer the question implied by the quotation above – what is the purpose that staff and prisoners have in common?

Public protection, delivered first and foremost by a secure prison system from which prisoners rarely escape to commit further crime, represents a purpose which the prison service has come to deliver with much greater consistency since the 1980s and 1990s. Spurred on both by a large number of escapes from moderately secure prisons and a smaller number of high profile escapes from prisons that were meant to be completely secure, the prison service implemented comprehensive changes to both its physical and procedural security.

However, public protection has come to be interpreted in a much broader sense. It now incorporates the idea that the system can identify, reduce and manage the risk of an individual committing further offences after release. The change is most noticeable in the operation of the probation service, originally set up to “advise, assist and befriend” offenders in the Probation Act 1907. It is now measured principally by its success or otherwise in preventing the commission of further offences by people under its supervision. A similar shift has occurred in the various incarnations of the parole system, morphing in various stages from a locally administered system that in practice tended to focus on encouraging and rewarding good institutional behaviour in the 1970s and 80s, to a centralised exercise solely focused on the assessment of risk to the public should a prisoner be released.[36]

The prisoners we heard from were acutely aware of how this interpretation of the public protection purpose affected their prison experience and the influence officers had acquired over their futures as a result. Many had experience of the parole system and recounted how evidence of apparently minor misdemeanours within prison had been used as evidence against them during parole hearings. There was widespread frustration that good behaviour was very rarely “written up”, and that entries concerning alleged bad behaviour, including unproven suspicions based on who they spent time with, would be made in their record without their knowledge at the time. They would find out only when those entries formed part of a risk assessment process months or even years down the line.

Several of the prisoners we heard from had been recalled to prison following release, some on more than one occasion, and generally for an alleged breach of the terms of their licence rather than following conviction for a further offence. We also heard from a number of people serving the notorious IPP sentence (a form of indeterminate sentence equivalent to a life sentence in all but name) that could be handed down for offences that could never otherwise have attracted such a penalty. Invariably, those people had completed the period set by the court as sufficient for punishment (the tariff) and their continued detention rested solely on being able to persuade the Parole Board that they were safe to release. They justifiably asked why there was no change in their conditions of detention when the authority to punish them – as distinct from holding them for reasons of public protection – had expired. Other life sentence prisoners serving beyond tariff made the same point.

The daily reality of sentences where the date of release is discretionary is people trying to prove their ability to live in the community while in a prison system that continually degrades both the supportive factors that might assist them (such as family ties) and the mental strength they need to cope with the jeopardy of life on licence. The problem is at its most acute for people serving IPP and life sentences, of whom there are currently over 11,000 in custody, but it affects anyone whose release depends upon an assessment of the risk they may pose to the public. When we asked prisoners what they saw as their driving purpose in prison, unsurprisingly they often told us that it was to “get out”. Getting out in the modern prison system means somehow compiling evidence that will persuade prison staff and probation staff to support your case.

At first glance (and in a way that has clearly motivated legislators in waving through ever more versions of sentencing where the release date is not fixed), this emphasis on reducing future risk might seem to offer a helpful sense of purpose towards which both staff and prisoners might work. The prison service has formally adopted it as part of its Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) model, which sets out the following aspiration:

> *Every prisoner should have the opportunity to transform their lives by using their time in custody constructively to reduce their risk of harm and reoffending; to plan their resettlement; and to improve their prospects of becoming a safe, law-abiding and valuable member of society.*[37]

36 The Parole Board. (2023). *Annual Report and Accounts 2022/23*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64b799b261adff001301b334/Parole_Board_ARA_2022-23_-_Final.pdf

37 Ministry of Justice and HM Prison & Probation Service. (2018). *Manage the Custodial Sentence: Policy Framework*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/manage-the-custodial-sentence

But it is deeply problematic in practice. First, the only factor that has any significant predictive weight in assessing the likelihood of future offending appears to be the history of past offending. A prisoner can do nothing to affect that. There is good evidence that, taken overall, most crime is committed by young men, but for someone serving a very long sentence, simply getting older does little to persuade the Parole Board that risk has reduced. Secondly, the "rules of the game" on how to demonstrate progress towards a crime-free future are at best opaque and at worst fickle.

The confusion surrounding progression and its consequences are laid bare in the report "Making Progress?" by the Prison Reform Trust's Building Futures programme, that draws heavily on the direct testimony of prisoners serving very long sentences.[38] It found that not only were prisoners and staff ignorant of any official definition of progression, but that both would generate their own versions of what did or did not count towards it. The net outcome for many was that, far from acting as a motivating and coherent purpose for a sentence, the concept provoked a profound distrust. One life sentence prisoner told the authors:

> *A lot of low-risk prisoners I speak to worry about progression as they see it as a form of sabotage.*

Sadly, the problem goes much deeper than a failure to communicate or resource the OMiC strategy. In June 2022, following press coverage concerning a prisoner who had absconded from an open prison, the then justice secretary abruptly changed the criteria for assessing whether a life sentence prisoner could be transferred to an open prison in order to assess and prepare for the possibility of release into the community following a parole hearing. In practice, it quickly became apparent that this would prevent virtually all life sentence prisoners from ever going to an open prison, despite such a move having been accepted up to that point as a necessary and desirable prelude to assessment for release. At a stroke, that decision made a nonsense of the advice given to all life sentence prisoners about what their objective should be in terms of progressing through the prison estate – and because it affected lifers, that meant advice given consistently to thousands of prisoners over a period of decades.

In the same year, section 132 of the Police Crime and Sentencing Act made provision for the justice secretary to convert a sentence with a fixed release date into a sentence with a discretionary release date based on their view of the prisoner's risk to the public. Applying to a wide range of violent, sexual or terrorist offences, this provision allows a politician to change a sentence in a fundamental way long after it has been passed, with no requirement to go through a court process to do so.

It is hardly surprising that prisoners felt that the ground on which they stood in terms of sentence planning was constantly shifting. The prisoners we heard from for this report endorsed the findings of the Building Futures team. Progression – to show that the public will be safe – is a game that any prisoner without a fixed date of release is compelled to play. But it is a game where the rules are unclear and can change in an instant. It is an inevitable part of prison life, and any prisoner in those circumstances would be foolish not to take part, but it is too flawed to provide an honest purpose for the prisoners and staff trying to navigate their way through it.

For officers, the dilemma this causes is a matter of day to day significance. They are expected to explain and defend a system which, at the very least, behaves in an unjust fashion from time to time. But they also have to deal with the direct consequences of its flaws and inconsistencies, as prisoners react to delay, disappointment and broken promises. Offering a sympathetic ear may be the best an officer can offer, but their legitimacy as the incarnation of authority is undermined when the system operates in such a quixotic way.

---

38 Prison Reform Trust. (2022). *Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences.* https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/making-progress/

So rehabilitation remains as the last of the statutory purposes of sentencing that might provide the common purpose for imprisonment that the prisoner in our very first discussion said was lacking. It is certainly at the front of the government's mind and has been throughout a politically tumultuous period, with multiple justice secretaries of very different sensibilities all repeating a similar mantra. In 2016, the then prime minister gave a major speech about prison reform.[39] He said:

> *Prisons aren't a holiday camp – not really. They are often miserable, painful environments. Isolation. Mental anguish. Idleness. Bullying. Self-harm. Violence. Suicide. These aren't happy places.*
>
> *It's lazy to subscribe to the idea that prisoners are somehow having the time of their lives. These establishments are full of damaged individuals.*
>
> *But here's the point: 99% of them will be released one day, back into our communities.*
>
> *So we should ask ourselves: is it a sensible strategy to allow these environments to become twisted into places that just compound that damage and make people worse?*
>
> *Or should we be making sure that prisons are demanding places of positivity and reform – so that we can maximise the chances of people going straight when they come out?*

Fast forward to December 2021 and the justice secretary of the day, with a significantly less liberal reputation than the prime minister of 2016 vintage, had this to say:

> *Prisons keep people safe by taking dangerous criminals off our streets, but they can only bring down crime and keep the public safer in the longer-term if they properly reform and rehabilitate offenders.*

Rehabilitation, measured by a reduction in reoffending by released prisoners, has survived as an official purpose for prisons through a decade of funding cuts, operational chaos and a succession of justice secretaries from every possible wing of the governing party. So why did we find that it failed to provide a sense of shared and coherent purpose either amongst prisoners or in how they reported the attitudes and behaviours of prison staff?

The prisoners we heard from spoke frequently about rehabilitation. Few disputed the idea that they had deserved to go to prison and we know from the literature that feelings of remorse and shame are prominent in the experience of young men beginning life sentences.[40] But many had also either completed all the specific rehabilitative work that was relevant to them, or had experienced multiple frustrations in trying to do so – for example being transferred to a prison to do a specific course only to find that the course wasn't available. Acknowledging that those we heard from were by definition more engaged with the issues, and more interested in making some positive use of their time inside, it was all too apparent that most were already leading lives inside that were characterised by pro-social attitudes and behaviour. It was hard to see what more they could be doing to demonstrate that, whatever crime they had committed (typically many years previously and in a completely different phase of their life), they now had both the motivation and skills to avoid crime in the future.

The political enthusiasm for rehabilitation is not without risks. Reductions in re-offending are inherently problematic to measure when they rely on re-conviction statistics which in turn are driven as much by police and prosecution behaviour as by the behaviour of released prisoners.

39 GOV.UK. (2016). *Prison reform: Prime Minister's speech*. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prison-reform-prime-ministers-speech

40 Crewe, B., Hulley, S,. & Wright, S. (2020). *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity, Time*.

There can be a naive view about what is achievable in any prison system if it is not accompanied by supportive actions and attitudes from agencies well beyond the criminal justice system post release. As previous examples show, a single high profile failure can prompt policy responses that undermine the prospects for success of a much larger number of cases that go unnoticed. But the rehabilitative ambition has helped secure resources for positive work in prisons in very hard fiscal circumstances, and remains a key factor in recruiting new prison officers.

The prisoners we spoke to welcomed the fact that some of the new recruits they had met were clearly motivated to “do good”. Whatever their own circumstances, prisoners observed many young prisoners in particular who had come into prison from chaotic and violent lifestyles, and some told their own stories of how prison had provided a necessary interruption to their own dangerous or self-destructive habits. But they also frequently described examples where staff with laudable rehabilitative motives had become disillusioned and left the service.

There is a vigorous academic debate about the potential risks of seeing prison as a place where rehabilitation is possible.[41] Part of that rests on the persistent failure of so many prisons to establish cultures where a prisoner may be able to exist without the emotional and psychological defences required in a hostile or oppressive environment. There is also an argument that prisons are so far from “normality” that the ability to learn and demonstrate skills that will underpin a crime free life after release is illusory. Some argue that putting staff in the position of “rehabilitators” guarantees rapid disillusionment, but may also reinforce the divide between staff and prisoners, encouraging staff to see prisoners as less than human. It may also simply require prisoners constantly to return to their “worst moment”, and get in the way of them building hope for a better future, a key component of the “desistance” approach to reducing recidivism.

To give the prison service its due, its recruitment campaign attempts to give an optimistic but not idealistic view of the influence officers can have and the difference they can make.[42] For example, it says:

> *As a prison officer you have an opportunity to make a difference in vulnerable people’s lives at a time when it matters most.*

That simple summary is rooted in many years of impressive research and conceptual thinking. A particularly compelling and brief take on how to reconcile what some have tried to portray as competing philosophies on rehabilitation can be found in a joint article by the late Dr Ruth Mann and Professor Shadd Maruna.[43] Published by HM Inspectorate of Probation in 2019 it argues that both specific rehabilitative interventions and work that focuses more on a person’s way of life rely on an environment that also builds social capital (for example links with families) and exists in a culture that supports hope in the possibility of a better future. In some of the prisons we visited, the diagram that the prison service produced illustrating a rehabilitative culture, with foundations of a safe, secure and fair prison regime could still be seen in the gate area. As a coherent, serious framework for how to weave a rehabilitative ambition into the operation of both a prison and the prison service, it remains an impressive model.[44] So it was worrying that it merited no mention in the Prisons Strategy White Paper published in 2021, and of course the trajectory of prison performance during the pandemic and subsequently makes its achievement seem ever more remote.

41 See, for example, the 2007 article by David Scott, - “The changing face of the English prison: a critical review of the aims of imprisonment”.

42 HMPPS. *Become a prison officer: Life as a prison officer.* https://prisonandprobationjobs.gov.uk/roles-at-hmpps/prison-officer/life-as-a-prison-officer/

43 Maruna, S. & Mann, R. (2019). *Reconciling ‘Desistance’ and ‘What Works’.* https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2019/02/Academic-Insights-Maruna-and-Mann-Feb-19-final.pdf

44 Mann, R., Fitzlan Howard, F. & Tew, J. (2018). What is a rehabilitative prison culture? *Prison Service Journal. 235.* Prison Service Journal (crimeandjustice.org.uk)

The message we heard from prisoners was more prosaic, which was simply that day to day life in prison, month after month, year after year and, increasingly, decade after decade, simply cannot be filled with rehabilitative activity. The same is true for officers. Making a difference in the here and now is a daily possibility, but the impact on a prisoner's future will normally be impossible to predict.

A purpose geared to the present – the centrality of relationships

Given the shortcomings of every purpose of sentencing in providing a day to day shared sense of purpose within a prison we asked prisoners for their advice. What emerged was the desire to make the prison a decent place for staff and prisoners to work and live, and how that rested above all else on the possibility of forming healthy relationships between the two.

In every prison, the starting point for a healthy relationship was set at a very basic level:

> *Essentially they just need to be human.*
>
> *There are certain "tells" you can use to judge how good an officer is: communication skills, talking to people like human beings.*
>
> *Good prison officers treat people like they would want to be treated. It's as simple as that.*
>
> *Even having an officer come up to you and ask if you're all right…opens doors towards improving the jail and building rapport.*

Over and over, prisoners talked about the importance of officers who could build rapport with prisoners. They weren't asking for friendship but they appreciated officers who demonstrated some basic emotional intelligence:

> *He treats you like you're human, seems happy and genuinely pleased to see people.*

At one prison, a joint exercise between a group of prisoners and staff had identified the top priority for the prison as being to improve staff and prisoner relationships by "humanising" the staff view of prisoners. The prisoners involved recognised that staff might be hesitant about disclosing too much about their own lives, but were designing a training event to disclose more about the prisoners' lives and how they viewed themselves – as parents for example, or husbands and sons, and as people with enthusiasms and talents unconnected with either prison or their offending.

Even the smallest details can act as a signal of respect and shared humanity – or the lack of it:

> *Good prison officers see the human and not just the prisoner. For instance, one prison officer let me use a mug in chapel the other day as there were no plastic mugs left and I needed a drink. The next prison officer came along and said prisoners can't use those mugs. I immediately knew what this meant. I wasn't worthy of a china mug I had to use the prisoners' mugs. It was a demonstration I wasn't worth it and I was less valued. That's difficult to deal with.*

Prisoners understood that forming healthy relationships could be complicated by factors over which staff had little control and for which they were ill-equipped – the incidence of serious mental health problems amongst the prisoner population was frequently cited.

> *If we can recognise a mental health issue in other prisoners than staff should be able to do so.*

But they were also clear that some staff avoided the challenge of building relationships with prisoners, and worried that the prison service's own training for officers was counter-productive:

> *Officers are generally suspicious of good relationships with prisoners. They think they are being groomed because that's what they've been taught. We listen to people showing kindness, respect, fairness, professionalism, consistency, accountability. Not someone trying to be the alpha male, we don't care about that. Prison is full of people who that alpha male attitude doesn't work with, most of us wouldn't be in prison if we were intimidated by that.*
>
> *New staff come in being told to be vigilant, don't trust them, they'll manipulate you etc., so that's the mindset they will enter with.*

From time to time, discussion groups included people with experience of prison systems overseas. The comparison sometimes cast the English and Welsh system in a poor light:

> *In Spain the prison officers were more humane and it created more safety and less stress: not fighting for recognition but safe knowing there was actual care going on and we had a common purpose and we all understood that.*

But on other occasions, we heard from people with experience of systems where the distance between staff and prisoners was deliberately extreme. For one prisoner, life in an English prison was initially very disorientating as a result:

> *I always thought when I saw officers playing pool with prisoners what the fuck are you doing, just do your job. But now I'm on a recovery wing, where staff engage with prisoners all the time like that, I see it's more peaceful. I was wrong.*

As noted earlier, prisoners rarely mentioned the role of staff in maintaining order. When they did, it was to stress how in their view order depended on prisoners. Bad relationships put staff at risk:

> *The officers don't have any respect for us. On the outside, you're crossing the road when I walk past, but in here you're telling me to shut the fuck up. I'm not gonna take that outside and I'm not gonna take it in here either. All we want is respect.*

By contrast, every discussion highlighted the centrality of staff to solving everyday practical issues created by the peculiarities – some inevitable and some inexplicable – of living in a custodial setting. Being able to navigate the administrative challenges was a highly valued quality in officers, as was being familiar with the national and local rules that impinged on everything from what prisoners could keep in their cells to eligibility for release. In the course of our discussions, it became clear that there was no aspect of life in prison which wasn't affected in some way by the quality of relationships between staff and prisoners. Improving the quality of that custodial existence was a complex but essentially collaborative task which provided purpose.

What makes a good prison officer

We made this the starter question in all our discussions with prisoners. Initial general reactions always stressed the ability to make relationships and to be clear about the purpose of the job. But discussion then often focused on age and experience. Generalisations – for example that officers needed to be older or to have more years' experience in the role, or a particular previous professional background – quickly collapsed when people were asked to describe

the attitudes and behaviours of specific officers they considered to be good at the job. There was never any difficulty in identifying who those people were:

> *You will know based on who is always being requested by prisoners…*

Their performance was often contrasted with officers who did the bare minimum. Busy officers were seen as victims of their own professionalism, with colleagues who let them bear more than their fair share of the work.

> *They (good officers) recognise that it's important to build working relationships with us, lazy officers tend not to want to do that.*

> *(A) decent officer will end up doing everything, running around the wing and performing tasks a one stripe or a two stripe ought to do.*

Good officers were also readily identified by attitude, but in several anecdotes what prisoners considered the "right" attitude apparently played a part in driving individuals out of the service:

> *Good prison officers can be victims of their own success and often don't last; I don't think it's prisoners that drive them away but the prison: they tell us of a toxic working culture; those new recruits who sit down and talk with us or eat with us or who sit down to play dominoes or cards they aren't praised for that but are viewed with suspicion and get reported to security by their own colleagues.*

> *If you've come here to help people rather than take out frustrations on prisoners, you may find yourself banging your head against a wall.*

We were surprised at the number of times prisoners told us about conversations they had had with officers planning to leave the job because of their frustration with colleagues, and prisoners clearly recognised the pressure good staff felt under not to "call out" poor practice or attitudes by a fellow member of staff.

Just as prisoners found it easy to identify individuals as good officers, so they easily and with great consistency across different sites identified the qualities that made them so. It should come as no surprise that these matched up to the academic analysis of what makes a good officer, given that that analysis derives from many years of close observation within different prisons. It was reassuring, however, to find that prisoners' views bore a good deal of similarity to the prison service's own descriptions of what it wanted from new officer recruits.

From our evidence, prisoners-particularly valued the following qualities.

Empathy

Prisoners are rarely confused about the power relationship in prisons. To quote Andi Brierley in "The Good Prison Officer – Inside Perspectives":

> *The power is not, should not, and never will be equal. Therefore a personal relational adjustment is often required to redress the power dynamic and maintain positive behaviour wherever possible. This is the ability to attune to those we work with and ensure they feel included in decision making as much as possible."*[45]

We found that, unprompted, prisoners invariably mentioned that there was a "line not to be crossed" for officers forming empathic relationships with prisoners, but the definition of that

45 Brierley, A. (2023b). The legitimacy of trust, in in A. Brierley (ed.) *The good prison officer*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp.17-39.

line was hugely variable. Curiously perhaps, in the higher security prisons the use of first names between officers and prisoners was not unusual whereas in some lower security prisons the refusal to be addressed by first name was a symbolic statement of the distance officers should keep. On several occasions, prisoners complained to us about staff who brought their private troubles to work with them, and how this affected their performance:

> *Whatever is going on at home or wherever must be left at the gate.*

So while empathy – the ability to put yourself in another's shoes – was seen as vital, the complexity of demonstrating it in the prison context was significant. This was especially marked in the women's prison we visited, where careless practice could be re-traumatising for women who had far more often than not been victims of physical and psychological abuse before coming to prison.

Consistency

> *With a good officer you will get what you are entitled to from them, and what you aren't entitled to you won't.*

Treating people equally is not equivalent to treating everyone the same, and in discussion, prisoners acknowledged that consistency could be hard to reconcile with an approach that treated every prisoner as an individual. Some harked back to a world where prisoners' entitlements were so limited that it was easier for staff to operate – the answer was almost always "no". But many of the frustrations we heard related less to the sophisticated task of achieving consistency when there is so much discretion at play, than to simple ignorance of either local or national rules amongst a very inexperienced staff cadre. Some felt that this was not the fault of staff, but of management:

> *Consistency is key, good or bad. What prisoners need to know is where you stand. Especially post Covid everything is very inconsistent and both prisoners and staff lack predictability and the certainty needed for the jail to run smoothly.*

An imbalance of prison experience was also mentioned on several occasions.

> *Most of us, if not all of us, have been in here longer than the officers. What faith does that give us...knowing that we know more about the prison than their own officers?*

In a separate conversation, prisoners recognised how a good officer develops networks amongst colleagues in different departments within the prison that enables them to sort problems out informally and through goodwill. The best staff had relationships across the prison that enabled them to fix problems quickly.

Accountability

> *Good officers… they're someone who follows through, doesn't say they'll do something and not do it.*

This quality was highly prized. Prisoners were used to not getting the answer they wanted, but intensely frustrated if officers made promises they then did not keep. That frustration was exacerbated by the absence of effective complaints systems. This took more than one

form. On occasion, the problem was that it was unclear where authority lay. Some prisoners regretted what they saw as a gradual disempowering of the officer role:

I don't feel officers have the same level of responsibility that they used to. They defer to SOs, CMs, cleaning officers. Staff view their role as locking and unlocking, escorting prisoners. They used to know PSIs and Rules.

As a result, getting an answer could become a wild goose chase:

No-one actually takes accountability for anything.

So many issues are palmed off using excuses around 'local policy'.

For others, the issue was simply that no complaint ever resulted in a positive outcome for the prisoner.

I have never had a successful complaint upheld about an officer's behaviour. It says that the system does not want to learn about its employees.

The lack of accountability showed itself in what appeared to be a chaotic approach to the daily routine in some prisons:

The chain of command and the expectations that follow lack transparency. If a CM is off and someone covers, the wing will be run completely differently.

And senior management were again held responsible for making it more difficult to be a good officer.

The SMT are often disconnected from the facts on the ground, creating policy that makes officers' jobs harder.

Officers' ability to "write up" prisoners, making entries in their prison record, was frequently a source of friction. Prisoners complained of negative entries being made without their knowledge until they came to light in another context; and they also complained that positive behaviour on their part rarely resulted in a positive entry. This was perhaps the most frequent example used of power exercised (including through its underuse) without accountability.

Kindness

This was not a word or concept that prisoners often volunteered, but we did hear examples, ranging from the apparently trivial but symbolic to life preserving. The use of a china cup rather than a plastic prisoner mug previously mentioned was one example, and we were also told a story about a young, newly recruited officer who had interrupted the count of prisoners in cells prior to a roll call in order to attend to a prisoner in obvious distress. He was then criticised by a colleague for doing so, but the prisoner telling the story had gone up to him later to commend him. Some examples of kindness had very profound impact:

I've had some good prison officers in my journey through IPP. In fact if it wasn't for a prison officer I don't think my life would be in the shape I am today. Times my mental health is being desperate if it hadn't been for prison officers helping me then I don't know where I would be.

The prison service's own recruitment literature includes this quotation from a recently recruited officer:

> *Kindness and understanding are two of the most powerful tools you can have at your disposal when working with prisoners and are a key part of the work that officers do.*

So it was disappointing that local opportunities for prisoners to commend good staff were not common or well advertised. Given the significant proportion of nominations for the prestigious annual Butler Trust awards that come from prisoners about individual staff, this seemed like a missed opportunity.

Good practice and innovation

We were very aware that we were looking at a prison service struggling to fulfil even its most basic duty of providing sufficient capacity to hold prisoners sent to it by the courts. Indeed, if the system was required to operate to enforceable minimum standards of decency and humanity, it would certainly now be incapable of meeting that duty. Nevertheless, we heard about examples of good practice, both historic and current, which sought to support the development of good relationships and in particular the opportunity for officers to learn the difficult skills required to form them.

Unlocked Graduates

By far the most sophisticated example of innovation we came across was the Unlocked Graduates scheme.

In its own words:

> *Unlocked was established in 2016 with the explicit aim of attracting high-calibre graduate talent to work in the UK prison service and inject new ideas, insights, and energy into the rehabilitation of prisoners – to lead change on the inside that delivers change on the outside.*[46]

It is important to understand that Unlocked is not set up to be an alternative model for recruiting, training and supporting all prison officers, nor as a solution to the problem the prison service faces of recruiting in large volumes to keep up with the demand created by an expanding prison estate. It focuses on supporting those who complete the two year leadership programme to progress into operational roles and empowering them to work together on prison reform. For the majority of those that complete the programme this translates into promotion on the landings, becoming-policy makers or working on reducing reoffending in other associated roles. But it also expects its recruits to be effective prison officers – indeed, to be highly influential in their place of work while undertaking the programme. Feedback from governors suggest that is being achieved,[47] and where we came across Unlocked Graduates officers working in the prisons we visited, prisoners were positive about them as individuals.

Despite its very explicit focus on rehabilitation, much of the focus in recruitment and training is necessarily on surviving the culture shock of working as a prison officer, especially in such difficult times. Unlocked Graduates' definition of the qualities required to be a good prison officer largely follows the well-worn path already described in this report, but with some subtle emphases. The programme is certainly ambitious about the personal impact its recruits might make in terms of reducing reoffending, but it also stresses the importance of self-reflection and continuous learning. Given the obvious potential challenges of joining the prison officer workforce as a graduate on a "special" programme, the recruitment literature sensibly includes advice on the importance of relationships with colleagues as well as with prisoners. To interested candidates, it says:

> *It's fundamental for you as an Unlocked officer to be able to build respectful relationships with people from all walks of life. You will need to be non-judgemental, approachable and supportive whilst also understanding the boundaries of these relationships. As part of a cohort you will build key relationships, support each other and work together with prison officer colleagues to create a positive environment.*[48]

---

46 Unlocked Graduates. *Who we are*. https://unlockedgrads.org.uk/why/who-we-are/

47 One governor that Unlocked Graduates works with said, "I think Unlocked is starting to influence how we recruit and support. It is also attracting some brilliant people into the prison service". Another governor said, "I have to say that I was a bit sceptical of Unlocked. I was not convinced that graduates would bring any special skills and was concerned their training programme meant that the Unlocked officers would sometimes have to be off the wing when we needed them. But a number of years since I first had a group of Unlocked officers join, I am a complete convert. These officers bring a different perspective and genuinely challenge me (in a good way) with their new ideas and follow through. I'm now lobbying to get more each year". Unlocked Impact Report 2022. https://s28953.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Unlocked_ImpactReport_2022_Digital_Interim.pdf

48 Unlocked Graduates. *What we're looking for*. https://unlockedgrads.org.uk/apply/looking-for/

Other elements of the description of required qualities also focus on the prosaic day to day challenges of working as an officer, including decision making and resilience. If candidates arrive a little starry-eyed, the training they receive and the prisons to which they are posted provide a swift antidote. But a strong commitment to providing a positive impact in the lives of the people you are caring for, and sticking to your principles, are non-negotiable:

> *We want participants who share our vision and commitment to rehabilitating prisoners and reducing the costs of reoffending. You will prove your commitment through your two years as a prison officer and be motivated to continue to promote this vision in your future career. You will act with integrity and moral courage throughout your time on the programme.*

Some might argue that the Unlocked programme, requiring candidates to have a degree and then complete a two year master's degree as part of their first two years as a prison officer, reflects a legitimate response to the multiple challenges of being a prison officer. That is not the conclusion we have reached, and we heard little from prisoners to suggest that all prison officers should have that level of educational achievement. Whilst analysis by Unlocked has found that-the retention rate for their recruits is 14% higher than for those entering by the standard route, the people attracted to the scheme are likely to take on additional responsibilities and move up quite rapidly. The entry requirements also undoubtedly would have excluded many existing prison officers whom prisoners identify as being good at the job, and would put off many more mature candidates who also bring substantial benefits to the prison service from experience in previous careers.

The more interesting question is what the prison service may have to learn from Unlocked in the processes it has set up to recruit, train, support and appraise its participants. In particular, the organisation has chosen to use the expertise of former prisoners to help it both select and train the right people to be effective as prison officers. It stresses the value of the lens through which candidates and trainees can be viewed as a result, but also the healthy impact on the teams responsible for recruitment and training. Former prisoners are involved at every stage, trained for the roles they carry out and, crucially, form part of a team that includes serving prison officers.

At the recruitment stage, former prisoners assist both with delivering scenarios that test candidates' ability to respond to difficult situations, and play a part in the assessment of which candidates should be accepted. Unlocked point to a number of benefits. Former prisoner and existing prison officer assessors generally reach similar views about candidates, but their joint participation also models the type of collaborative relationship to which candidates are being asked to commit. For officers, the involvement of former prisoners is evidence of success in the rehabilitative element of their work in prisons.

The same pattern continues in the delivery of both the initial training and throughout the two years of continuous professional development, including two week summer schools. Former prisoners work alongside prison officer trainers and university based tutors, as well as delivering specific sessions based on their experience, and providing a "candid café" opportunity for trainees in which they can ask former prisoners questions in a "no holds barred" setting.

We spoke to some of the Unlocked trainers who had prison officer backgrounds and some who had backgrounds as prisoners about the experience of delivering training together. Officer trainers readily confessed to initial scepticism and the disconcerting impact of being expected to work closely with people whom their experience in the prison service had led them largely to avoid for fear of seeming compromised. Former prisoners were worried that their involvement might be tokenistic. But both former prisoners and officers quickly spoke with enthusiasm about the benefits of working together and the impact on trainees. They felt that the curriculum was well structured and allowed all members of the training team to deliver it confidently, regardless

of background. They also confirmed what this report has found repeatedly: that they shared very similar views about the qualities of a good prison officer. Concerns about maintaining appropriate professional boundaries turned out to be misplaced – all were selected and equipped on the basis of their ability to teach. Some also mentioned the principle of "nothing about me without me" that is common in delivering training about race, for example. The presence of former prisoners made it impossible for officer trainers to deliver an "approved" version of training in formal sessions followed by an unapproved informal version out of sight. All were conscious that they were equipping the graduate trainees to undertake a really significant personal challenge, and the credibility that their joint experience of prisons brought to that task was seen as crucial.

Compared to the prison service, Unlocked also takes a very different approach to the support of its trainees during their first two years. The prison service can reasonably assert that it has wanted to do more to support new officers after their brief initial training. It has set up a mentoring scheme – "new colleague mentors" – and the prisoners we spoke to were very clear that the likely fate of new officers depended heavily on where they took their advice in the early days. But they also told us that mentoring was often being done by officers with little more experience than those they were seeking to help, and that some mentors were clearly not suitable in terms of the attitudes they held. The best of intentions on continuing professional development have also gone by the wayside. Faced with the overwhelming demand to have officers on shift, the prison service has abandoned its commitment to dedicated training time for newly recruited officers to complete an apprenticeship as part of their introduction to the role.[49]

By contrast, Unlocked assigns carefully selected, experienced officer mentors - known as Mentoring Prison Officers (MPOs) - to all its trainees for the duration of the two year programme, spending two days a week on site with their mentees. MPOs themselves complete a structured programme to develop expertise in supporting new prison officers, and spend four days a week on the landings with their mentees. Trainees receive 30 half-days of dedicated training across the programme in addition to the initial six week training. But they are also required to undertake a good deal of work in their own time to obtain the masters degree which forms part of the programme. This will include setting up a project within their own prison, and writing a short dissertation on a policy subject of their choosing. They also undertake a two week placement outside the prison system or in a different prison from their own. The programme makes significant use of its own graduates – called ambassadors – to motivate and encourage trainees following in their footsteps.

It is very much to the credit of the prison service that it has supported the Unlocked programme, especially at a time of such acute operational and financial pressure, and it is understandable if the gulf between standard prison officer training and what Unlocked has to offer seems unbridgeable in current circumstances. But elements of what Unlocked has done are transferable at little or no cost – in particular the involvement of former prisoners – and it is clear that the involvement of prison service staff has also been very rewarding for those staff. The experience of receiving prisons does seem to bear out the thesis that well-trained, well-motivated and well-supported prison officers can make a radical difference even within their first year or two of appointment. Compared to the cost of recruiting and then almost immediately losing staff to whom none of those descriptions can apply, the value for money case of enhanced investment appears very strong.[50]

---

49 FE Week. (2024). *MoJ's prison service U-turns on mandatory apprenticeships*. https://feweek.co.uk/mojs-prison-service-u-turns-on-mandatory-apprenticeships/

50 At the time of publication, the Ministry of Justice and Unlocked Graduates have been unable to agree terms to continue to deliver the scheme, and at the time of publication there is no contract to recruit in 2025. This is highly regrettable given the evidence for this report of the impact of the scheme's recruits and the innovative methods pioneered to select and support them.

Prisoners training officers

Unlocked has used former prisoners in a systematic way as part of its approach to training new prison officers, but we also came across some examples where serving prisoners were involved in helping experienced prison officers to enhance their skills. For many years, the allocation of dedicated in service training time for prison officers has been inadequate. A small protected resource is quickly swallowed up by essential training in matters related to safety and the risk of litigation - in particular the correct use of control and restraint techniques. In current circumstances, governors may often face the choice between running staff training and operating even the most limited daily regime. So it was admirable to find imaginative schemes that took advantage of the "free" resource of prisoner insight to help officers do a better job.

In one prison, experienced prisoners helped new staff during their induction by explaining some of the administrative tasks that matter to prisoners, such as visits booking, making phone calls, how to operate in-cell technology, or having property sent in. They also had permission to explain to new staff what prisoners' expectations were in terms of respect and fairness and how they could expect positive attitudes and behaviour on their part to be reciprocated.

More frequently, we have come across prisoners trained to act as experts in how to access important information about rules and administrative systems, saving staff time but also coming to act as a useful resource for staff also new to the many complexities of the prison service.

In a more ambitious and structured example, the Zahid Mubarek Trust (ZMT) has, in a number of prisons, trained prisoners to help staff deliver the prison service's policies on diversity, including the handling of complaints. Prisoners receive a 14 week training course from ZMT, but then work alongside diversity leads in prisons. In two prisons, the governor has extended that to allow trained prisoners to deliver sessions to officers learning to be keyworkers under the OMiC programme.

In one prison we visited, the trusting relationships built up as a consequence over an extended period had led to the formation of an ad hoc group of staff and prisoners, jointly chaired, tasked with identifying priorities for positive change within the prison. Their conclusion was that prisoners with experience of working with ZMT should design and deliver training sessions with the aim of helping prison staff see prisoners as more than just prisoners. That work is in its infancy, but those we spoke to agreed that it was only possible because of a broader culture within the prison, supported by successive governors, that sought to involve prisoners in solving problems that affected them. It also profited from the personal relationships of trust engendered by staff and prisoners working together and committing to innovation that might be viewed with suspicion by their peers on both sides of the divide that they were seeking to bridge.

Appraisal

We are all very used nowadays to being endlessly asked to comment on any service or product that we have bought, from Airbnb properties to a meal in a restaurant or the most modest online purchase. It's uncontroversial to be offered the opportunity to rate the service in a canteen or the cleanliness of a washroom. The civil service has for many years included upward appraisal as part of how it assesses the performance of senior managers. But the idea of prisoners being given the opportunity to comment on the performance of prison officers is so immediately controversial that even the prisoners we spoke to seemed thrown off balance by the idea.

In reality, prisoners do already have opportunities to tell the prison service about the performance of officers. The most obvious is the complaints procedure, which for three decades has provided prisoners with a way to write direct to the governor under "confidential access". That process always had the possibility of complaints about staff misconduct in mind, but the prisoners we heard from viewed the whole complaints system with scepticism, and never more so than when

allegations of poor staff behaviour were concerned. None could remember a complaint against a staff member being upheld, and using the system carried risks for the complainant:

Prisoners who use the complaints system as a mechanism to give feedback are quite often designated as serial complainers as if they are the problem and not the system.

But the potential value of criticism was also understood:

It is very hard to give feedback about a prison officer: complaints and DIRFS (discrimination incident reporting forms) are a case in point. They don't take them seriously yet prisoner feedback should feed into reflective practice sessions to aid learning.

A complaints system is a very blunt instrument if the objective is to help staff improve their understanding and practice, and the stakes for both complainant and the person complained about are very high in the custodial context. That is one of the reasons why the prison service has sometimes explored ideas of restorative practice and mediation as an adjunct to the formal, lengthy and bureaucratic processes by which allegations against both staff and prisoners are handled. Once again, admirable initiatives of that kind have struggled to gain traction in a system under such intense operational pressure.

The other side of the coin, however, is how to recognise good performance by staff, and we found both national and local examples which gave prisoners the opportunity to affect staff performance by calling out the best of it. For many years, the prestigious national awards given by the Butler Trust to people working in prison and probation services have accepted nominations directly from prisoners and encouraged the submission of supporting statements from them. The same is true of the annual Prison Officer of the Year awards organised by the prison service itself. Many prisons have local awards schemes, and we came across one prison where the "prison officer of the month" award was to be matched by a "prisoner of the month" award on a particular wing, with prisoners nominating the former and staff the latter. More typically, however, we heard from prisoners about schemes which had fallen into disuse or were poorly advertised – more likely to be the victims of a lack of attention and priority than any serious misgivings about the principle.

In another field we were told about a scheme which had systematised very frequent recognition. Rather than requiring a resource-intensive system of nominations, assessment criteria and public displays of approval, "Learning from Excellence"[51] sets out to capture and be individually grateful for countless acts of good practice in the healthcare environment. The brainchild of a consultant paediatrician who found himself unexpectedly in the position of being a patient in the NHS, what started as a means simply to let people know that their good practice had been noticed and appreciated quickly turned into a means of identifying and spreading innovation. It aimed to improve patient safety through identifying the best care rather than investigating the worst. With many prisoners now having access to in-cell or kiosk-based technology that includes a simple internal email facility, there is no technical obstacle to both prisoners and staff being able to record examples where someone has demonstrated the qualities that this report has found to be so widely shared as the attributes of a good officer. As Learning from Excellence has found, the process can morph into something of strategic value from those straightforward beginnings.

In short, there are low or nil cost ways for prisons and the prison service to send crucial messages about the behaviours they value without embarking on what would certainly be a challenging debate about prisoner involvement in the formal appraisal of staff performance.

51 Learning from Excellence. https://learningfromexcellence.com/

Shared activity

A 2022 inspectorate thematic report on the subject of race[52] made a series of recommendations that are highly relevant to this report and which we repeatedly heard endorsed by prisoners when we drew attention to them. In the introduction to the report, in which he also pointed out how racism within prisons had become more subtle than the overt racism common in only slightly more distant times, the chief inspector said this:

> *Alongside important procedural approaches, the measures supported by both staff and prisoners were largely those intended to create opportunities for respectful communication and the development of mutual understanding. They included cooking and eating together, an apparently simple activity that has deep cultural relevance and meaning; 'reverse mentoring', whereby prisoners provide insights into their lives during private discussions with staff; joint prisoner and staff forums, and joint training and education.*

The government's response[53] appeared to support these recommendations, but without giving a timescale for their implementation, and there is no public document that sets out whether any have been given effect nationally. The prisoners we heard from added joint sporting, artistic, horticultural and charitable activities to the list of shared activities which could build better relationships between staff and prisoners. They also underlined the importance of time when staff and prisoners could simply have the space to get to know each other, generally in residential accommodation when prisoners were not required to be at work or education. That space – over many years known by the term association – disappeared completely during the pandemic and in many prisons has not returned. That is due in part to staff shortages, but also to the anxiety that prisoners being unlocked in significant numbers without some kind of structured activity provides the opportunity for disorder and violence.

From prisoners' perspectives, "association" is largely a thing of the past regardless of whether the argument for its restriction has actually been made out. Cooking, eating, playing sport or making music together seemed even more remote possibilities to the prisoners we met, although many could recall examples from the past and their positive impact. Regardless of the prison service's policy stance, the opportunities for relationship building that lie at the heart of our custodial model appear to have dwindled to a dramatic extent.

A strategic curriculum for professional development

The Knowledge and Understanding framework (KUF)[54] is an innovative learning programme for professionals working across health, social care, criminal justice and voluntary sectors to support people with complex emotional needs, often associated with a diagnosis of 'personality disorder'. HMPPS was amongst the commissioners for the framework, which is co-facilitated and co-produced by trainers with lived experience and clinical expertise. As the literature review for this report has highlighted, KUF is a rarity in the field of co-production having been subject to evaluation, but the outcomes so far suggest that it is an approach worth pursuing. As if to demonstrate that prisons are not the only public service where short term financial considerations can trump longer term benefit, central funding for KUF co-ordination and for training in community mental health trusts has been withdrawn for the financial year 2024/25,[55] however, the training will continue to be delivered in prisons and secure mental health settings.

---

52 HMIP. (2022). *The experiences of adult black male prisoners and black prison staff*. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/the-experiences-of-adult-black-male-prisoners-and-black-prison-staff/

53 HMPPS. (2023). *A Response to: HMIP Thematic Review – The experiences of adult Black male prisoners and Black prison staff*. https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2022/12/HMIP-Thematic-Response-2023-accessible-version.pdf

54 KUF Training. https://www.kuftraining.org.uk/

55 KUF Training. KUF Hub Statement. https://www.kuftraining.org.uk/images/KUF_Hub_Statement.pdf

The framework is explicit in its central aim of improving the confidence and competence of the workforce, and equally explicit that the contribution of those receiving a service from that workforce is essential to both design and delivery:

> *Lived experience of Complex Emotional Needs (or of a diagnosis of personality disorder) is valued in equal measure to work-related experience through authentic coproduction in all aspects of the design, delivery, evaluation, and quality assurance of the KUF training.*

In other words, the prison service already has expertise in design and delivery of training using a technique which appears to have directly transferable potential for a very much larger portion of its core day to day business. If co-production and co-delivery in the field of personality disorder is possible, how much more should it be attainable for a wider prison population where that added complication is not a factor. At the very least, the experience gained from KUF should be harnessed in the development of a new training model and generic curriculum for prison officers.

Wider issues

Inevitably, given the open questions we put both to prisoners and to others we met for this report, other issues were raised with us that impacted on the ability to recruit and retain a high quality prison workforce.

The training curriculum – both for initial training and for continuous professional development

We are aware that the Ministry of Justice has commissioned a review of its training estate and the means of delivering initial officer training, but also that that review has not been asked to look at the content of the curriculum either for initial training or for continuous professional development. Evidence to the justice select committee suggested that the curriculum for initial training was under review but we are not aware whether the same is true for continuing professional development or even if such a curriculum exists.

The survey of staff opinion carried out by the justice select committee for its inquiry into the prison workforce found that only around one in five prison officers thought their training was good or better. A third considered it poor.[56] The prison service's response to the committee's question about how officers can be better equipped for their role focussed on occupational health services, pilots of mentoring and structured supervision, the provision of body worn cameras and incapacitant spray, and the opportunities for officers to gain specialist skills such as dog handling or physical education instruction. We think this limited response betrays the absence of a strategy to ensure that officers are properly trained for the core job as the environment in which it has to be done changes, and knowledge about how to do it best increases.

We have already pointed out the seismic shifts in the nature of the prison population that the future holds, and in any field of this significance there is a constant flow of new learning from the academic world and from associated disciplines. The process of creating, reviewing and updating a curriculum to support prison officers in their changing environment needs to start and should be both open and consultative.

Line management and supervision

We mentioned earlier that some of the prisoners we heard from had worked as managers themselves and in various professions. They were all bemused by the public prison service's approach to both line management and supervision.

On supervision, the prison service says that it is trialling structured supervision for officers, a process distinct from line management which gives officers space to reflect on their practice with an experienced colleague. Prisoners expressed surprise to us that this wasn't already available:

> *They need to be able to deal with the levels of distress here: they need time out sometimes to reset.*

The absence of professional supervision not only denies officers that time out, but sends a powerful symbolic message about the way the organisation views the role. Resilience is certainly a necessary quality in a prison officer, but too much of the employer's duty of care currently appears to be invested in repairing the damage when resilience has run dry.

The absence of effective line management arrangements for prison officers was even more evident to prisoners. As part of the changes introduced to deliver major savings from around 2011 onwards, the prison service abolished the rank of senior officer, which had previously had line management

56 Justice Committee. (2023). *Prison operational workforce survey*. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/122073/default/

responsibility for main grade prison officers. Typically, a senior officer's duties would have placed them alongside prison officers on wings, with line management responsibility for around eight to 10 officers. That line management responsibility included writing annual personal appraisal reports, supported by periodic face to face reviews and underpinning a poor performance procedure for officers who consistently failed to reach an acceptable standard. Very few people who remember that system would say that it worked well. Despite successive reforms, it was bureaucratic and only rarely performed its intended function of improving performance for most, but leading to regrading or dismissal for those who simply couldn't perform to a required standard.

The system's initial replacement involved giving line management responsibilities to "custodial managers", effectively the former line managers for the defunct senior officer grade. That meant that custodial managers typically found themselves being asked to line manage 30 or more prison officers, and in roles that had many more demands placed on them than senior officers. Crucially, a custodial manager would have far less opportunity to observe prison officers carrying out their day to day duties and, in particular, the quality of their interaction with prisoners.

After many years, the prison service has accepted that custodial managers cannot be expected to administer its appraisal system, but its response has been to do away with the appraisal system rather than to reinstate reasonable spans of control for line managers. The "supervising officers" - in theory more experienced prison officers responsible for overseeing the day to day running of an area such as a residential wing – have no responsibility to develop a small group of officers under their line management control, nor any authority to instigate procedures that might remove those who cannot do the job to an acceptable standard. The prisoners we heard from spoke frequently about the fact that the supervising officer on a wing on any given day might know little or nothing about its operation or the team of staff working on it, and this contributed to their sense that lines of authority in the prison generally were unclear and ineffective:

> *No-one actually takes accountability for nothing.*

Prisoners expected a good deal of "buck-passing", and described how it generated frustration:

> *Getting the simple things right is important in prison. Making sure you know about the visits for instance and who's responsible for updating the visits board. Day staff say night staff are responsible yet night staff don't do it so nobody does it and prisoners get upset and stressed and anxious. When we ask why prisoners can't do that we don't get satisfactory answers and yet nobody seems to be able to solve the dilemma of why night staff aren't doing what they are supposed to do…who is actually in charge.*

The absence of an effective chain of command may have been the consequence of a need to save money, but its impact on the lives of prisoners and staff is all too obvious. Day to day, it generates frustration and denies the organisation an effective means to assess which of its officers need either to be helped or to be moved on.

In several discussions, prisoners asked about probationary procedures for new officers. They knew about officers who left of their own accord, and the variety of reasons for doing so, but not of any officers who had left because they failed probation. We tabled a freedom of information request asking how many officers did in fact fail probation and either have their probationary period extended or face dismissal. The answer was that the prison service did not hold that information centrally and considered that it would be too expensive to gather it. The conclusion we draw is that the probationary period is not currently used as a means for the prison service proactively to assess what proportion of its recruitment decisions have turned out to be correct. In practice, the decision as to which of its recruits go on to hold positions with lifelong job security lies in the hands of those individuals rather than their employer.

A strategic approach to human resources in the prison service

Few, if any, of the issues raised with us by prisoners will come as a surprise to the prison service. Its own evidence to the justice select committee touches on many of them, and the evidence from many others to that committee, including serving prisoners, provides an extensive agenda for reform. The government itself set out an ambitious programme in its Prison Strategy White Paper in 2021.[57] Chapter five of that document – "Our People" – made promises of change across recruitment, retention, supervision, training, leadership, progression, diversity and technology. It promised within two years to lay the groundwork for delivering a ten year vision for its workforce.

As far as we are aware, no update has ever been published, either for that initial two year period or for progress towards the 10 year vision. We asked the prison service if it would provide an update for the purposes of this report, but none has been forthcoming.

The chaos caused by the mismatch between demand for prison places and its supply is not confined to prisons. The operational headquarters and policy functions within the Ministry of Justice are just as vulnerable to the incessant demands of crisis management as governors. Changes in political and operational leadership inevitably bring shifts in the agenda, and both public and parliamentary scrutiny is dominated by regular outcries over the dismal condition of prisons in the here and now. If there are mechanisms to keep track of the very many promises made for strategic change, they are kept hidden away and no minister or secretary of state appears to be held accountable for delivering their predecessor's undertakings.

In those circumstances, it is all the more important that there is clarity within the department about where responsibility for delivery lies. But here too there is confusion. So far as we are aware, neither the operational head of the prison service, nor the CEO of HMPPS to whom they report, has a dedicated head of human resources reporting to them. They must rely for their HR advice and leadership on a policy function within the Ministry of Justice which must also deliver HR reform for probation and courts staff, alongside a myriad of other responsibilities from judicial appointments through to the appointment of individuals to various statutory and other arm's length bodies in both the criminal and civil justice systems.

We accept that there are generic HR issues which might span all of the department's responsibilities, and some areas in which prison and probation staff in particular could benefit from joint policies and opportunities. But the evidence of this report and the literature on which it draws is that developing and supporting the role of prison officer urgently requires unambiguous and accountable leadership. We have not seen where that leadership rests, nor that there is clear accountability for the delivery of a public, time bounded and measurable strategic plan.

57 GOV.UK. (2021). *Prisons Strategy White Paper*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prisons-strategy-white-paper

Conclusions

No one involved in the prison system in England and Wales in 2024 could fail to see the impact of the staffing problems caused by the drastic cuts made from 2012 onwards and the wholly predictable consequences of then having to recruit quickly and in high volume to deal with the equally predictable effects of reckless changes in sentencing policy. The prison service has no choice but to be preoccupied with how it staggers through from one crisis to the next, but decisions taken in the midst of chaos can have very long term effects. The purpose of this report is not to advise the prison service on how to solve its immediate staffing crisis – it has already secured significant improvements in pay and some of the governors we spoke to in passing were complimentary about the quality of some of their new recruits. Initiatives such as mentoring for new staff were clearly likely to have a positive impact if they could be delivered in practice. Several managers saw the opportunities of a significant turnover in staff, despite the immediate challenges.

Rather, this report aims to inform the strategic decisions the prison service faces in designing a future workforce. Specifically in relation to officers, the grade which more than any other affects the quality of life for prisoners, what we heard from prisoners was a plea for the challenges of being a good prison officer to be properly recognised in the way they are trained, supported and held accountable. The rhetoric of the Prisons Strategy White Paper is simply not matched by the service's policies, which all too often treat officers more like unskilled labour than the "hidden heroes" celebrated by the top brass.[58]

For many years, the prison service could rely on an institutional memory of a model for running prisons that relied on relationships built face to face between officers and prisoners. The disorder of the last decade, the shock of the pandemic and the disastrous turnover in staff brought about by austerity cuts, leaves that memory hanging by a thread. Only a minority of staff now have direct experience of working consistently in that way, and many of those will have had their confidence undermined by the experience of recent years. So it is crucial that, even in the midst of turmoil, the prison service recognises that it is at a turning point. It must decide what its operating model for the future is to be, properly examining the nature of the population for which it will be caring.

The starting point for a genuinely strategic approach to creating and sustaining an effective officer workforce must be a clearer statement of the purpose of prison that both staff and prisoners can share. The evidence of this report is that, while working towards a successful return to the outside world remains an important part of that purpose, the foundation for the great majority of a way of life in prison should be the joint creation of safe, respectful and purposeful communities. With so many more prisoners serving very long periods inside, and with so much jeopardy hanging over both the decision to release and the possibility of recall following release, it cannot be sustainable to treat imprisonment simply as an interruption to a person's existence in the wider community. Many prisoners will spend many or all of their most productive years in the care of the prison service – that time has to have meaning in itself as well as hope for what might follow it.

The implications of such a purpose are manifold. They go beyond the important test that already exists but is often ignored in practice that "a convicted prisoner, in spite of his imprisonment, retains all civil rights which are not taken away expressly or by necessary implication".[59] They require that in addition to applying what is often referred to as the "normality test" – in other words striving to make life in prison as close as it can be to the life that a prisoner may hope to lead in the community following release – the prison should address how a prisoner can live a full and meaningful life in

---

58 Civil Service World. (2021). *MoJ celebrates 'hidden heroes' of the justice system*. https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/moj-celebrates-hidden-heroes-of-the-justice-system

59 Raymond v Honey I [1983] 1 AC 1 I United Kingdom House of Lords I Judgment I Law I CaseMine. https://www.casemine.com/judgement/uk/5a8ff8c960d03e7f57ecd6d2

custody.[60] Some aspects of this relate to how a prisoner might spend their time, with opportunities to work, learn and pursue their talents and interests. Other aspects relate to the ability to maintain relationships with people outside prison and continue to perform the role of parent, partner or friend, for example. A way of life founded on this joint purpose of creating a healthy community in custody must also require prisoners to have the opportunity to take responsibility, earn positions of trust, play a part in decision making that affects them and, crucially, be accountable alongside staff for the consequences of the choices they make. Many, if not all of the elements needed for such a statement exist in the "Rehabilitative Culture" analysis that the prison service itself has pioneered, but there appears to be a dislocation between that work and the Prisons Strategy White Paper 2021 presented to parliament.

Delivering this way of life in prison would be a challenging ambition in any circumstances. With a population so often affected by poor mental and physical health, substance misuse, a litany of adverse childhood experience compounded by remorse and shame for the acts which have led to their incarceration, all exaggerated by the intrinsic harm that punishment by exile represents, the complexity of the task facing prison officers can hardly be overstated, but neither can it be side-stepped.

This is certainly not a plea to return to some golden age. The tradition of relational practice in English and Welsh prisons does not come with a history of unblemished success or impeccable treatment of prisoners. But prisoners told us repeatedly, and always as the first response to the question, "what makes a good prison officer?", that building rapport was the indispensable skill. Prisoners and officers are quite literally "in it together", locked in the same space with restrictions on their movement and their mutual safety ultimately dependent on a shared desire to maintain it. Effective collaboration is a matter of necessity.

It may be that technology offers some significant opportunity to reduce the "turnkey" elements which still take up so much of a prison officer's working day. Frustratingly, simple technology that allows prisoners to control access by other prisoners to their cells (reducing theft and bullying and doing away with the endless requests to officers to lock their door behind them) has existed for many years and is either not installed in many prisons or is undermined by cells having to be overcrowded. In-cell and kiosk technology that allows prisoners to undertake a wide variety of mundane tasks that previously required officers to assist (like ordering goods from the prison shop or making menu choices) is widespread and in many places is now enhanced by simple internal email systems that mean officers no longer have to act as a postal service for prisoners, with all the scope for abuse and complaint that was generated as a result. It would be reasonable to expect that technology might also in due course reduce the amount of officer time that goes into accounting for the whereabouts of prisoners within the prison and allow for easier movement of prisoners within the prison without officers having to answer doorbells and escort prisoners simply to open internal gates.

We have also heard from prisoners that good officers not only do the work of several poor ones, but prevent that work arising in the first place. As any number of businesses have discovered to their profit, a highly trained, expert and better rewarded workforce can be more efficient than the larger workforce it supplants. But such a transition cannot happen by accident or without investment. The prison service must decide and make clear that this is the operating model it wants, however much the current emergencies frustrate that ambition. We have a small number of recommendations that we think can put beyond doubt the direction of travel, and justify the investment that will certainly be required in the short and medium term.

60 The concept of "normality" in prison is far from straightforward. What may seem normal to one person is often not to another, and many people in prison will be coming from and possibly returning to circumstances that seem anything but normal to an observer from a different social and economic background. Normalising the environment may slide into an attempt to "normalise" the individual as part of a rehabilitative effort. But the concept does lend itself to a useful test in designing prison regimes and in taking endless decisions day to day – "is there a reason to do this differently because we're in prison?". It is a test which can be usefully applied to any aspect of how life works inside – most obviously where there are security or safety concerns, but also in areas such as applying and being selected for work, access to technology, the myriad of local rules concerning clothing and appearance, controlling access to your cell, communications and rights of redress. A useful discussion of the principle of normality and its application in two different jurisdictions can be found at: van de Rijt, J., van Ginneken, E, & Boone, M. (2023*). Lost in translation: The principle of normalisation in prison policy in Norway and the Netherlands*. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14624745221103823

Recommendations

The purpose of prison

The prison service should have a public design principle for the way of life in prison that gives prominence to creating an environment that supports personal growth in a healthy prison community alongside rehabilitation.

A new approach to the role of prison officer

Acknowledging the complexity of delivering that purpose, the changing context in which it will need to be delivered, and the centrality of relational practice to achieving it, the prison service should commit to a strategy that radically enhances the initial training, professional development and supervision of prison officers.

A registered profession

The change in approach required should be given substance and protection by a system of registration for prison officers, analogous to the registration requirement for nurses.[61]
We suggest that the role of officer, which carries life and death importance and for which regularly updated knowledge and skills are essential, is closely comparable to that of a nurse. Registration would involve the following features:

- A standard setting, expert body at arm's length from the employer(s), with responsibility for drawing up and periodically revising a code of practice for prison officers.
- A certificate of competence to practice, with a requirement for renewal every three years.
- A renewal process requiring evidence of competent practice, self-reflection and professional development during the relevant period.
- An independent process of assessment and appeal in cases where renewal of registration was withdrawn, or where registration was removed as a consequence of serious malpractice.

We understand that this reform would have substantial set up and running costs and would require both the prison service and private prison operators to provide the resources for officers to be able to meet the requirements of both initial registration and periodic renewal. Those resources would include time for professional supervision, and the provision of material and training to support both skills and knowledge acquisition. The employers would have to work closely with the registration authority to ensure that officers had what they needed to keep up to date with a changing operating context and a constantly improving knowledge of best practice. But that is the point – the effective support of this key role is too important to be left to the vicissitudes of political and administrative upheaval in Whitehall.

The reinstatement of line management and effective appraisal for prison officers

Officers should be managed by individuals who get to observe their work face to face with prisoners on a daily basis, with spans of control no larger than one manager to 10 officers, and an appraisal system that triggers action to respond to poor performance.

The adoption of professional supervision across the board

The prison service appears to be heading in this direction already. While accepting the challenges of doing so in the current context, it must not allow those difficulties to lead to an abandonment of a much needed support for prison officers.

61 Nursery and Midwifery Council. Registration. https://www.nmc.org.uk/registration/

An operational policy to support activities that build relationships and empathy between officers and prisoners

This relates to the prison service's response to the HMCIP report "The experiences of adult black male prisoners and black prison staff",[62] which appears to accept the need for more opportunities for prisoners and staff to build relationships through activities such as cooking and sharing meals (to which the prisoners we heard from added from their own experience). Again, it is crucial that the prison service does not use the current crisis of staffing in many prisons to sideline or neglect an existing commitment to reform. In practice, these activities tend to be popular and well respected by prisoners, and therefore not resource intensive.

A generic commitment to involve prisoners in both the design and delivery of this new approach to the prison officer role.

Prisoners should contribute to the design of each of the recommendations listed above. The evidence that they can provide insight is now overwhelming and the means to access it exists. The development and delivery of the Knowledge and Understanding Framework (KUF) provides a helpful and highly relevant precedent. As we made clear in the introduction, we do not claim that this report can reflect a representative prisoner view, and certainly not a comprehensive one. But all consultation and policy development processes are imperfect – that cannot be an excuse for failing to engage. The more the prison service makes the effort to listen, the greater the benefit it will derive and the more the process of listening leading to co-design can be refined.

In addition, there are key areas in which prisoners and former prisoners can and should contribute to the delivery of the new approach we seek. In particular we recommend that:

- The approach taken by Unlocked Graduates in engaging former prisoners in the recruitment and initial training of prison officers should be adopted by both public and private prison operators.
- Serving prisoners should be trained to assist in elements of in service training for prison officers, particularly during their induction and in relation to interventions designed to build empathy between prisoners and staff.
- Every prison should have a local scheme that allows prisoners to identify good practice by good staff.
- The prison service should adopt the Learning from Excellence model and ensure that prisoners are able to participate in it.

An accountable person

We recommend that the director general of prisons should be supported at board level by an HR professional with personal accountability for delivering these recommendations.

Balancing demand and supply

The politics of punishment are well beyond the scope of this paper, and there is no sense in which we consider that the reshaping of the prison service's approach to its officer grades is dependent on a re-balancing of the demand for prison places with what any government will realistically be prepared to fund by way of supply. But it would be a disservice to everyone who lives and works in our prison system not to point out that their lives are made very substantially worse by the reckless approach to sentencing policy that has characterised every administration for most of the last three decades. Designing a radically better future is not impossible in the midst of an emergency – commentators often cite the work that went on to design a national

62 HMIP. (2022). *The experiences of adult black male prisoners and black prison staff*. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/the-experiences-of-adult-black-male-prisoners-and-black-prison-staff/

health service while the country fought for its very existence. But there has to be some prospect of the emergency coming to an end so that the prison service's leadership can move from crisis management to crisis prevention. Providing that opportunity lies in the gift of ministers and parliament, and it is time they faced up to their responsibility to do so.

PRISON
REFORM
TRUST

15 Northburgh Street,
London. EC1V 0JR
020 7251 5070
www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk
contact@prisonreformtrust.org.uk