Prison Reform Trust response to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee inquiry into prison culture: governance, leadership and staffing – January 2025

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal 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. The Prison Reform Trust provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Penal Affairs Group and has an advice and information service for people in prison.

The Prison Reform Trust's main objectives are:

- reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime
- improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families
- promote equality and human rights in the criminal justice system.

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Introduction

1. We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute evidence to this important and timely inquiry. Our chief executive, Pia Sinha, provided oral evidence to the committee on 26 November 2024 where she responded to many of the operational questions that the committee is seeing evidence of. This written submission to the inquiry is intended to build on that evidence and provide the committee with further detail on the findings of our recent report *Potential Unlocked: building a sustainable prison workforce* published in December 2024, and our Next Gen prison leadership project.

2. *Potential Unlocked*, written by PRT's former director and former prison governor Peter Dawson, calls for the radical transformation of the prison officer role in England and Wales. The report acknowledges the current operational challenges facing the prison service but argues that these should not prevent the implementation of necessary strategic reforms to create a more professional and effective prison officer workforce for the future.

   The report recommends:

   - A professional registration system: Implementation of a mandatory registration system for prison officers, similar to nursing, requiring regular renewal and ongoing professional development
   - Enhanced training: A radical enhancement of initial training, professional development, and supervision for prison officers

- Improved management structure: Introduction of a maximum ratio of one manager to ten officers, with regular face-to-face observation of officer-prisoner interactions
- Prisoner involvement: Greater involvement of prisoners in both the design and delivery of officer training and development programs
- Board-level accountability: Appointment of an HR professional at board level with specific responsibility for implementing these reforms

The role of a prison governor

How can the pipeline of talent within HMPPS be promoted and secured?

3. Facing intense pressure to lead through yet another period of crisis; beaten down by bureaucracy; and left with little room for creativity, innovation or autonomous thinking, prison leaders feel disempowered, demotivated and burnt out, reluctant to acknowledge and appreciate their own level of influence and authority.

4. The rapid turnover of prison leaders and staff has robbed the service of its institutional experience of how to deliver safe and effective prisons, as well as the belief and aspiration that things can be different. The cost of this is the quality of life for those prisoners in their care.

5. Despite genuine attempts by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) to enhance the quality of leadership within its ranks, a culture of mistrust within the system means that programmes of support or coaching are often viewed with cynicism, leading to poor levels of engagement.

6. To address this, PRT has created a Next Gen leadership project, led by our CEO Pia Sinha, which aims to support the next generation of prison service leaders to improve life in prison for all that live and work there.

7. We are working with 19 deputy governors, who represent nearly 45% of prisons in the country. Participants attend a series of four day-long workshops with expert speakers over a period of eight months, followed by a four-month implementation period. They design and implement a project within their prison which should satisfy two conditions: (1) it needs to be co-created with prisoners; and (2) where possible, external partners should be involved. These projects—which are currently being developed by deputy governors—will then be evaluated by PRT.

8. The purpose is twofold. The first is that you create 19 improvement projects in the country that directly benefit prisoners and counteract the constant stream of negative publicity about prisons. The second is to broaden the range of expertise that deputy governors draw from, bringing prisoners, leaders with lived experience of prison, and third-sector organisations to support them in improving their prison. This also extends between participants, and we have been encouraged to see that they particularly value the network they have developed with other future leaders of our prison system.

9. To evaluate the projects, we will conduct consultations with the prisoners directly affected. This is a tried and tested PRT methodology where we get qualitative data from prisoners, who will, hopefully, talk about the benefits and the outcomes that they have gained from the projects. We will then publish these findings to share learning and good practice, which could then be used or adapted for other prisons.

10. The Next Gen leadership project will also be independently evaluated, so that we can learn and develop its next iteration. But in advance of that, we are also conducting pre and post-testing with our prison leaders, to understand the impact of the project in developing motivation, resilience, perceived autonomy, competence, creativity, value clarity, political astuteness,

11. The project has been very well received and supported by the senior leadership within HMPPS. They have not viewed it with suspicion, they have not viewed it in a negative way, and they are encouraging us to see whether we can diversify and provide this leadership programme to other leaders within the organisation.

HMPPS

12. 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. Prisoners can help both articulate that vision and in some respects support its delivery.

13. Developing a vision for the role of the prison officer starts with being clear about purpose within a prison.

14. We have been encouraged 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.

15. It is vital that it should do so. We hope our *Potential Unlocked* report, as well as the insights of our Prisoner Policy Network[1] — which are informed by prisoners' perspectives and which the prison service itself might struggle to access — will assist in that endeavour.

16. 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.

[1] See more at https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publications/PPN

17. 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.

18. 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.

19. We accept that there are generic HR issues which might span all 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

Recruitment, training and retention

What is the role of a prison officer?

20. 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.

21. 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.

22. 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.

23. 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.

24. 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.

25. 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.

26. 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.

27. We are concerned that the traditional model of prison management, based on face-to-face relationships between officers and prisoners, is at risk of being lost due to high staff turnover and systemic pressures.

28. Confidence 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.

What are the aims of the officers' training programme and how effective is it at achieving those aims?

29. A survey of staff opinion carried out by the House of Commons Justice 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.[2] 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.

30. We think this limited response betrays the absence of a strategy to ensure that officers are sufficiently trained and supported to deliver their core role in the face of a changing environment.

31. 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 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.

[2] Justice Committee. (2023). Prison operational workforce survey. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/122073/default/

Unlocked Graduates[3]

32. Unlocked Graduates is a prison officer recruitment and training programme, based on the Teach First model. The programme aims to recruit university graduates into prison officer work, with a view to (1) foster prison officers who are invested in prisoner education; (2) training graduate prison officers for future leadership.

33. The programme recruits university graduates for a two-year MSc custodial leadership course that is completed parallel to front-line prison officer work. Recruits are supported by peer mentors at their prisons. Compared to the standard prison officer training package delivered by HMPPS, Unlocked Graduates benefit from ongoing education throughout their two-year training period. Part of this training package is developed, delivered, and assessed by people with lived experience of imprisonment.

34. Some might argue that the Unlocked Graduates programme, requiring candidates to have a degree and then complete a 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 have heard little from prisoners to suggest that all prison officers should have that level of educational achievement.

35. Whilst analysis by Unlocked Graduates 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.

36. The more interesting question is what HMPPS may have to learn from Unlocked Graduates 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. 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.

37. Officer trainers we spoke with admitted they were initially sceptical and uneasy about working closely with people they had largely avoided — to prevent the appearance of being seen to be compromised. Former prisoners were worried that their involvement might be tokenistic.

38. But both former prisoners and officers we consulted 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. Concerns about maintaining appropriate professional boundaries turned out to be misplaced — all were selected and equipped on the basis of their ability to teach.

39. 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

[3] We understand that the Ministry of Justice and Unlocked Graduates have been unable to agree terms to continue to deliver the scheme, and at the time of writing 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.

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.

40. All were conscious that they were equipping the graduate trainees to undertake a significant personal challenge, and the credibility that their joint experience of prisons brought to that task was seen as crucial.

Supporting new officers

41. Compared to the prison service, Unlocked Graduates also takes a very different approach to the support of its trainees during their first two years.

42. 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.

43. 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.[4]

44. By contrast, Unlocked Graduates 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.

45. 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 either outside the prison system or in a different prison. The programme makes significant use of its own graduates — called ambassadors — to motivate and encourage trainees following in their footsteps.

46. It is understandable if the gulf between standard prison officer training and what Unlocked Graduates has to offer seems unbridgeable in current circumstances. But elements 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.

47. Indeed, we did find some examples outside of Unlocked Graduates 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

[4] Camden, B. (2024, April 18). MoJ’s prison service U-turns on mandatory apprenticeships. *FE Week*. https://feweek.co.uk/mojs-prison-service-u-turns-on-mandatory-apprenticeships/

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.

48. 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.

49. 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.

50. In a more ambitious and structured example, the Zahid Mubarek Trust (ZMT) has, in several 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.

51. 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.

What are the barriers to retaining the prison workforce? How can a career in the Prison Service be made more attractive?

52. 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.[5]

53. 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.

[5] Ministry of Justice (2024). Table 4, HMPPS workforce statistics bulletin: September 2024 tables, *HMPPS workforce quarterly: September 2024*.

54. The figures on retention of newly appointed prison officers certainly support the view that there is a serious problem. Over half of officers (58%) who left the service in the last year had stayed in the role for less than three years. Over a third (34%) left after less than a year.[6]

55. 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.

Prisoners' views

56. We will explore what makes a "good" prison officer from the perspective of prisoners in the next section of our evidence. However, as part of the consultation for our *Potential Unlocked* report, prisoners revealed that what they considered the "right" attitude amongst "good" officers was possibly playing a part in driving those 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."

57. 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.

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

59. 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."

60. 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.

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[6] Ministry of Justice (2024). Table 13, HMPPS workforce statistics bulletin: September 2024 tables, *HMPPS workforce quarterly: September 2024*.

61. 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, which highlighted broader economic pressures, including high inflation and a tight labour market.[7] Prison officers are therefore significantly better paid now than when this report was first commissioned.

62. 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.

The perspective of prisoners

63. Prison Reform Trust commissioned a literature review to inform our report *Potential Unlocked*.[8] The review confirmed that the relationship between prisoners and prison officers is crucial for a prison's culture. It also highlighted that the prison service, through the work of Mann and Howard, has supported this idea through the development of what they called a "rehabilitative culture". [9] 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.

What makes a "good" prison officer from the perspective of prisoners?

64. Initial responses by prisoners 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…"

65. 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.

    "[Good officers] recognise that it's important to build working relationships with us, lazy officers tend not to want to do that."

66. Prisoners recognised how a good officer develops networks amongst colleagues in different departments within the prison that enables them to sort problems out

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[7] House of Commons written statement HCWS232, 19 July 2022
[8] Kant, D. (2024). *Prisoner and staff consensus on what makes a good officer: a brief review of the literature*. Prison Reform Trust
[9] Mann, R., Fitzlan Howard, F. & Tew, J. (2018). What is a rehabilitative prison culture? Prison Service Journal. 235. *Prison Service Journal* (crimeandjustice.org.uk)

informally and through goodwill. The best staff had relationships across the prison that enabled them to fix problems quickly.

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

67. 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.

68. Many of the frustrations we heard from prisoners related 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."

69. 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?"

70. 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 and CMs. Staff view their role as locking and unlocking, escorting prisoners. They used to know PSIs and rules."

71. On the specific topic of the attributes of a "good" prison officer, the literature review found a strong overlap between the opinions of staff, managers and prisoners. Key attributes include:[10]

- 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.

[10] Kant, D. (2024). *Prisoner and staff consensus on what makes a good officer: a brief review of the literature*. Prison Reform Trust

- 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.

How do relations between prisoners and staff affect the experience of those in the prison system (staff and prisoners)?

72. Both physically and symbolically, prisoners and staff are all in it together. Each can 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.

73. 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.

74. 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 we spoke to during our consultation said:

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

75. While disentangling all the causes of the shocking and sharp deterioration in safety is beyond the scope of this response, 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.[11] 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.[12]

76. 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.[13] 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:

    "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."

77. 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,

[11] Ministry of Justice (2018). Table 3, HMPPS workforce statistics bulletin: September 2018 tables. *HMPPS workforce quarterly: September 2018*.
[12] Ministry of Justice (2024). Table 1, Safety in custody summary tables to June 2024. *Safety in custody: quarterly update to June 2024*.
[13] Liebling, A., Price, D., & Shefer, G. (2010). *The Prison Officer* (2nd ed.). Willan. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203832998

including safety, has been severely challenged in the decade leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic.

78. 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.

79. 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."[14]

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

Prisoners' views

81. What emerged from our consultation was the desire to make the prison a decent place for staff and prisoners to work and live, and how that rested on the possibility of forming healthy relationships between the two — above all else. 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:

    "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."

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

82. 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."

83. 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

[14] HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2023). *HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Annual Report 2022–23*.

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.

84. Prisoners 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."

85. During 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. Yet in many cases the mechanisms to provide constructive feedback and collaboration either don't exist or are do not command sufficient trust.

86. The complaints procedure has provided prisoners with a way to write directly to the governor under "confidential access" for the last three decades. 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."

87. 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."

88. 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 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.

89. It is also disappointing that local opportunities for prisoners to commend good staff are 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 seems like a missed opportunity.

International comparison

90. Our literature 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.

91. Some of our 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."

92. 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."