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Justice and Home Affairs Committee

1st Report of Session 2024–25

Better prisons: less crime

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Justice and Home Affairs Committee

The Justice and Home Affairs Committee was appointed by the House of Lords to consider justice and home affairs, including the domestic criminal justice system, and international cooperation in respect of criminal justice, civil justice, migration and asylum.

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Declaration of interests

See Appendix 1.

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Evidence is published online at <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/8565/prison-culture-governance-leadership-and-staffing/> and available for inspection at the Parliamentary Archives (020 7219 3074).

Q in footnotes refers to a question in oral evidence.

SUMMARY

We have the highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe and it is only increasing. There are over 87,000 people in prison in England and Wales. This is almost double the prison population in 1993.¹ The prison population is expected to exceed 100,000 by 2029.²

80 per cent of offending is reoffending. The economic and social cost of reoffending is estimated to be around £18 billion a year and is a major contributor to the size of the prison population.

Our prisons are currently operating in a state of crisis. They are overcrowded, often in bad and unsanitary condition, and face issues such as a shortage of funds, gangs operating with impunity, drones undermining security, an alarming availability of drugs and over-stretched, demoralised staff.

We know that access to purposeful and productive activities makes prisons safer and reduces reoffending on release. However, the current situation in our prisons hinders the provision of these activities, preventing prisoners from seeking support with mental health problems and addiction, or securing training and education opportunities that can prepare them for life outside.

There is urgent need for wider prison reform, not least to reduce reoffending. The Government is addressing some of the most urgent problems, and other Parliamentary Committees are scrutinising these actions. We have focused on the leadership, governance and staffing of prisons.

The Government must give a clear lead to ensure that prisons fulfil their primary purpose of preparing offenders for their release—in the hope that they will be able to lead stable and meaningful lives in future and not reoffend.

What we found

- A lack of clarity about the purpose of prisons;
- Lack of public understanding about prisons;
- Limited autonomy for prison governors;
- A wholly inadequate prison staff recruitment procedure;
- Poor staff assessment and training arrangements;
- Siloed working, with a lack of effective cross-agency collaboration within His Majesty's Prison and probation Service (HMPPS) and with external partners;
- Insufficient 'purposeful activity' designed to reduce re-offending;
- A sense of complacency and inadequate accountability arrangements throughout the prison service.

1 Ministry of Justice, *Story of the prison population: 1993–2012 England and Wales* (January 2013): <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cc70040f0b6629523bc15/story-prison-population.pdf> [accessed 9 July 2025]

2 Ministry of Justice, 'Prison Population Projections 2024–2029' (5 December 2024): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029> [accessed 9 July 2025]

Reviewed in totality, HMPPS is inflexible, and overly bureaucratic. Whether it is fit for purpose remains to be proven.

The purpose of prisons

Prisons play a role in punishment, protecting the public, reducing reoffending, and preparing prisoners for lives outside. But there is lack of clarity about which of these should be given priority.

Our view is that being in prison is the punishment and once there, the focus must be on reducing reoffending. The punishment is the deprivation of liberty. Beyond that, prisoners should be treated with dignity as human beings who are capable of change and deserving of the opportunity to rebuild their self-esteem and their lives.

We argue that the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) should set out a clear and consistent statement of the purpose of prison, with reducing reoffending as central. They should communicate it within the system, across government and to the wider public to build greater support for evidence-based approaches to reducing re-offending.

“It is to punish people, to protect the public and to reduce reoffending. That is the key role.” Lord Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending.

We also argue that the MoJ and the Home Office should work together on a strategic communications effort to enhance public understanding of the crucial link between policies aimed at reducing reoffending and the role of prisons in ensuring public protection through reduced crime.

Prison Governors

Governors have overall responsibility for their prisons, setting the vision, tone, and culture, and are responsible for safety, security, and day-to-day running. Effective leadership is crucial for establishing the authority of prison officers and fostering mutual respect.

“We have seen an example of a governor who spent 3 days trying to arrange for the replacement of a broken kitchen appliance. The process for replacing the appliance was centralised and difficult to arrange.” Prisons and Probation Ombudsman.

Governors are hindered by an over-complicated and confusing management structure, excessive bureaucracy (preventing their greater visibility both within their prison and among the local community), lack of autonomy, inadequate support and professional development opportunities, lack of continuity (with governors frequently transferred between prisons) and inadequate sharing of good practice.

We argue that the MoJ should strike a better balance between governor autonomy and centralised control, ensuring that Governors have the necessary authority to lead effectively.

Staffing

The prison system faces a severe recruitment and retention crisis, with high turnover, low morale, and insufficient experienced staff. We do not accept the

view of HMPPS that the recruitment process for prison officers is robust. The lack of direct face-to-face interviews, for example, provides no opportunity to establish the suitability of candidates. We argue that governors should play a greater role in the recruitment process.

“You would think that as a profession, as the prison officer role should be, it would have defined professional characteristics and that would set your training, assessment and career journey. In the absence of those, it is kind of up to prison officers what they decide to make of that.” Natasha Porter, CEO, Unlocked Graduates.

We believe that the current training of prison officers is woefully inadequate. It does not sufficiently prepare officers for complex situations or address key areas like managing high-risk prisoners or mental health issues. In-service training is lacking. This is in contrast to the two-year training programme offered to recruits in Norway.

The Ministry of Justice should introduce more frequent and role-specific training for prison officers. Existing training for those working with women and children should be reviewed and lengthened.

Purposeful activity

A substantial part of the prison population is not engaged in work or education, and for those who are, it is often only on a part-time basis. This leads to boredom, self-harm, frustration, and increased violence.

“These prisoners were not getting to do any purposeful activity. They were not getting to work. They were not getting education or training, or the sorts of things that we would want them to get in order that, when they come out, they do not just go back into offending.” Charlie Taylor, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons.

Access to education is limited despite its proven positive impact on reoffending. While basic literacy and numeracy are prioritised, higher-level education is scarce. Prisoners view many courses as a façade or a tick-box exercise.

Access to skills training linked to labour market needs is also limited despite clear evidence of the effectiveness in reducing reoffending of programmes offering guaranteed employment pathways.

We argue that providing purposeful activity is not a ‘nice thing to have’ but central to the Prison Service’s purpose of preparing prisoners for life outside the criminal justice system and reducing reoffending. The Prison Service should take steps to improve access to a more diverse range of educational opportunities in prisons, and introduce a strategic approach to employment in prisons, linking work opportunities to labour market needs and providing transferable skills.

“I have walked past too many classrooms and workshops with no one in them.” Lord Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending.

Accountability

The accountability mechanisms for prisons are poor. The data around prisons and prison performance is poor.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) are an independent inspectorate who inspect the treatment and conditions of detainees and report on their findings. HMIP can make recommendations for improvement in areas where prisons are underperforming. However, shockingly, these recommendations have little impact and too often fail to be implemented.

“Increasingly, it has felt like the Chief Inspector has been reduced to ringing an alarm bell that has no clapper in it and does not make any sound.” Andrew Neilson, Howard League for Penal Reform.

Other oversight mechanisms such as Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) have seen their power diminish over time, with complaints not able to be dealt with effectively.

We argue that the inspectorate must be given enhanced powers, with the ability to place prisons in special measures and require reports from prisons and HMPPS on actions taken in relation to recommendations.

Given the need for closer co-operation between the Prison Service and the Probation Service, we believe this should be reflected in formalised, collaborative working of their respective Inspectorates.

The present poor system is a consequence of many leadership failures over years by both Ministers and officials in the Ministry of Justice and in HMPPS. The Secretary of State and the new Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Justice need to recognise this and that HMPPS owns the need for radical reform and has the will and new capabilities to engage with it; external support will be essential for this.

The stark conclusion of our inquiry is that MoJ and HMPPS have failed to improve the prison service to reduce re-offending. It is now in a parlous state. This has contributed to the high levels of re-offending and the need to keep building more and more prisons. Doing so is unsustainable, it costs over £53,000 a year for each prisoner, thirteen times as costly as Community Sentences.

Alongside measures to reduce overcrowding, including through the prison building programme and implementation of the Sentencing Review, we argue for:

- A clear and well communicated statement of the purpose of prison with reducing reoffending as central;
- Greater autonomy for prison governors;
- A major overhaul of measures to recruit, assess and train prison officers; and
- Enhanced accountability of both prisons and HMPPS.

Ministers and others need to make the case to the public for why these reforms are essential and to seek to build cross-party support for doing so. The present

Prison Minister understands the need for change and what needs to be done; he should be strongly backed by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Justice.

It is essential and possible to build a better prison system that protects the public and helps reduce re-offending; other countries have done so. It is about time that England and Wales did the same.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. The resolution of the capacity crisis is urgently needed to ensure a well-functioning prison system. Order must be restored in prisons and the Service should be properly resourced to deal with the demands required of it. These are prerequisites for many of the conclusions and recommendations which follow. However, the problems with prisons in England and Wales today go beyond issues of capacity and resourcing. The Committee believes that there is confusion within HMPPS about what it is trying to achieve and a sense of complacency about the scale of the problems facing operational staff. The purpose of prisons needs to be clearly defined and the direction of the Service should be set accordingly. Determined and consistent leadership is required at political level and at all levels of management within the Service. (Paragraph 9)
2. As our report describes, we share Lord Timpson's focus on "reducing reoffending" and conclude that this should be the key purpose of prisons. (Paragraph 14)

Chapter 2: Organisation and purpose of prisons in England and Wales

3. There is confusion within Government and HMPPS about the purpose of prisons. Policy and practice are fundamentally misaligned, resulting in prisons that cannot fulfil their primary purpose. (Paragraph 32)
4. We believe that clarity of purpose is essential and that the current language used by HMPPS and HMPS is confusing and unhelpful. (Paragraph 34)
5. We strongly agree with Lord Timpson's statement that the core purpose of prison is to punish people, to protect the public and to reduce reoffending. This is indeed the core purpose of all parts of HMPPS. (Paragraph 38)
6. We agree that the term "reducing reoffending" is useful to describe the purpose of prisons. (Paragraph 39)
7. *We recommend the use of "reducing reoffending" rather than "rehabilitation" in official government messaging.* (Paragraph 39)
8. *The importance of reducing reoffending is central to the purpose of prisons and should be at the forefront of all decisions relating to the future of Government policy.* (Paragraph 40)
9. We agree that being in prison is the punishment and once there, the focus should be on reducing reoffending. The punishment is the deprivation of liberty itself; beyond that, prisoners must be treated with dignity as human beings who are capable of change and deserving of the opportunity to rebuild their self-esteem and their lives. (Paragraph 52)
10. We disagree that having a hierarchy is unhelpful since reducing reoffending must be front and centre in the purpose of prisons, as this is how we best protect the public and victims. (Paragraph 58)
11. The Committee recognises the importance of improving public understanding of the role of prisons in society, not least in showing how a focus on reducing reoffending will make a significant contribution to improving public safety.

Clarity of purpose will lead to better organisation of prisons and the way they are managed. (Paragraph 62)

12. *It is crucial that the Ministry of Justice sets out a clear, consistent purpose for prisons—one that is communicated not only within the system and across government, but also to the wider public, to build greater support for evidence-based approaches to reducing reoffending.* (Paragraph 63)
13. We remain alert to the challenges facing the Probation Service and we are concerned that the approach of cross-agency working under HMPPS is not yet fully accepted. (Paragraph 75)
14. There is a clear distinction between the role of the Prison Service and the Probation Service. However, we do not accept the view of the Prison Officers' Association (POA) that the Prison Service and the Probation Service should be entirely separated. The sense of shared purpose between the two agencies—that of reducing reoffending and preparing people for lives outside the criminal justice system—has been lost during successive reorganisations. HMPPS must recognise the distinctive but complementary purpose of each side of the organisation. (Paragraph 76)
15. *The Government should develop and publish a clear framework outlining the respective roles and responsibilities of the Prison and Probation Services in reducing reoffending rates. The framework should define clear lines of accountability, establish measurable objectives for inter-service collaboration, and be subject to regular review.* (Paragraph 77)
16. As things stand, HMPPS remains a top-heavy, inflexible, and overly bureaucratic organisation. It is failing to show the change leadership, flexibility, and innovation that is desperately required. Whether it is fit for purpose is open to question and remains to be proven. (Paragraph 83)
17. The culture of secrecy that exists between public and private prisons is unhelpful. (Paragraph 90)
18. *Greater openness is essential, not least so that examples of good practice can be shared.* (Paragraph 90)
19. Successive governments have failed to give the prisons portfolio the status and priority it requires. The rapid churn of Ministers has been both a cause and a symptom of a lack of political direction in relation to policy. (Paragraph 98)
20. *The Prisons Minister should always be at the rank of Minister of State and the post-holder should be supported by the Prime Minister and given sufficient authority within government to drive change in co-operation with other departments. Continuity in key Ministerial posts should be encouraged, where possible.* (Paragraph 99)
21. We are concerned that the development of a consistent government message about prisons may get caught up in inter-departmental rivalry. Without urgent co-operation between the Ministry of Justice and other departments, the prison crisis will only get worse. (Paragraph 100)
22. *The Ministry of Justice and the Home Office should work together on a strategic communication effort to enhance public understanding of the critical link between policies aimed at reducing reoffending and the role of prisons in ensuring the protection of the public.* (Paragraph 101)

Chapter 3: Leadership—the role of the governor

23. The Management structure within prisons is over-complicated. (Paragraph 109)
24. *The term ‘Governing Governor’ is a tautology and should not be used. ‘Prison Governor’ should suffice and it should be used only to refer to the overall head of a prison with statutory responsibilities.* (Paragraph 110)
25. The impact that leadership and culture has on prisons is profound. The prison governor, as the institutional figurehead, shapes not only the operational effectiveness of their establishment but also the experience of imprisonment for those in their care. (Paragraph 116)
26. The Governor plays a fundamental role in shaping the culture of a prison. Effective leadership is essential for establishing the authority of prison officers, which in turn underpins a culture of mutual respect between staff and prisoners, a key condition for a safe environment. (Paragraph 117)
27. A key role of prison governors is to ensure a safe environment for staff and prisoners. The earned release scheme proposed in the Independent Sentencing Review may assist governors in achieving this by providing meaningful incentives for good behaviour and compliance with programmes targeted at reducing reoffending. We strongly support this and hope the Government will accept and implement this recommendation. (Paragraph 121)
28. A successful Governor must be visible to staff, prisoners, and the local community. However, what constitutes adequate visibility was unclear and, in the case of visibility to prisoners, we found disparities between what governors considered adequate and what prisoners experience. (Paragraph 137)
29. *It is only when Governors are seen, and their presence is felt that they can set a clear direction in a prison. They must be afforded the time to do this.* (Paragraph 137)
30. *The Ministry of Justice and HMPPS should ensure that the importance of governor visibility is embedded within leadership development, training, and performance frameworks. Governors should be given sufficient authority to allow them to be present in their prisons and lead by example, and to be visible in their local community. Extra administrative burdens should not be placed on them such that they are prevented from doing so. While the Committee recognises the significant time pressures faced by governors, it is essential they protect time for meaningful engagement with prisoners and staff.* (Paragraph 138)
31. Governors often lack the discretion to make important decisions on operational matters such as staffing, budgets, and regime design, undermining their capacity to create a coherent vision for their prisons. This is compounded by an administrative burden and top-down control that restrict their ability to maintain a visible and engaged leadership presence within their establishments, which has negative consequences for staff morale and prisoner safety. (Paragraph 145)
32. Prison Governors are over-managed, and there are too many layers of management responsibility within HMPPS. (Paragraph 146)
33. A culture of centralisation within HMPPS has stifled innovation and weakened the ability of governors to lead effectively. The balance between national consistency and local flexibility has shifted too far toward the

former, undermining the leadership model and morale among governors and senior staff. (Paragraph 147)

34. *The Ministry of Justice should strike a better balance between governor autonomy and centralised control, ensuring that governors have the necessary authority to lead effectively. This would involve giving them more decision-making power on key operational matters like staffing, budgeting, and regime design, allowing governors to create clear, tailored visions for their prisons. (Paragraph 148)*
35. *Prison governors should oversee the recruitment process in their prisons. A senior member of staff from the prison should hold a face-to-face interview with prospective candidates before the governor confirms a formal offer of employment. (Paragraph 153)*
36. *Governors should have more autonomy over their budget, in particular with regards to procurement. (Paragraph 157)*
37. *To improve continuity and long-term planning, governors should be allowed to remain in their positions for longer periods before being rotated. Sabbaticals should be encouraged for personal development and long-term wellbeing. This will allow for more strategic planning and greater stability in leadership, fostering better outcomes for both staff and prisoners. (Paragraph 163)*
38. There is considerable good practice taking place across the prison estate, often driven by committed leadership and strong local cultures. However, the Committee is concerned that these examples remain too isolated and are not consistently shared. (Paragraph 167)
39. *The Ministry of Justice should re-introduce a national annual governor conference to facilitate the sharing of good practice across the prison estate. It is crucial that successful models from all types of establishments—including public, private, and women's prisons—are shared and considered for wider implementation. (Paragraph 168)*
40. *Formal governor training should also be established to ensure that governors have the necessary skills required to manage complex modern prisons. (Paragraph 169)*
41. The experiment with reform prisons is a lesson in the importance of continuity and consistency in developing a leadership strategy for prisons (Paragraph 173)
42. *We believe new pilots should be established and they should be given the time and resources which are required to ensure they have a reasonable chance of success, such that others can learn from best practice. (Paragraph 173)*
43. We hope that the Future Prison Leaders programme will succeed; it is long overdue and HMPPS had been negligent in not developing such a system earlier. It is naïve to expect that enough talented governors will emerge from the ranks of prison officers who are recruited with minimum qualifications, limited life experience, and a lack of training and support. (Paragraph 183)
44. We share the regrets of other witnesses that MoJ and HMPPS were negligent in losing the creativity and expertise of Unlocked Graduates, a major avoidable mistake. It remains to be seen if HMPPS has the confidence, creativity and radicalism to create as good a system to attract talent. (Paragraph 184)
45. Talented young entrants will not stay if the system fails to support them. The present system within which prison governors operate is the reverse of

what is needed, majoring on control and bureaucracy, rather than creative support. Major changes are needed so that governors are enabled to help prisoners stop offending and so keep the public safer. (Paragraph 185)

46. *The Government should invest in strengthening the leadership pipeline by providing more opportunities for the professional development of future leaders. The current Future Leaders Programme cannot, on its own, address the leadership crisis we face. The Government must expand support for external programmes such as Unlocked Graduates, while also enhancing internal development pathways for experienced officers. A strong leadership pipeline will ensure the long-term stability and resilience of the Prison Service.* (Paragraph 186)

Chapter 4: Staff in prison

47. We fundamentally disagree with the claim that the recruitment process used by HMPPS is robust. (Paragraph 198)
48. The role of prison officer is misunderstood and undervalued in society. The role of prison officer is complex and highly demanding. A career in the prison service should be comparable in status to one in the police, Border Force, or in the Armed forces. (Paragraph 209)
49. A career in the Prison Service is equally not for everyone, and is not necessarily the right choice for those considering a career in comparable services. Recruitment processes should reflect the reality of the role. (Paragraph 210)
50. The Committee notes with concern the critical challenges in recruiting and retaining prison officers, with low pay, poor working conditions, increasing violence and high turnover contributing to ongoing instability within the prison service. (Paragraph 211)
51. *Early face-to-face engagement is essential to improving recruitment outcomes. The MoJ and HMPPS should incorporate in-person assessments, realistic job previews, and direct interaction with experienced staff to ensure candidates have a clearer understanding of the role and its demands. This is essential for the purposes of candidate screening, and is consistent with our recommendation that Governors should oversee the process in their own prison, and that candidates should be interviewed face-to-face by a senior member of staff before a formal offer of appointment is made.* (Paragraph 212)
52. *We recommend establishing a Prison Service Medal for exceptional service. Raising the professional status of a career in the prison service is not merely symbolic, it is essential for recruitment, retention, and morale.* (Paragraph 213)
53. The current training provided to prison officers is woefully inadequate and lacks reference to the purpose of prisons. New recruits are being set up to fail. (Paragraph 231)
54. We note that the current training programme does not address key areas such as managing high-risk prisoners and dealing with mental health issues. Current training programmes undoubtedly contributes to a lack of clarity about the purpose of prison officers' role and what is expected of them on a day-to-day basis. (Paragraph 232)
55. *The Ministry of Justice should introduce more frequent and role-specific training for prison officers, with a particular focus on equipping staff to respond effectively to the range of complex situations that arise within the custodial environment. Such*

training should be embedded throughout officers' careers, with clear frameworks for ongoing professional development and scenario-based learning. The additional training for staff working with children and women should be reviewed and potentially lengthened. (Paragraph 233)

56. *HMPPS should implement targeted women's leadership groups and support for female staff to aid with succession planning. This should recognise the additional obstacles facing female staff in prison, including concerns about whether prison work—with its potential for short-notice transfers—can realistically support a long-term career when starting a family. (Paragraph 234)*
57. It beggars belief that Custodial Managers are expected to line manage between twenty to thirty staff. This is unsustainable given the nature and complexity of the role, and the volume of new staff entering the Service. (Paragraph 239)
58. *HMPPS must reassess this management structure urgently. (Paragraph 239)*
59. We are astounded by the confusion surrounding the current appraisal system. An appraisal system which does not make provision for a formal appraisal record and regular reviews is not a system at all. (Paragraph 240)
60. *An appraisal system which does not make provision for a formal appraisal record and regular reviews is not a system at all. A formal and regular appraisal should apply for all staff rather than just those on probation, ensuring that areas identified for improvement lead to targeted training, while high-performers are supported through progression plans and development pathways. (Paragraph 240)*
61. *It is critical that the Ministry of Justice undertakes a thorough review of sickness levels across the prison estate and develops a targeted strategy to reduce absence rates. This should include measures to improve staff wellbeing, enhance occupational health support, and to identify the root causes of long-term and frequent sickness. We also recommend that prison staffing models be adjusted to reflect the operational impact of consistently high absence rates. (Paragraph 252)*
62. *HMPPS should undertake a full review of the support programme available to staff and consider its suitability given the dramatic increase in staff assaults, serious violence and accumulated exposure to trauma facing prison officers in England and Wales. A revised support programme should include on-site, specialised psychological support, free and unlimited counselling and increased supervision for trained peer support teams. (Paragraph 253)*
63. While recognising the cultural differences between the Prison Service and the Probation Service, we believe that achieving a reduction in reoffending requires close co-operation between the two arms of HMPPS. (Paragraph 266)
64. *We recommend the appointment of a voluntary sector co-ordinator in each prison. (Paragraph 267)*

Chapter 5: Reducing reoffending through purposeful activity

65. Access to education remains inconsistent across the prison estate. Despite the acknowledged importance of education in reducing reoffending, there are significant barriers to its delivery, including limited resources, outdated infrastructure, and staff shortages. While basic qualifications in English and maths are available, higher-level education and training opportunities

remain scarce, limiting prisoners' ability to develop skills that could assist with their reintegration into society. (Paragraph 288)

66. *The Ministry of Justice should take steps to improve access to a more diverse range of educational opportunities in prisons. This includes expanding access to higher-level education and vocational training, as well as providing governors with greater autonomy to tailor educational provisions to the needs of the local population, including involving external agencies to assist. Investing in quality libraries within prisons and guaranteeing prisoners frequent access to them is essential for any serious effort to promote education and reduce reoffending.* (Paragraph 289)
67. Providing purposeful activity is not a 'nice thing to have' but central to the Prison Service's purpose of preparing prisoners for life outside the criminal justice system and reducing reoffending. Prisons which fail to provide an adequate regime of purposeful activity are failing in this core purpose. (Paragraph 315)
68. Several evidence submissions noted that purposeful activity is not sufficiently prioritised within the prison estate. While prisons may maintain formal timetables for work, education, and programmes targeting reducing reoffending, chronic staffing shortages have led to many activities being cancelled or significantly reduced. This undermines the goal of the prison system to reduce reoffending and increases tension, potentially contributing to higher levels of violence and reoffending. (Paragraph 316)
69. Addressing mental health and addiction is essential to delivering purposeful activity and reducing reoffending. Unless these needs are met, many prisoners will be unable to engage in meaningful education, work or other constructive activities. Prisons that fail to provide adequate support in these areas will be unable to meet their core purpose of breaking the cycle of reoffending. (Paragraph 317)
70. *Where structural issues limit the ability of prison governors to provide purposeful activity, this should be reflected in inspection rankings, and HMPPS should address them as a priority. Performance reviews of governors should assess local delivery of purposeful activity, taking into account these wider constraints.* (Paragraph 318)
71. *The Ministry of Justice should prioritise purposeful activity as a core function of the prison regime, ensuring that work, education, and rehabilitative programmes are protected from disruptions caused by staffing shortages. This will require a strategic focus on maintaining consistent activity delivery, even in the face of staffing challenges.* (Paragraph 319)
72. *A strategic approach to employment in prisons should be introduced, ensuring that work opportunities are linked to labour market needs and provide prisoners with valuable, transferable skills. This should include expanding the use of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) for external placements and ensuring that employers are supported through simplified vetting and clearance processes.* (Paragraph 320)

Chapter 6: Accountability

73. To improve cross-agency working, to improve accountability, and to ensure recommendations from relevant inspectors are not easily ignored, other complex services often have an inspectorate or standards office with enhanced powers. The most relevant example in this context is Ofsted, which retains the identity of His Majesty's Chief Inspector. The Prison and Probation Service currently does not have an equivalent. (Paragraph 341)

74. The Committee considers oversight bodies, particularly the Chief Inspector of Prisons and Independent Monitoring Boards, vital to ensuring accountability and improvement. However, we find it concerning that the Chief Inspector's recommendations are often disregarded and find the Urgent Notification process is insufficient in addressing the most significant concerns. We also find the capacity of Independent Monitoring Boards to deliver robust and consistent oversight has diminished. (Paragraph 342)
75. The failure to retain and share positive practices over time indicates a systemic failure to embed and sustain effective approaches, reflecting a wider lack of coordinated follow-up and accountability within the prison system. (Paragraph 343)
76. *The Government should review the role and resourcing of Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) to ensure they are able to carry out consistent, in-person monitoring across the prison estate.* (Paragraph 344)
77. *In the case of HMPPS, the Chief Inspector of Prisons provides vital scrutiny for His Majesty's Prison Service and HM Chief Inspector of Probation provides an equivalent scrutiny of the Probation Service. We acknowledge that the two Inspectorates already work together on Criminal Justice Joint Inspections, but we believe there would be merit in both Inspectorates working more closely together—perhaps in a combined Inspectorate—reflecting the wider combined role of HMPPS. This body should also involve the Independent Monitoring Boards.* (Paragraph 345)
78. *An enhanced Inspectorate should have powers to oversee performance, enforce the implementation of inspection recommendations, and promote the systematic adoption of effective practice across the prison system. It should also have power to comment on the policies and structure of HMPPS, and to make recommendations as necessary, for example where it believes that they are impinging on the freedom of prison governors to provide good leadership. The Inspectorates working together should focus on the development of the One HMPPS strategy, and measure its effectiveness.* (Paragraph 346)
79. *HMI Prisons or an enhanced Inspectorate should continue to work jointly with Ofsted in inspecting the provision of purposeful activity in prisons and YOIs, though the enhanced Inspectorate would be free to comment more widely of the approach of HMPPS in terms of purposeful activity.* (Paragraph 347)
80. *The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State should report annually to Parliament on actions that have been taken to address the reports of HMIP (or any successor organisation), and the Secretary of State and Prisons Minister should commit to an annual joint appearance before a Parliamentary Select Committee.* (Paragraph 348)
81. We believe that the current Prisons Minister understands the need for change and what needs to be done; he should be strongly backed by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Justice. (Paragraph 349)

Better prisons: less crime

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1. The focus of this inquiry has been on the governance, leadership and staffing of prisons in England and Wales. The Committee has looked at the role of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and His Majesty's Prison Service (HMPS).
2. Reform of prisons is urgently needed, but there is a lack of agreement about the direction of reform. We believe that clarity of purpose is an essential requirement for effective management of prisons, and this is currently lacking.

The current situation

3. Since we started planning our inquiry last year, there has been intense media scrutiny of prisons. Prisons are operating at close to operational capacity, with many in a poor or unsanitary condition. Gangs are operating with impunity in some prisons and with increasing sophistication. Drones are undermining the security of prisons. Staff are overstretched and are often unable to carry out key tasks. There have been reports of appalling violence against officers. Morale is low; and there have been high-profile and damaging allegations of staff corruption. The availability of drugs in prisons continues to be alarming. The system is “operating either in or at the verge of crisis most of the time”.³ The state of prisons is “disheartening and saddening”.⁴ Prisons are “in a very bad state” and the Service is “an extremely challenging part of our public sector”.⁵ We are “in a perilous time”.⁶ This is just a flavour of what we heard during the inquiry. These problems are confounding efforts to offer mental health treatments or to deal with drug and alcohol abuse, and gambling addiction in the prison population. They are hindering efforts to reduce reoffending and prepare prisoners for life outside. The situation is grim.
4. Many of these challenges are not new, and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), which has responsibility for prisons, has not been a protected department in terms of funding.⁷
5. Nevertheless, some measures have been taken to address some of the issues, not least the capacity crisis. In February 2023 the Government activated Operation Safeguard, a temporary measure triggered when prisons are close to capacity, enabling prisoners to be held in police cells. This remained in place until October 2024.⁸ In September 2024, the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP, described the prison system as being “on the point of collapse” and as a “ticking prison

3 [Q 42](#) (Michael Gove)

4 [Q 2](#) (Carl Davies)

5 [Q 25](#) (Natasha Porter)

6 [Q 70](#) (Gavin Miller)

7 [Q 23](#) (Carl Davies, Tom Wheatley)

8 HC Deb, 18 March 2025, [col 9WS](#)

‘time-bomb’”.⁹ The Government introduced a scheme known as ‘SDS40’, so-called because it allowed certain prisoners serving a standard determinate sentence (SDS) to be released after serving 40 per cent of their sentence (rather than the usual 50 per cent). By the end of the year, 16,231 prisoners had been released under this scheme.¹⁰ However, by 17 March 2025, there were only 824 places remaining in the adult male estate, and the Government once again reactivated Operation Safeguard.

6. Short-term responses such as these have had a knock-on impact on other parts of the criminal justice system, most notably on the Probation Service. Prisons are, in turn, impacted by the backlog in the courts, with a record high remand population (those held in prison awaiting trial) at the end of March 2025 of 17,582 (representing 20 per cent of the total prison population)¹¹. This context means that finding a way through the current challenges is extremely difficult. The Committee welcomes the announcement made in the Government’s Spending Review to provide the probation service with up to £700 million additional funding per year by 2028/29, as well as up to £450 million additional investment per year for the courts system by 2028/29, with the aim of tackling the court backlog.¹² The Government’s Plan for Change aims to create 14,000 extra prison places by 2031.¹³
7. We pay tribute to the dedication of prison officers and governors who work in prisons—and to the many people working or volunteering for the charities and partner organisations which keep prisons running. We also acknowledge the role played by officials in HMPPS and the MoJ, who are responsible for implementing rapid turnarounds in policy. The public often does not hear about the good work that goes on in prisons, though we were told about numerous success stories and examples of good practice throughout the system. Many of the challenges facing prisons in England and Wales are experienced in other countries. We are conscious that “the media zoom into the salacious, the exciting, the dismal and the despairing”.¹⁴ Pointing this out should not take away from the scale of the problems. The nature of media coverage merely reinforces the importance of political leadership and clarity of purpose when it comes to driving reform.
8. We are also acutely conscious of the experience of victims. We note the extraordinary difficulties many victims face as a result of their interaction with the Criminal Justice System. Prisons serve an important function in safeguarding victims and the wider public from people who have committed serious offences. We believe that addressing the issue of reoffending, in the

9 Ministry of Justice press release ‘Lord Chancellor sets out immediate action to defuse ticking prison ‘time bomb’’: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/lord-chancellor-sets-out-immediate-action-to-defuse-ticking-prison-time-bomb> [accessed 4 June 2025]

10 Ministry of Justice, *Transparency Data, Standard Determinate Sentences 40% (SDS40) Detailed Data, England and Wales* (24 April 2025): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/680a218f382965132de1aa7a/SDS40_additional_transparency_data.pdf [accessed 4 June 2025]

11 Ministry of Justice, HMPPS, ‘Offender Management statistics quarterly: October to December 2024’ (24 April 2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2024/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2024> [accessed 4 June 2025]

12 HM Treasury, *Spending Review 2025*, CP 1336 (June 2025), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6849172b860362efc8e78836/E03349913_HMT_Spending_Review_June_2025_TEXT_PRINT.pdf [accessed 30 June 2025]

13 Ministry of Justice, ‘New 1,500-place prison opens as government grips crisis’ (28 March 2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-1500-place-prison-opens-as-government-grips-crisis> [accessed 26 June 2025]

14 [Q 25](#) (Genevieve Glaister)

ways set out in this report, is consistent with promoting the rights and best interests of victims.

9. **The resolution of the capacity crisis is urgently needed to ensure a well-functioning prison system. Order must be restored in prisons and the Service should be properly resourced to deal with the demands required of it. These are prerequisites for many of the conclusions and recommendations which follow. However, the problems with prisons in England and Wales today go beyond issues of capacity and resourcing. The Committee believes that there is confusion within HMPPS about what it is trying to achieve and a sense of complacency about the scale of the problems facing operational staff. The purpose of prisons needs to be clearly defined and the direction of the Service should be set accordingly. Determined and consistent leadership is required at political level and at all levels of management within the Service.**

Wider context

10. This report comes at an important moment for the future of the wider criminal justice system and is a natural follow-on from our earlier report, *Cutting crime: better community sentences*.¹⁵ In that report, we argued that while community sentences are not soft options, they are falling short of their potential; however with the right investment, intensive community sentences could succeed where short prison sentences fail. We continue to see community sentences as part of the answer to the prison capacity crisis, mindful of the many challenges which face the Probation side of HMPPS. Without sufficient support, the Probation Service will be unable to deliver the many things expected of it.
11. Our inquiry was already underway when the Government commissioned Rt Hon David Gauke, a former Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, to conduct an Independent Review of Sentencing. We were grateful to have the opportunity to speak to Mr Gauke at an early stage of his work and to submit our community sentences report as evidence to the review. We are unable to consider his proposals in detail in this report, but we believe that the review's findings on community sentences are broadly in tune with our earlier work. As well as potentially easing the capacity crisis, the increased use of community sentences could lead to lower reoffending rates than the use of short prison sentences. If the Review of Sentencing's proposals are to be carried forward, it seems essential that both parts of His Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service communicate effectively with each other. This is another important theme of this report.
12. Some of the most urgent and pressing issues facing prisons have been, or are being, addressed by other committees. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee recently published its report *Prison estate capacity*, to which the Government has already responded.¹⁶ The Justice Committee is conducting inquiries on *Rehabilitation and resettlement: ending the cycle of reoffending* and on *Tackling drugs in prisons*. We have sought not to duplicate the work of these committees during our inquiry, and we hope that our report concentrating on leadership and staffing is complementary to their findings.

¹⁵ Justice and Home Affairs Committee, *Cutting crime: better community sentences* (1st Report, Session 2023–24, HL Paper 27)

¹⁶ Committee of Public Accounts, *Prison Estate Capacity* (Fifteenth Report, Session 2024–25, HC 366)

About our inquiry

13. We began scoping this inquiry shortly after the 2024 General Election. The appointment of Lord Timpson as Prisons Minister in the House of Lords presented the opportunity for close engagement with the Minister, and we are grateful to him and the Ministry of Justice for their co-operation with the inquiry. We note that Lord Timpson's full title is Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, with the last part of the title included at his request.
14. **As our report describes, we share Lord Timpson's focus on "reducing reoffending" and conclude that this should be the key purpose of prisons.**
15. In November 2024, we launched our call for evidence, which was disseminated widely to interested stakeholders. We were especially keen to hear directly from serving prisoners and from staff working on the frontline. We are grateful to *Inside Time*, the newspaper distributed to prisoners, for publicising our inquiry and providing details on how prisoners could write to us.
16. Over the course of our inquiry, we held 13 evidence sessions and spoke to a total of 29 witnesses; we also received over 40 written submissions and over 40 handwritten letters from serving prisoners. Each of these letters was read by the Chair and a Member of the Committee, as well as by staff. While we were unable to publish these letters, they were fully taken into account during our deliberations and a summary of the key points is reproduced as Appendix 3. We held a private roundtable with serving prison governors and a note of that discussion is also reproduced as Appendix 4.
17. On 25 March 2025 the Committee visited HMP Belmarsh, where we had the opportunity to speak to a group of serving prisoners, and HMP/YOI Isis, where we held a roundtable with serving officers. We thank Governors Jenny Louis and Emily Thomas and others involved in making the visits a success, particularly the prisoners and staff who spoke openly about their experiences.
18. The remit of this inquiry extends to prisons in England and Wales. However, we also heard about practice in Scotland and Northern Ireland and recognise that many of the individuals and organisations we spoke to work with prisons on a UK-wide basis. The Committee also took evidence about prisons in other jurisdictions, particularly in Norway.
19. Our Specialist Adviser for this inquiry was Alex South, who has years of direct experience as a prison officer and has written widely on the subject. We greatly benefitted from her knowledge of the Prison Service and of prisons in other jurisdictions. We thank her for her support throughout.

Structure of the report

20. This report is concerned that public confidence in the prison system is at risk of collapsing without clear leadership from politicians and officials with overall responsibility for the management of the system. In Chapter 2, we argue that there is currently confusion about the purpose of prisons, and this needs to be addressed urgently. We also look at how the organisational structure of HMPPS and how this contributes to the confusion about the

role of prisons. In Chapter 3, we look at the key role that prison governors have in running a prison, and conclude that they do not have sufficient authority or autonomy to carry out their role effectively. We also note that recruiting highly talented individuals as prison governors is essential to drive transformational change within prisons. Chapter 4 looks at the recruitment, retention, assessment and training of prison staff, and argues that the current approach to the training of staff is setting a generation of prison officers up to fail. Chapter 5 sets out how the provision of purposeful activity within prisons is key to reducing reoffending. Prisons are failing to provide prisoners with consistent access to relevant education, training and meaningful activities, despite clear evidence of their importance. The chapter also addresses the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support and addiction treatment services, which are fundamental to breaking the cycle of reoffending. Finally, in Chapter 6, we argue that the bodies tasked with oversight of prisons—particularly HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons—need to have much bigger teeth.

CHAPTER 2: ORGANISATION AND PURPOSE OF PRISONS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

Introduction

21. Prisons are an indispensable part of the criminal justice system and perform an important role in carrying out the orders of the courts. During our inquiry, we heard that prisons have a role in punishment, protecting the public, reducing reoffending, and preparing prisoners for lives outside prison. Witnesses had different views about the appropriate weight to be given to these roles. However, if the purpose of prisons is not clearly articulated, there is a risk that public confidence in the system could be undermined and that those working in prisons could lack clarity about their role and priorities. The first part of this chapter states clearly what this purpose should be.
22. The question of purpose relates back to political and administrative leadership of prisons. Prisons policy in England and Wales is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). In the second part of the chapter, we consider the relationship between the Prison and Probation Service and the importance of improving the cross-agency working within the criminal justice system.

Box 1: HMPPS

His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) is an executive agency of the MoJ. It comprises three organisations: The Probation Service, which supervises offenders serving community sentences or released into the community from prison; the Youth Custody Service (YCS) which runs public sector Young Offender Institutions (YOI) and secure accommodation and is the contract manager for youth private sector sites; and His Majesty's Prison Service (HMPS, sometimes referred to here as the Prison Service) which runs public sector prisons and is the contract manager for private sector prisons.

Source: 'HM Prison and Probation Service' (6 June 2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-prison-and-probation-service> [accessed 6 June 2025]

Purpose of prisons

HM Prison Service: Statement of purpose

23. The Prison Service has a "statement of purpose" as follows:

"[His] Majesty's Prison Service serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts. Our duty is to look after them with humanity and help them lead law-abiding and useful lives in custody and after release."¹⁷

At the time of writing, the Prison Service website carried a slightly shorter version of this statement: "We keep those sentenced to prison in custody, helping them lead law-abiding and useful lives, both while they are in prison and after they are released."¹⁸

24. Professor Alison Liebling, Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Cambridge, told us that the current statement of purpose is

¹⁷ Written evidence from Professor Alison Liebling (PRI0032) and written evidence from Howard James Fatcher (PRI0047)

¹⁸ 'HM Prison Service' (6 June 2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-prison-service> [accessed 6 June 2025]

“appropriate and well-liked”.¹⁹ She told us, however, that “we do not think hard enough or communicate hard enough to staff or prisoners about what those terms mean.”²⁰

25. Howard James Futcher, a former prison officer, recalled reciting the statement of purpose during his training to become a prison officer. He noted:

“Whilst this ‘statement of purpose’ is perfectly well-meaning, containing practicalities such as the ‘keeping in custody’ of those committed by the court, the ‘answer’ to what really does help Prisoners lead law abiding and useful lives in custody and after release remains opaque in my opinion and is certainly not meaningfully captured in this statement.”²¹

The role of HMPPS

26. We also heard about the role of HMPPS as distinct from the Prison Service. The website of HMPPS describes its role in slightly broader terms, reflecting the fact that it is also responsible for the Probation Service. It states: “We carry out sentences given by the courts, in custody and the community, and rehabilitate people in our care through education and employment.”²²
27. The Ministry of Justice told us that “HMPPS remains committed to its fundamental mission of protecting the public and helping people lead law-abiding and positive lives—and our staff, leadership and governance are key to the delivery of this.”²³ The MoJ also used the concept of “punishment”, explaining that the “fundamental mission” of HMPPS “is to protect the public and reduce reoffending by delivering the punishment determined by the sentences of the courts, in both custody and the community.”²⁴
28. Several witnesses also referred to the “mission” of HMPPS—although it is not clear that they were all referencing the form of words quoted above. Paul Cosgrove, a former prison officer, suggested there was an alternative version, telling us: “I don’t believe we need to re-invent the mission statement of HMPPS ‘To Prevent Victims By Changing Lives’, we need to be actively pursuing this goal.”²⁵
29. Penal Reforms Solutions said that HMPPS’ “current statement is vague and detached from operational realities. It has also not been created by the leaders, staff and people within it, so ownership is reduced”.²⁶ It also suggested that HMPPS should “align its vision with everyday decision-making and staff expectations”.²⁷ Lord Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, stated that he was not a “fan” of mission statements, though acknowledged that “we need to be very clear about the purpose of what we are trying to do” adding “one of the problems with mission

19 Written evidence from Professor Alison Liebling (PRI0032)

20 Q 108 (Professor Alison Liebling)

21 Written evidence from Howard James Futcher (PRI0047)

22 HMPPS, ‘Landmark sentencing reforms to ensure prisons never run out of space again’ (6 June 2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-prison-and-probation-service> [accessed 6 June 2025]

23 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice (PRI0003)

24 *Ibid.*

25 Written evidence from Paul Cosgrove (PRI0019)

26 Written evidence from Penal Reform Solutions (PRI0025)

27 *Ibid.*

statements and their purpose is that you can end up drifting around and adding lots of things on”.²⁸

30. The Prisoners’ Education Trust noted that “whilst education features in the broader HMPPS service definition, it is not specifically referenced in the description of the prison service.” The prison service description “should be far more explicit in the role the prison service plays in rehabilitation and enabling educational and employment opportunities.”²⁹
31. Michelle Jarman-Howe, COO, HMPPS, told us that its purpose is “to keep the public safe and to prevent reoffending”. She reminded us that there was a duty to the staff of the Service too: “Prison environments need to be safe and respectful. Our staff and all of our teams do an outstanding job to try to manage that every day. When a system is under pressure, that becomes extraordinarily difficult.”³⁰
32. **There is confusion within Government and HMPPS about the purpose of prisons. Policy and practice are fundamentally misaligned, resulting in prisons that cannot fulfil their primary purpose.**

The ‘core purpose’ of prison

33. Although Lord Timpson said that he was not a fan of mission statements, he acknowledged that “in the Prison and Probation Service ... we need to be very clear about the purpose of what we are trying to do.”³¹
34. **We believe that clarity of purpose is essential and that the current language used by HMPPS and HMPS is confusing and unhelpful.**
35. Lord Timpson defined the core purpose of prison as follows:

“It is to punish people, to protect the public and to reduce reoffending. That is the key role.”³²
36. We were struck by the point made by Rt Hon Charles Clarke, a former Home Secretary, who felt there was a distinction between the terms “rehabilitation” and “reducing reoffending”, telling us that the rehabilitation of offenders is in a sense “a slightly higher ambition than the prison system can aspire to”. He preferred “reducing reoffending” on the grounds that: “You can aspire to reducing reoffending so that people who do not become great citizens at least become law-abiding ones in some way. I would say that the function of reducing re-offending ought to be central to prisons.”³³
37. In our conclusions and recommendations we use the term ‘reducing reoffending’, though the term ‘rehabilitation’ was used by many witnesses quoted in this report.
38. **We strongly agree with Lord Timpson’s statement that the core purpose of prison is to punish people, to protect the public and to reduce reoffending. This is indeed the core purpose of all parts of HMPPS.**

28 [Q 165](#) (Lord Timpson)

29 Written evidence from Prisoners’ Education Trust ([PRI0033](#))

30 [Q 133](#) (Michelle Jarman-Howe)

31 [Q 165](#) (Lord Timpson)

32 [Q 166](#) (Lord Timpson)

33 [Q 49](#) (Charles Clarke)

39. **We agree that the term “reducing reoffending” is useful to describe the purpose of prisons. We recommend the use of “reducing reoffending” rather than “rehabilitation” in official government messaging.**
40. *The importance of reducing reoffending is central to the purpose of prisons and should be at the forefront of all decisions relating to the future of Government policy.*

The balance between punishment and reducing reoffending

41. Throughout our inquiry, we heard that there is a tension between the different roles of prisons. Prospect Trade Union told us that prison fulfils four roles in society:
- (1) The protection of the public;
 - (2) Punishment of offenders where community sentences are inappropriate;
 - (3) Encouraging offenders to reform so they no longer offend; and
 - (4) Rehabilitation of offenders so they can contribute to society.³⁴
42. Section 57 of the Sentencing Act 2020 stipulates that when sentencing offenders, a court “must have regard” to the following purposes of sentencing
- (1) The punishment of offenders;
 - (2) The reduction of crime (including its reduction by deterrence);
 - (3) The reform and rehabilitation of offenders;
 - (4) The protection of the public; and
 - (5) The making of reparation by offenders to persons affected by their offences.³⁵
43. The Sentencing Act makes direct reference to the reduction of crime and the reform of offenders, however the impact of reoffending on overall crime levels is stark. Lord Timpson informed us that “80 per cent of offending is reoffending”.³⁶ Proven reoffending rates³⁷ for those in prison between April 2022 and March 2023 were 37.8 per cent, with short sentences having particularly high reoffending rates (59.6 per cent for sentences under 6 months). Non-custodial disposals (such as community orders and suspended sentences) had a proven reoffending rate of 27.4 per cent.³⁸
44. The costs associated with housing prisoners are far higher than alternative forms of sentencing. The Ministry of Justice put the total cost of housing a

34 Written evidence from Prospect Trade Union ([PRI0041](#))

35 Sentencing Act 2020, [section 57](#)

36 [Q 161](#) (Lord Timpson)

37 An offender is anyone released from custody, receiving a non-custodial conviction at court, or a reprimand or warning between April 2022 and March 2023. A proven reoffence is defined as any offence committed in a one-year follow up that leads to a court conviction, caution, reprimand, or warning. Only adult offenders used in the above table.

38 Ministry of Justice, ‘Proven reoffending statistics: January to March 2023’ (30 January 2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/proven-reoffending-statistics-january-to-march-2023> [accessed 18 June 2025]

prisoner for a year in 2023/24 to be £53,801.³⁹ The cost for a community order in 2016/17 (the latest available data) was between £2,500–£4,000 per person.⁴⁰

45. Section 57(1) of the Sentencing Act 2020 states that courts must have regard for the punishment of offenders, which in many circumstances involves prison. Witnesses told us that “a prison sentence is the deprivation of liberty; that is the punishment. Once somebody is in prison, we should be focused on rehabilitation.”⁴¹ Professor Ben Crewe stated “punishment is meant to be the intention of the sentence but not specifically what the prison does”.⁴²
46. Witnesses distinguished between the concept of a prison sentence as a punishment and prison as a place of punishment. Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign told us that: “People are sent to prison as a punishment, not for further punishment”⁴³. The letters we received from prisoners also suggested a strong feeling that their sentence was their punishment and that prison should not be a place of further punishment (see Appendix 3). A prisoner quoted by the charity Nacro said that: “Being locked up is a punishment and so they don’t need to continue to punish you. I think a lot of officers have a power trip.” Another quoted by the charity Women in Prison said: “It feels like the primary focus [of the prison] is on punishment with no focus on rehabilitation or recovery. We are already being punished by being in prison, we don’t need to be punished more.”⁴⁴
47. We heard that there was strong qualitative evidence that work or activity within a prison that gives prisoners a sense of meaning, for example through education or various types of work, has a positive impact on prisoners.⁴⁵
48. This focus on punishment sits in stark contrast to Nordic countries such as Norway. Dr Kristian Mjåland, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Agder, told us “The clear purpose of the Norwegian prison system is that it should facilitate rehabilitation”. A survey found that some 65 per cent of Norwegians said that rehabilitation should be the main purpose of imprisonment.⁴⁶
49. We also heard how Norway follows the normality principle, which states that life in prison should be as similar as possible to life in the community and that the only legitimate punishment that Norway can inflict upon its citizens is the deprivation of liberty.⁴⁷
50. Penal Reform Solutions told us that in Norway “Prison officers are change agents, not enforcers”⁴⁸ which allowed for a quicker transformation of culture.⁴⁹

39 Ministry of Justice, *Costs per place and costs per prisoner by individual prison. HM Prison & Probation Service Annual Report and Accounts 2023–24 Management Information Addendum* (3 April 2025): <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67e51acfb11d0060f606d68/costs-per-place-costs-per-prisoner-2023-2024-summary.pdf> [accessed 11 June 2026]

40 Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, *Non-custodial sentences*, [POSTnote 613](#), January 2020

41 [Q 138](#) (Helen Berresford)

42 [Q 108](#) (Professor Ben Crewe)

43 Written evidence from Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign ([PRI0016](#))

44 Written evidence from Women in Prison ([PRI0040](#))

45 Written evidence from Philosophy in Prison ([PRI0014](#))

46 [Q 108](#) (Dr Kristian Mjåland)

47 [Q 110](#) (Dr Kristian Mjåland)

48 Written evidence from Penal Reform Solutions ([PRI0025](#))

49 *Ibid.*

The MoJ told us that: “In Norway, the role of the Governor (“Warden”) is viewed as having a greater emphasis on rehabilitation. They are responsible for ensuring that the prison’s environment fosters the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners into society.” It added that “Prison Officers in Norway’s prison service often have a background in social work or psychology, whereas prison officers in England and Wales are from different professional or education backgrounds.”⁵⁰

51. Professor Alison Liebling pointed to India’s statement of purpose which notes that someone in prison “does not become a non-person”; they are “entitled to all human rights within the limitations of imprisonment”; and “there is no justification for aggravating the suffering already inherent in the process of incarceration”.⁵¹
52. **We agree that being in prison is the punishment and once there, the focus should be on reducing reoffending. The punishment is the deprivation of liberty itself; beyond that, prisoners must be treated with dignity as human beings who are capable of change and deserving of the opportunity to rebuild their self-esteem and their lives.**

A hierarchy of roles

53. Several witnesses noted that punishment in England and Wales is promoted ahead of other considerations because of a lack of clarity from Parliament, or because of the nature of public discourse. Andrew Neilson, Campaigns Director, Howard League for Penal Reform, considered the role of prisons with reference to the five statutory purposes of sentencing as set out in Section 57 of the Sentencing Act 2020. He told us: “Parliament has not determined a hierarchy of these priorities, nor has it properly defined what each of those purposes mean. That is partly why punishment gets promoted almost as a default ahead of the others.”⁵²
54. In a similar vein, Margaret Adams, who held senior roles in the Prison and Probation Services, and now runs a company called Magistra Ltd, offering training services, told us that: “Evidence from multiple HM Inspectorate Reports indicate the majority of prisons now just focus on the punishment element due to staff shortages and lack of resources for rehabilitation.”⁵³
55. Rt Rev Rachel Treweek, The Lord Bishop of Gloucester, Anglican Bishop for Prisons in England and Wales, made a similar point about Parliament giving greater clarity about the purpose of prisons:

“Although HMPPS has mission and purpose statements, defining in legislation the purpose of imprisonment would give clarity on what prison is for. This may prevent different parts of the criminal justice system and its wider stakeholders projecting different views and expectations onto the system which can confuse efforts to reimagine and build an effective, well-functioning prison system.”⁵⁴
56. The Independent Sentencing Review, led by David Gauke, recommended that the statutory purposes of sentencing be amended in order to emphasise

50 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#))

51 Written evidence from Professor Alison Liebling ([PRI0032](#))

52 [Q 137](#) (Andrew Neilson)

53 Written evidence from Margaret Adams, Director at Magistra Ltd ([PRI0006](#))

54 Written evidence from The Lord Bishop of Gloucester, Rt Rev Rachel Treweek ([PRI0048](#))

the importance of protecting victims and reducing crime. Crime reduction would act as an overarching principle that governs the five purposes of sentencing.⁵⁵

57. Phil Copple, Director General Operations, and now interim CEO, HMPPS, told us that “it is not helpful to overemphasise having a hierarchy” since different things had to be held in balance. He told us there was “a fundamental thing around carrying out the orders of the court”, adding that:

“We always have to run establishments in a way that balances the protection of the public and the delivery of that sentence or order with the fact that we are trying to have a positive rehabilitative outcome as well. There will be a tension between those two things.”⁵⁶

He felt that where the balance was not right this was not because of a lack of clarity of purpose, but was rather “a symptom of some of the challenges that are faced; of some of the weaknesses, either in key systems or key people; of resource constraints; or of the infrastructure, which is very difficult in a lot of prisons”.⁵⁷

58. **We disagree that having a hierarchy is unhelpful since reducing reoffending must be front and centre in the purpose of prisons, as this is how we best protect the public and victims.**

Public understanding and the role of the media

59. The public’s understanding of the role of prisons is heavily influenced by the media. The charity Clinks told us that the stated objectives of HMPPS “conflict with the reality of overcrowded, under-resourced prisons” and that there were “inconsistencies across the estate”. However, they noted that there were external challenges, particularly in relation to the media environment in which prisons operated. They said:

“Public understanding of prisons is largely shaped by the media, which tends to focus on punishment rather than rehabilitation. This has led to the perception that prisons should be punitive, limiting open discussion about effective rehabilitation strategies. The Daily Mail test—a term often used in justice circles—refers to the political reluctance to highlight rehabilitative work for fear of being seen as too lenient. This misconception diminishes public support for evidence-based interventions, including arts and creativity programmes that have been shown to reduce reoffending and improve prison culture.”⁵⁸

60. Charles Clarke also noted the importance of the media: “There is a climate of politics throughout the media that focuses on the punishment end of it rather than the other sides of it, and that wants to see people suffer for the crimes they have committed.”⁵⁹
61. On the other hand, Ministers tend to rely on the media to explain to the public the purpose of prisons. Lord Timpson, Prisons Minister, told us that

55 Independent Sentencing Review, *Final report and proposals for reform* (May 2025): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/682d8d995ba51be7c0f45371/independent-sentencing-review-report-part_2.pdf [accessed 10 June 2025]

56 Q 162 (Phil Copple)

57 Q 165 (Phil Copple)

58 Written evidence from Clinks (PRI0046)

59 Q 49 (Charles Clarke)

the public's understanding of the role of prisons is not "100 per cent clear".⁶⁰ Tom Wheatley, President of the Prison Governors' Association, told us:

"By their very nature, they [prisons] are closed establishments and people do not understand or know what happens there. So it is about getting them into the public consciousness. We think that making the public interested in them will have benefits for the Prison Service".⁶¹

62. **The Committee recognises the importance of improving public understanding of the role of prisons in society, not least in showing how a focus on reducing reoffending will make a significant contribution to improving public safety. Clarity of purpose will lead to better organisation of prisons and the way they are managed.**
63. *It is crucial that the Ministry of Justice sets out a clear, consistent purpose for prisons—one that is communicated not only within the system and across government, but also to the wider public, to build greater support for evidence-based approaches to reducing reoffending.*

Political and institutional factors

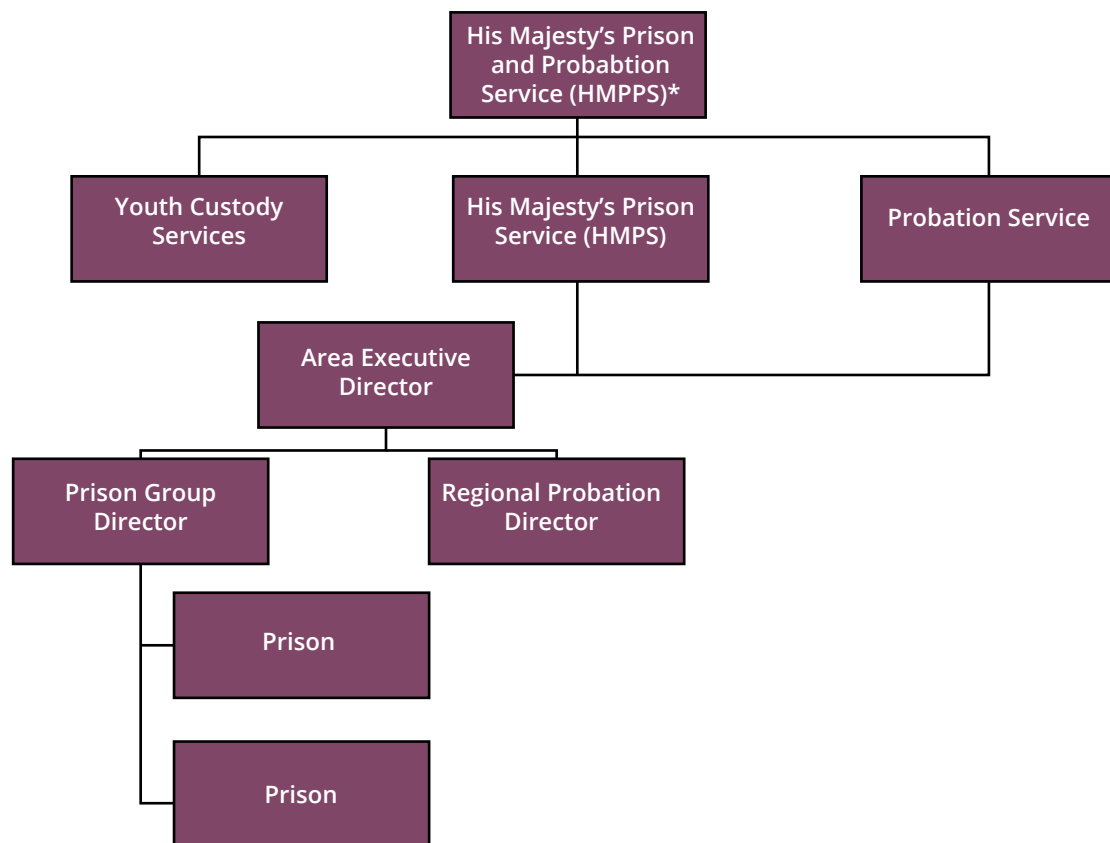
64. The relationship between Whitehall and HMPPS, and the identity of the Prison Service within this overall structure, is also something we considered.

Scrutiny and oversight of HMPPS

65. HMPPS runs an area model in England and Wales, with geographical areas in operation, each managed by an Area Executive Director. Each Area Executive Director will have at least one Prison Group Director, each of whom are responsible for between 4–7 prisons. Each prison is then run by the Prison Governor. The Area Executive Director is also responsible for the Regional Probation Director. See Figure 1 below for the overall structure and Table 1 in Chapter 3 for the roles within a prison.

60 [Q 166](#) (Lord Timpson)

61 [Q 2](#) (Tom Wheatley)

Figure 1: Organisation of HMPPS as it impacts the Prison Service

Source: HMPPS, Organisation Chart (April 2025): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/680a3e617a11df940be1aaa6/HMPPS_Org_Chart_April_2025.pdf and HMPPS, HMPPS Area Model: Six Areas and Wales: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/644ba1b42f6222000ca6a279/OneHMPPS_Area_Model_Overview_-_Proposal.pdf

Box 2: The role of oversight bodies

There are a number of different organisations with oversight responsibility for prisons: The National Criminal Justice Board and Local Criminal Justice Boards bring together Criminal Justice leaders for oversight and promotion of collaborative approaches to criminal justice issues. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) reports on conditions for, and treatment of, those in prison. In relation to prisons, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) investigates deaths in custody and complaints from people in custody. Independent Monitoring Boards (IMB) are attached to each prison and provide annual reports (see Figure 3 below).

According to the Prison Act 1952, the Chief Inspector's role is as follows:⁶²

- (a) It is the duty of the Chief Inspector to inspect or arrange for the inspection of prisons in England and Wales and to report to the Secretary of State on them.
- (b) The Chief Inspector shall in particular report to the Secretary of State on the treatment of prisoners and conditions in prisons.

- (c) The Secretary of State may refer specific matters connected with prisons in England and Wales and prisoners in them to the Chief Inspector and direct him to report on them.
- (d) The Chief Inspector shall in each year submit to the Secretary of State a report in such form as the Secretary of State may direct, and the Secretary of State shall lay a copy of that report before Parliament.

Source: HMIP, 'Our mandate': <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/our-mandate/> [accessed 10 July 2025]

Siloed working

66. The structure of HMPPS reflects the many parts of the criminal justice system. However, concerns have been expressed that the liaison between the different elements within HMPPS is inadequate, causing confusion for those—not least prisoners—who are involved with them. For example, Rt Hon Michael Gove, now Lord Gove⁶³, a former Justice Secretary and Lord Chancellor, told the Committee:

“Rather than offenders being managed, offenders are passed from individual to individual and institution to institution like parcels, not people. The probation officer who gives a report to a sentencing judge as the judge considers the appropriate sentence for a convicted criminal will be a different person from the offender manager prison officer who meets a prisoner and decides what is appropriate when they go into prison. They will be different from the prison officer responsible for their welfare most of their time in prison, who will be different from the person responsible for their welfare outside ... Our Probation Service has for years not been able to do the job that we ask of it.”⁶⁴

67. Prisoners come into contact with numerous agencies, such as health workers, education providers and caseworkers when they enter the criminal justice system, and this is exacerbated by the high turnover of staff within HMPPS. This inconsistency makes it hard for prisoners to build relationships and for professionals to develop individualised support plans. Witnesses told the Committee of a similar lack of partnership between external agencies including healthcare and education. Charles Clarke said that:

“The criminal justice system is completely siloed, and its different agencies do not work with each other in a coherent way. The prison population is the least healthy and least educated section of our whole population. Any society focusing on health and education ought to focus there. That is all done through partnerships, but the prison system is isolated from all these other institutions and there is very little joint work.”⁶⁵

68. Charlie Taylor, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, made a similar point on the publication of his annual report 2024/25. He said: “We talk about it as a justice system, but it is actually a lot of pretty loosely collected systems.” He added: “the cogs don't lock together and they are kind of spinning freely

63 Rt Hon Michael Gove was introduced as a Member of the House of Lords in May 2025.

64 [Q 42](#) (Michael Gove)

65 [Q 43](#) (Charles Clarke)

... Finding ways in which courts, prisons and probation can work better is really important.”⁶⁶

The role of the Probation Service

69. The role of the Probation Service and its relationship with the Prison Service is something we considered in our previous inquiry in 2023. During that inquiry, we heard that probation officers perform a complex role, as they are responsible for dealing with offenders serving sentences in the community, as well as those released on licence from prison. We heard that the Probation Service “suffers from staff shortages, resulting in unmanageable caseloads, and its mission is being questioned as its focus has shifted from the supervision of low-level offenders to the protection of the public against high-risk criminals”.⁶⁷ The bringing together of probation and prisons under HMPPS contributed to an “identity crisis” on the part of the Probation Service.
70. Other witnesses expressed the view that the current structure which sees the Prison Service as part of HMPPS is unsatisfactory. Mark Fairhurst, National Chair, Prison Officers’ Association, said that the Union was unhappy with the Prison Service being part of the MoJ in that respect: “HMPPS does not work. His Majesty’s Prison Service needs to be a separate entity. We need to be a stand-alone service like we were back in the 1990s when we were under the Home Office.”⁶⁸ Mr Fairhurst told us that the MoJ “cannot get anything right” and that it was “full of bureaucrats and non-operational staff”.⁶⁹ The Prison Officers’ Association and its sister Union, NAPO, take the view that HMPPS should be abolished and replaced with standalone Prison and Probation Services, each with its own Director General.⁷⁰
71. Gavin Miller, National Secretary for Justice and Custodial at Community trade union, said that the current structure was not working—“Reoffending levels are the evidence that it is not working”—but he did not see a structure to make it work.⁷¹
72. However, Tom Wheatley, President of the Prison Governors’ Association (PGA), saw some benefit in “having the two things together [because it] potentially allows you to look at the whole”. So long as there is clarity about the purpose of imprisonment and the wider purpose of punishment under one organisation, “that potentially means that we will be able to respond more effectively to things such as the sentencing review” led by Mr Gauke.⁷² Mr Wheatley and Carl Davies, Vice-President of the PGA, said that a more fundamental issue was the fact that the Ministry of Justice was not a protected department for the purposes of funding.⁷³
73. The Ministry of Justice is aware of the challenges in bringing the two parts of HMPPS together. During our previous inquiry, we heard about the launch of ‘OneHMPPS’ in October 2023, a new structure which promised to bring

66 ‘Prisons’ Chief Inspector seeks more power for governors unable to even buy a washing machine’, The Financial Times (7 July 2025): <https://www.ft.com/content/c72e569e-ece0-49c5-919a-34bf577885a9> [accessed 9 July 2025]

67 Justice and Home Affairs Committee, *Cutting crime: better community sentences* (1st Report, Session 2023–24, HL Paper 27), Chapter 5

68 Q 64 (Mark Fairhurst)

69 *Ibid.*

70 Written evidence from the Prison Officers’ Association (PRI0009)

71 Q 76 (Gavin Miller)

72 Q 22 (Tom Wheatley)

73 Q 23 (Carl Davies, Tom Wheatley)

“greater alignment” between the two services.⁷⁴ This time around, we were assured that early analysis of this model had seen “increased join-up between prisons and probation by bringing responsibility for both together at AED [Area Executive Director] level, with shared processes and governance to deliver a more seamless journey for offenders, leading to smoother and more efficient working and local innovation which is responsive to local need”.⁷⁵

74. Charlie Taylor, Chief Inspector of Prisons, told us of issues with the HMPPS structure with Prison Group Directors and Area Executive Directors:

“It is not entirely clear specifically what people’s roles are within that. We have been critical and have tried to understand what those different bits of the system are supposed to do ... It is fair to say that the jury is out when it comes to whether that structure is actually effective.”⁷⁶
75. **We remain alert to the challenges facing the Probation Service and we are concerned that the approach of cross-agency working under HMPPS is not yet fully accepted.**
76. **There is a clear distinction between the role of the Prison Service and the Probation Service. However, we do not accept the view of the Prison Officers’ Association (POA) that the Prison Service and the Probation Service should be entirely separated. The sense of shared purpose between the two agencies—that of reducing reoffending and preparing people for lives outside the criminal justice system—has been lost during successive reorganisations. HMPPS must recognise the distinctive but complementary purpose of each side of the organisation.**
77. *The Government should develop and publish a clear framework outlining the respective roles and responsibilities of the Prison and Probation Services in reducing reoffending rates. The framework should define clear lines of accountability, establish measurable objectives for inter-service collaboration, and be subject to regular review.*

Centralised control

78. HMPPS plays a key role in setting national policy, operational standards, and strategic direction for prisons in England and Wales.⁷⁷ We heard that in recent years, HMPPS has become increasingly involved in centrally managing key functions such as budgets, staffing, and procurement, which has reduced the operational autonomy of prison governors.⁷⁸
79. Several witnesses raised concerns about the centralisation of authority within HMPPS. We heard that this centralisation had contributed to a culture of compliance rather than leadership.

74 Justice and Home Affairs Committee, *Cutting crime: better community sentences* (1st Report, Session 2023–24, HL Paper 27), Chapter 5

75 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice (PRI0003)

76 Q 81 (Charlie Taylor)

77 HM Prison & Probation Service, ‘About Us’: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-prison-and-probation-service/about> [accessed 14 May 2025]

78 Supplementary written evidence from Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign (PRI0016), written evidence from Margaret Adams (PRI0006) and written evidence from the Prison Officers’ Association (PRI0009)

80. Dr Kate Gooch, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Bath, told us: “Although there is a significant emphasis on leadership, HMPPS is increasingly orientated towards a bureaucratic and managerialist logic. Leadership might be the message, but it is compliance that is sought.”⁷⁹ Nacro felt that the increased bureaucracy “makes it difficult or impossible for people in prison to express their views directly to governors and can lead to a lack of consistency”.⁸⁰
81. Julia Killick, former governor, HM Prison Service, highlighted one of the positives that centralisation has had, particularly on women’s prisons. She told us that “the women’s prisons have now gone into a women’s estate group, so it is functionally led. That is an example of good centralisation, because you have the expertise of running women’s prisons, and support behind you, which I did not have when I was running [HMP] Holloway.”⁸¹
82. The issue of centralised control was highlighted by Charlie Taylor, His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons, on the publication of his annual report 2024/25. The Chief Inspector told the *Financial Times* that: “The amount of central control is staggering.” He added: “We mandate mediocrity ... you can’t run a prison system by turning dials on a big machine in Whitehall.”⁸²
83. **As things stand, HMPPS remains a top-heavy, inflexible, and overly bureaucratic organisation. It is failing to show the change leadership, flexibility, and innovation that is desperately required. Whether it is fit for purpose is open to question and remains to be proven.**

Private prisons

84. The Prison Service oversees directly 105 of the 122 prisons in England and Wales. The remaining 17 prisons are run privately⁸³ (though HMPS is the contract manager for these prisons). Several witnesses noted the difference between private and public prisons and highlighted areas where public prisons “could have learned so much more from private prisons.”⁸⁴
85. In response to a question about whether public prisons could draw lessons from private prisons in relation to financial management and the efficient use of resources, Charlie Taylor stated: “There are things they can learn ... Contract management, which is part of a prison governor’s job, is something that some of the private providers ... appear to be able to do more effectively than some of the public sector prisons.”⁸⁵
86. The Committee heard that some private establishments, operating under performance-based contracts, have been able to implement more flexible staffing models, engage external partners more easily, and trial new educational or rehabilitative programmes. Charlie Taylor noted the greater forms of innovation taking place within private prisons due to having greater autonomy, something that governors within public prisons do not necessarily

79 Written evidence from Dr Kate Gooch, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Bath ([PRI0044](#))

80 Written evidence from Nacro ([PRI0026](#))

81 [Q 98](#) (Julia Killick)

82 ‘Prisons’ chief Inspector seeks more power for governors unable to even buy a washing machine’, The Financial Times (7 July 2025): <https://www.ft.com/content/c72e569e-ece0-49c5-919a-34bf577885a9> [accessed 9 July 2025]

83 HM Prison and Probation Service, ‘HM Prison Service’: <https://prisonandprobationjobs.gov.uk/about-hmpps/about-the-prison-service/> [accessed 6 June 2025]

84 [Q 109](#) (Professor Alison Liebling)

85 [Q 87](#) (Charlie Taylor)

enjoy.⁸⁶ He told us that directors within private sector prisons have the flexibility to “make changes without having to go through more complicated discussions with HQ”.⁸⁷

87. Serco Ltd said that “private prisons are, in our experience, much more agile and autonomous. They can drive policy and improvements quicker by testing and implementing changes without recourse to layers of management that overlay public prisons.”⁸⁸ We address the issue of the autonomy of prison governors in public sector prisons in Chapter 3.
88. Lord Timpson said that “private operators have been generous with their time and expertise on how to open a new prison from scratch. Although there are examples of shared practice, there is quite a siloed mentality between companies.”⁸⁹
89. In response to a question on whether there was a good enough network for prisons to learn from each other, Professor Alison Liebling told us:

“The organisation has become highly competitive and divided, in my view ... because we have introduced contestability or competition, private sector organisations keep secrets from each other and from public sector organisations.”⁹⁰
90. **The culture of secrecy that exists between public and private prisons is unhelpful. Greater openness is essential, not least so that examples of good practice can be shared.**

Political leadership

91. Since responsibility for prisons moved to the MoJ from the Home Office in 2007, there has usually been a junior minister with responsibility for prisons and probation (sometimes combined with other responsibilities) in the department. It is a challenging role. Prisons Ministers have held office at the levels of Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State and Minister of State. In 2019, the House of Commons Justice Committee noted that there had been seven Ministers between 2010 and 2019.⁹¹ The current Minister is the eighth post-holder since 2019.⁹²
92. Witnesses observed that the turnover of ministers in the MoJ, and specifically the turnover of Prisons Ministers, represented a challenge in respect of policy continuity. Dr Jamie Bennett, Research Associate at the Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford, gave the example of a promising pilot of “reform prisons” which was originally introduced in 2016–17, but momentum

86 *Ibid.*

87 *Ibid.*

88 Written evidence from Serco Ltd ([PRI0015](#))

89 [Q 167](#) (Lord Timpson)

90 [Q 111](#) (Professor Alison Liebling)

91 The seven Prison Ministers in that period were Crispin Blunt MP, Rt Hon Jeremy Wright KC MP, Andrew Selous MP, Sam Gyimah MP, Rt Hon Rory Stewart MP, Rt Hon Robert Buckland KC MP and Rt Hon Lucy Frazer KC MP. See Justice Committee, *Prison Governance*, (First Report, Session 2019, HC 191).

92 Lucy Frazer held the office again briefly in September 2021. The other post-holders were Rt Hon Alex Chalk KC MP (Parliamentary Under-Secretary), Rt Hon Victoria Atkins KC MP (Minister of State), Stuart Andrew MP (Minister of State), Rob Butler MP (Parliamentary Under-Secretary), Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP (Minister of State) and Rt Hon Edward Argar MP (Minister of State). Lord Timpson has held the office since July 2024 as Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending.

was lost as ministers moved on.⁹³ The trade union Prospect wrote of the importance of having consistent goals and avoiding the “churn” of ministers responsible for criminal justice.⁹⁴

93. Rt Hon Charles Clarke, former Home Secretary, also acknowledged the issue of Ministerial churn, but felt that was in turn linked to a wider problem that “there is no consistent agreed direction of travel for change” in respect of prisons policy. This is “not a party-political issue” since there were differences of opinion within political parties about how to deal with prisons.⁹⁵
94. Ministers also face other challenges when it comes to communicating with the public about the purpose of prisons. The media, as noted above, is also influential in the public debate on prisons. This makes it challenging to achieve consistent political leadership: “In the media climate that operates it is often very difficult for Ministers to hold to a steady path”.⁹⁶
95. Ministers with responsibility for prisons are also competing for attention within government, and the prisons portfolio has for some time sat separately from the Home Office areas of policing, immigration detention and counterterrorism. There is the question of whether the Ministry of Justice has sufficient clout as the department with responsibility for prisons. Some of our witnesses regretted the fact that the prisons portfolio had moved from the Home Office to the Ministry of Justice as part of wider reforms in the mid-2000s. Vanessa Frake-Harris, a former Head of Operations and Security at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, believed that moving the Prison Service from the Home Office to the MoJ “watered down its importance”, on the grounds that Home Secretaries were “quite consistent” and provided continuity. She linked the transfer to the MoJ with a lack of continuity in political leadership: “We ended up on a roundabout where we were literally doing one thing one minute and, when we came in the next day, it had all been rewritten”.⁹⁷
96. Former Ministers we spoke to also expressed a slight preference for the earlier division of responsibilities between the Home Office and the old Lord Chancellor’s Department—when prisons were a Home Office responsibility—though Michael Gove, a former Lord Chancellor, acknowledged that the Home Office could easily become “overloaded” because of the increased salience of borders and counter-terrorism. Charles Clarke said however that he “never looked back and thought that it was a positive change” to move prisons to the MoJ, since there were so many elements of the criminal justice system that needed to work together and “there are lots of total failures to communicate between these systems even now”.⁹⁸
97. Michael Gove reflected on the relationship between the Home Office and the MoJ as it now operates from a more recent perspective as Justice Secretary and Lord Chancellor. He told us how the Home Office saw the MoJ as an “errant sibling”. Whereas the Home Office dealt with “the tough stuff”, the Lord Chancellor’s role was caricatured as being ceremonial, about wearing a wig and attending drinks parties with judges.⁹⁹ In terms of driving change, he felt that “you need to have good Ministers together with a clear Cabinet

93 Written evidence from Dr Jamie Bennett ([PRI0011](#))

94 Written evidence from Prospect ([PRI0041](#))

95 [Q 43](#) (Charles Clarke)

96 *Ibid.*

97 [Q 23](#) (Vanessa Frake-Harris)

98 [Q 50](#) (Michael Gove, Charles Clarke)

99 [Q 48](#) (Michael Gove)

Committee structure and the Prime Minister's engagement in order to get the change you need".¹⁰⁰

98. **Successive governments have failed to give the prisons portfolio the status and priority it requires. The rapid churn of Ministers has been both a cause and a symptom of a lack of political direction in relation to policy.**
99. *The Prisons Minister should always be at the rank of Minister of State and the post-holder should be supported by the Prime Minister and given sufficient authority within government to drive change in co-operation with other departments. Continuity in key Ministerial posts should be encouraged, where possible.*
100. **We are concerned that the development of a consistent government message about prisons may get caught up in inter-departmental rivalry. Without urgent co-operation between the Ministry of Justice and other departments, the prison crisis will only get worse.**
101. *The Ministry of Justice and the Home Office should work together on a strategic communication effort to enhance public understanding of the critical link between policies aimed at reducing reoffending and the role of prisons in ensuring the protection of the public.*

100 [Q 50](#) (Michael Gove)

CHAPTER 3: LEADERSHIP—THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNOR

Introduction

102. A prison governor has overall responsibility for the running of their prison. Throughout our inquiry, we have seen how a governor's vision and values permeate every aspect of prison life, from the daily interactions between officers and prisoners to the priority given to reducing reoffending alongside security. Governors today face substantial challenges including drug smuggling, drones, and severe overcrowding, making their role more complex and demanding than ever before. In this chapter, we outline the impact that a governor can have and highlight that prison governors are not given the necessary tools to do their role effectively.

The role of the governor

Statutory basis

103. Section 7 of the Prison Act 1952 states that “every prison shall have a governor”. The Ministry of Justice told us that governors have overall responsibility for the running of their prisons. Across public prisons, the term governor is used (director being the private prison equivalent). Sometimes the overall head of a prison is referred to as the ‘Governing Governor’ or No. 1 Governor, though we believe that the term governor should suffice (see paragraph 110). Governors are responsible for a prison's leadership and risk management, and they hold ultimate managerial responsibility for all directly employed staff across their functions.

Management structure

104. In terms of the staffing structure of HMPPS, a public sector prison governor is ranked as band 10 or 11 (see Table 1). Prison governors are themselves responsible to Prison Group Directors, who have several prisons under their responsibility. They in turn report to regional heads—Area Executive Directors—who are senior civil servants within the HMPPS structure. The Area Executive Directors ultimately report to the Director General (Operations) of HMPPS.
105. In prisons across England and Wales, there are often deputy governors and Heads of Function who hold a specific remit, for example, for security or offender management. They will typically refer to themselves and be referred to as a governor, ‘wing governor’, ‘security governor’ (sometimes leading to the use of ‘governor grades’), although the term has not been used officially in respect of operational managers at these grades for some time.¹⁰¹ The Prison Governors' Association allows members from band 5 (Custodial Managers—the middle management level within a prison—provided they are on the fast track stream to band 7) up to band 12 (Prison Group Directors, the line managers of Governors).
106. During the inquiry, concerns were raised about the complex and sometimes confusing range of management titles used within the prison system. Titles such as “governing governors, security governors, heads of resettlement”¹⁰² represent different management roles, all of which operate within the prison. Yet, while “internally, it is pretty well established and people know what

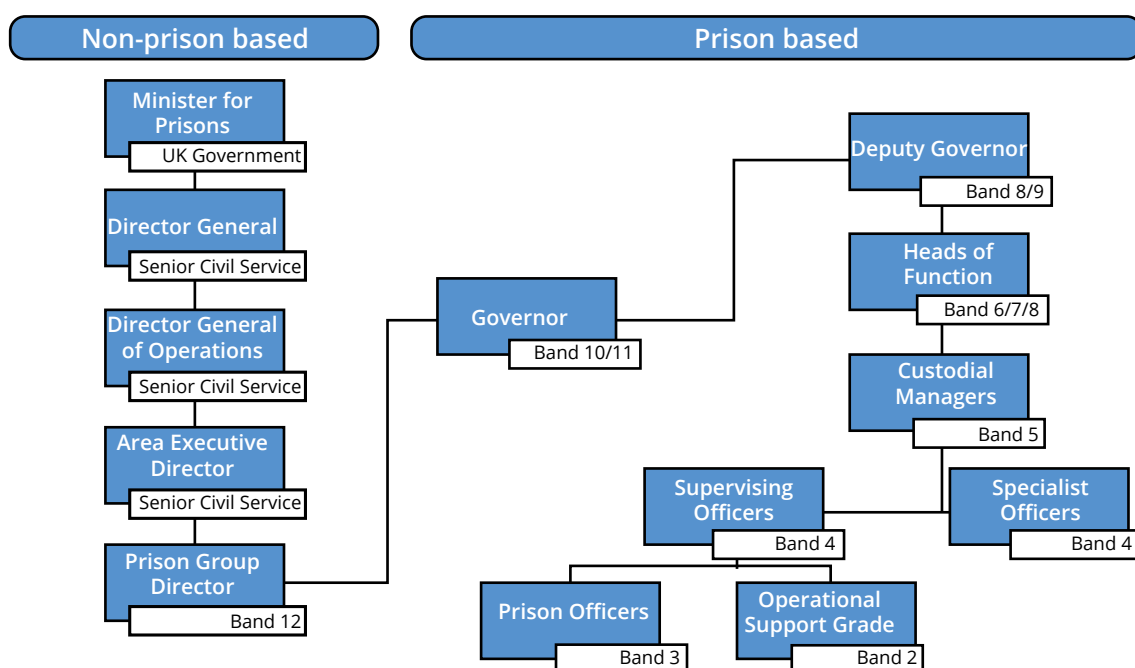
101 [Q 174](#) (Phil Copple)

102 [Q 174](#) (Lord Timpson)

those roles mean”,¹⁰³ Lord Timpson acknowledged that externally it can be “confusing”.¹⁰⁴

107. Witnesses questioned whether the current terminology sufficiently reflects modern expectations of clarity and accountability. David Pike, who worked in many prisons at management level, told us: “The management structures in place within establishments appear confusing, over complicated, and less efficient than in the past.”¹⁰⁵ Mr Philip Wheatley, retired Director General, HMPS, said that: “A critical factor for success which under-pins a sense of management grip is a clear and unambiguous management structure and system. Staff need to know who their boss is and where problems and difficulties are to be referred to.”¹⁰⁶ This confusion appears to feed through to the prisoners and their families, with Professor Belinda Winter, Simon Scott and Dr Paul Hamilton of Nottingham Trent University, and the Lived Experience Research Panel, pointing out that “often it can be difficult for people in prison and their families to understand the degree to which governors have autonomy and where each governor has responsibility”.¹⁰⁷
108. Throughout this report, except where explicitly mentioned, governor is used only to mean the head of a prison.

Figure 2: Key roles in prisons



103 Q 174 (Lord Timpson)

104 *Ibid.*

105 Written evidence from Mr David Pike, Retired Prison Governor at HM Prison Service (PRI0002)

106 Written evidence from Mr Philip Wheatley CB, Retired Director General of HMPS, Expert Witness and Adviser on Prison Management at Self employed (PRI0001)

107 Written evidence from Professor Belinda Winder, Simon Scott, Dr Paul Hamilton (Nottingham Trent University); and the Lived Experience Research Panel (PRI0037)

Table 1: Roles and duties

Job Role	Duties
Band 12 Prison Group Directors	Line managing several prison governors.
Band 10 / 11 Governor	Responsible for running a prison defined as standard complexity or high complexity. Sometimes referred to as the ‘Governing Governor’ or No. 1 Governor.
Band 8 / 9 Deputy Governor	Leads on daily operations of a prison on behalf of the governor.
Band 7 / 8 Head of Function	Manages a function within the prison which has been defined as standard complexity.
Band 5 Custodial Manager	Line management responsibilities for band 4 and below Assists Head of Function with developing specific areas.
Band 4 Supervising Officer Band 4 Prison Officer Specialist - Youth Justice Worker	Supervising officers supervise band 3 and OSGs. Prison officer specialists may become dog handlers, offender managers, physical education officers etc
Band 3 Prison Officer Band 3 Youth Justice Worker	Supervises, manages and controls prisoners and young people.
Band 2 Operational Support Grade (OSG)	Supports running of the prison. Gatehouse duties. Censors and correspondence duties. Contractor escorts and night escorts.

Source: HMPPS, ‘Roles at HM Prison and Probation Service’: <https://prisonandprobationjobs.gov.uk/> [accessed 8 July 2025] and HM Prison Service ‘Public Service Prisons’: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-prison-service> [accessed 8 July 2025]

109. **The Management structure within prisons is over-complicated.**
110. ***The term ‘Governing Governor’ is a tautology and should not be used. ‘Prison Governor’ should suffice and it should be used only to refer to the overall head of a prison with statutory responsibilities.***

Leadership role

111. The importance of the role of the governor was emphasised by many witnesses. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) told us that:

“The day-to-day role of the Governor and the senior leadership team is to provide strong visible leadership of all elements of the prison operation. They set the vision and tone for the prison and act as role models, leading by example in the care and management of prisoners,

the support for colleagues and engagement with partners who work within their prison.”¹⁰⁸

112. It added that:

“Governors maintain overall responsibility for maintaining and enforcing basic standards and ensuring that environments are clean, safe and decent for both prisoners and staff. Governors set and reinforce clear rules and protocols to help maintain order and reduce the risk of violence within prisons.”¹⁰⁹

We heard from other witnesses that governors should be clear in their vision and plans for their prison and communicate these plans effectively to both prison staff and prisoners.¹¹⁰

113. Evidence to this inquiry underlined the role of prison culture in shaping the daily experiences of staff and prisoners. Several witnesses noted that it was often the Governor that sets the tone, providing direction and instilling values that influence all aspects of life within the prison. For instance, HM Chief Inspectorate of Prisons “found the most positive prison cultures were where governors had a clear vision and objectives, which were well communicated to staff and prisoners.”¹¹¹ Juliana Rowan, a former prisoner, said: “Having a governor around makes a massive difference. It is like having a CEO or a boss: they set the culture and the standards within the prison”.¹¹² The Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign explained that “it is critical for a prison governor to set consistent standards of behaviour, encourage a culture of respect and engage with the local community”.¹¹³
114. When considering the qualities of an especially effective governor, the Lord Bishop of Gloucester, Anglican Bishop for prisons, told us that the common characteristic of good governance “is a passionate belief in rehabilitation in terms of believing people can change and a genuine care for the staff.”¹¹⁴ Julia Thompson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams, and Sunita Dobisz, serving heads of function at HMP Send, also said that “Successful governors need clear vision and prioritisation, good communication skills and the ability to handle stress and pressure. They should be natural team players.”¹¹⁵
115. Zak Addae-Kodua, founder and director at Xconversation, a Community Interest Company working with prisoners, who is also a former prisoner, told us that a good governor “would tell you what their plans were for the prison, what the regime is like, what opportunities were coming forward, how they wanted to help you and support you in changing your lives.”¹¹⁶ The Prisoners’ Education Trust added that governors should “have an interest in people and their potential, with clarity of thinking around rehabilitation and what it means for those in their establishment.”¹¹⁷ It also said that “Governors

108 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice (PRI0003)

109 *Ibid.*

110 Anonymous written evidence from a former prisoner (PRI0021), written evidence from Nacro (PRI0026), Q 81 (Charlie Taylor), Q 137 (Helen Berresford) and Q 111 (Professor Ben Crewe)

111 Written evidence from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (PRI0022)

112 Q 155 (Juliana Rowan)

113 Supplementary written evidence from Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign (PRI0016)

114 Written evidence from The Lord Bishop of Gloucester, Rt Rev Rachel Treweek (PRI0048)

115 Written evidence from Julia Thompson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams and Sunita Dobisz (PRI0020)

116 Q 155 (Zak Addae-Kodua)

117 Written evidence from Prisoners’ Education Trust (PRI0033)

should develop good relationships across the prison, with staff at all grades and across different departments.”¹¹⁸

116. **The impact that leadership and culture has on prisons is profound. The prison governor, as the institutional figurehead, shapes not only the operational effectiveness of their establishment but also the experience of imprisonment for those in their care.**
117. **The Governor plays a fundamental role in shaping the culture of a prison. Effective leadership is essential for establishing the authority of prison officers, which in turn underpins a culture of mutual respect between staff and prisoners, a key condition for a safe environment.**

Responsibility for safety

118. Several submissions emphasised the safety of prison staff, prisoners, and the public as a fundamental aspect of the governor’s role. Professor Lynn Saunders OBE, Professor of Applied Criminology, University of Derby, and a former prison governor, told us: “The prison governor’s role is for the safety, security, operational management and day-to-day running of a prison.”¹¹⁹ Clare Pearson, operations director and former prison governor, also noted that: “Everything that you do is focused on safety. It is absolutely about risk management, but safety more broadly and protection of the public.”¹²⁰
119. Witnesses drew attention to a range of incidents, including deaths, violence, and substance abuse within prisons, that compromise the safety of both prisoners and staff.¹²¹ The MoJ told us: “Effective leadership in handling these incidents whilst maintaining community safety is crucial. Some local communities are impacted by individuals seeking to throw illicit substances and contraband into the prison.”¹²²
120. The Independent Sentencing Review recommended the introduction of an earned progression model for those serving fixed-length prison sentences. The report noted that incentive schemes used in prisons “can have the potential to promote discipline and structure, and can motivate inmates to earn the right to receive more privileges leading up to early release”.¹²³
121. **A key role of prison governors is to ensure a safe environment for staff and prisoners. The earned release scheme proposed in the Independent Sentencing Review may assist governors in achieving this by providing meaningful incentives for good behaviour and compliance with programmes targeted at reducing reoffending. We strongly support this and hope the Government will accept and implement this recommendation.**

118 Written evidence from Prisoners’ Education Trust ([PRI0033](#))

119 [Q 94](#) (Professor Lynn Saunders)

120 [Q 94](#) (Clare Pearson)

121 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#)), written evidence from Professor Gail Kinman, Birkbeck, University of London and Dr. Andrew Clements, Aston University ([PRI0013](#)) and written evidence from Professor Philippa Tomczak, Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Nottingham ([PRI0005](#))

122 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#))

123 Independent Sentencing Review, *Final report and proposals for reform* (May 2025): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/682d8d995ba51be7c0f45371/independent-sentencing-review-report-part_2.pdf [accessed 26 June 2025]

Visibility

Importance of visibility

122. Throughout the inquiry, we heard compelling evidence about the importance of governor visibility within prisons. Witnesses emphasised that visibility is a key part of any good leadership. The Ministry of Justice told us: “Governors and their senior teams can shape the culture of their establishments through visibility and meaningful engagement with prisoners, whilst also setting the tone for staff.”¹²⁴ It noted the importance of being directly engaged through “regular walkabouts ... listening, addressing concerns, and explaining decisions”.¹²⁵ His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) added: “When governors are visible and engaged, particularly through spending time on the wings and directly engaging with prisoners, it helps reinforce positive behaviour, builds trust, and provides opportunities for communication, minimising a ‘them and us’ mentality.”¹²⁶ Penal Reform Solutions told us that governors are seen as “the ultimate decision-makers, but their impact depends on visibility and presence”.¹²⁷ Current prisoners also shared their experience of governor visibility; a summary of these accounts can be found in Appendix 3 of this report.

123. HMIP told us that many governors had reported that:

“They are not able to spend their time directly effecting change in the way they would like. Instead of being out and about on the wings getting to know their prison and the people living and working within it, many express frustrations at the amount of their time which is taken up by matters such as HR, facilities management, and complex returns to the centre [that is, HMPPS].”¹²⁸

Importance of governor visibility to prisoners

124. Professor Belinda Winter, Simon Scott and Dr Paul Hamilton of Nottingham Trent University, and the Lived Experience Research Panel told us:

“The governing governor sets the tone of a prison. Visibility of the governor is prized by residents; they are seen as someone who can and will sort out problems that other staff are unwilling or unable to. Governors can make things happen.”¹²⁹

125. HM Inspectorate of Prisons surveyed prisoners to see whether they felt able to speak to managers, governors, or directors if they wished. However, “only 33 per cent of respondents in men’s prisons indicated that they could”.¹³⁰ Zak Addae-Kodua highlighted the importance of governor visibility to prisoners, in particular, in removing the “us-versus-them culture”:

“Those barriers are quickly broken down when the governor makes his regular rounds and you know that, every Tuesday morning, the governor will be on your wing and you can speak to him directly. You can challenge

124 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#))

125 *Ibid.*

126 Written evidence from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons ([PRI0022](#))

127 Written evidence from Penal Reform Solutions ([PRI0025](#))

128 Written evidence from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons ([PRI0022](#))

129 Written evidence from Professor Belinda Winter, Simon Scott, Dr Paul Hamilton (Nottingham Trent University); and the Lived Experience Research Panel ([PRI0037](#))

130 Written evidence from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons ([PRI0022](#))

some things directly and you are able to solve problems directly—rather than using the app system that sometimes gets forgotten, or goes through so many chains of paperwork that, by the time it is time to sort it out, you have three or four more things that you need to be done.”¹³¹

126. Despite the importance of the role of the governor, our evidence suggests that prisoners rarely see their governor except in negative circumstances. Nacro, a charity which delivers services across the criminal justice system, told us that: “With one exception, everyone we interviewed said they rarely, or never, saw the Governor, and that any visibility within the prison was generally seen to be limited to dealing with negative things, such as volatile or violent incidents or dealing with adjudications.”¹³²

127. A former prisoner told Nacro:

“Most prisoners day to day will never see the Governor. Unless they are on adjudication or something negative has been done then you aren’t seen, and Governors do not get involved. If there was more visibility there would be a positive impact. It would show an increased positive attitude towards prisoners. As it is, prisoners are quite far removed from Governors and senior staff and there is a lack of communication from Governors about their direction for the prison.” JEX Male 1, released October 2023¹³³

128. Prison Reform Trust’s latest report noted that “technology did allow prison leaders to have greater visibility across the prison” and that “technology is providing increased opportunities for building a sense of community, through prisoner produced digital content, peer training in digital skills.” However, it also raised concerns that increased use of technology will “reduce vital forms of in-person contact in prison.”¹³⁴

129. The charity Women in Prison also noted the impact on prisoners where the governor was disengaged or distant. One prisoner told them: “You can see that from the top down and if the Governor doesn’t care then the staff don’t either—stands to reason”.¹³⁵

130. Throughout the inquiry, the Committee received several examples of good practice, particularly where governors demonstrated active engagement with prisoners and a clear interest in their care. Academics Dr Maria Adams, Professor Vicki Harman, Professor Jon Garland, Professor Daniel McCarthy, Dr Erin Power, and Dr Talitha Brown acknowledged the effective practices taken by governors in women’s prisons. They said:

“We also noted forms of good practice when there was visibility from the governors, including being involved in religious and cultural events, and if they dealt with individual needs that hindered women’s ability to live day to day in prison. This has been noted as good practice, due to

131 Q 155 (Zak Addae-Kodua)

132 Written evidence from Nacro (PRI0026)

133 *Ibid.*

134 Prison Reform Trust, ‘Update and Restart’ (June 2025): <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/update-and-restart/> [accessed 26 June 2025]

135 Written evidence from Women in Prison (PRI0040)

it being significant and memorable for women when reflecting on their experiences in prison.”¹³⁶

131. Even if governors were unable to physically get around a prison, we heard that they could still have high levels of visibility. Kate Fraser, Head of Practice at Women in Prison, told us “I know that in HMP Styal in Cheshire ... The women have laptops, and the governor does a little video blog where she talks to women and tells them about things that are happening.” She added that “women feel safer when there is that visibility of leadership.”¹³⁷ During our visit to HMP/YOI Isis, we noted that a similar process was used where the Governor filmed regular blogs to keep prisoners and staff updated on what was going on at the prison.

Importance of governor visibility to prison staff

132. Witnesses also noted the importance of governor visibility to prison staff. Andy Mouncey, of the Run for Life Community Interest Company active in North-West England, said that where governor visibility is lacking, staff can “fill the information vacuum with their own version of behaviour, language.”¹³⁸ One former prisoner told us that: “Staff and inmates alike develop greater trust in leadership when they see the governor taking a hands-on approach, being both accountable and accessible.”¹³⁹ They noted the importance of genuine interactions rather than performative appearances which “ultimately undermine rather than build institutional trust.”¹⁴⁰ StandOut Programmes, a charity working with prisons in London, highlighted the experiences of prisoners who rarely saw governors while serving their sentence. They felt that “increased Governor visibility would have helped the morale of staff, prisoners, and the overall culture during what was an extremely difficult time.”¹⁴¹

Visibility within the local community and community engagement

133. Visibility within the local community aids public understanding of the role that prisons play. The MoJ noted the importance of prison leaders engaging with the local community to “encourage local stakeholders to provide opportunities for prisoners”¹⁴² such as using Employment Councils to support offenders into work in the community. Academics from an ESRC-funded programme on food in women’s prisons shared an example of a partnership between the University of Hull and HMP Hull which “enabled the local community (and beyond) to understand more about the positive initiatives that happen in prisons that serve, and are a core part of, the local community.”¹⁴³ Professor Lynn Saunders also said that it was

136 Written evidence from Dr Maria Adams (University of Surrey), Professor Vicki Harman (University of Reading), Professor Jon Garland (University of Surrey), Professor Daniel McCarthy (University of Surrey), Dr Erin Power (Liverpool John Moore’s University) and Dr Talitha Brown (University of Leicester) ([PRI0030](#))

137 [Q 146](#) (Kate Fraser)

138 Written evidence from Andy Mouncey, Founder, Run for Your Life Community Interest Company ([PRI0012](#))

139 Anonymous written evidence ([PRI0021](#))

140 *Ibid.*

141 Written evidence from StandOut Programmes ([PRI0024](#))

142 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#))

143 Written evidence from Prof Karen Harrison, Professor in Law and Penal Justice, University of Lincoln; Rachel Mason, Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln; and Dr Helen Nichols, Reader in Criminology, University of Hull ([PRI0008](#))

valuable for “prisons to have better contact with local communities”¹⁴⁴ and that governors “should particularly involve the mayors, local authorities and voluntary sector organisations in the areas where the prisons are, and have a more open-door policy to involve them.”¹⁴⁵

134. There are challenges in achieving this. Julia Killick, a former governor, told us that there has been a long-standing expectation that prison governors should be “out-ward facing, talking to commissioners and building relationships with the local authority, the National Health Service and MPs.” However, this came at the expense of visibility within the prison: “The culture [of the prison] was expected not to come from you as governor. In fact, one of the performance metrics of a governor was how much time you spend on projects outside of the prison and how many other corporate boards you sat on.”¹⁴⁶
135. Professor Karen Harrison, Rachel Mason, and Dr Helen Nichols told us that: “A lack of funding and autonomy creates challenges for prison leaders when attempting to engage with local communities.”¹⁴⁷ Rt Hon Charles Clarke, former Home Secretary, also told us that in order for governors to be able to engage with the local community and improve partnerships with their prison they needed “slightly more autonomy than they have now”.¹⁴⁸
136. Several witnesses emphasised the important role of the governor in fostering community engagement and forming local links to support prisoner education, employability and skills development. Professor Alison Liebling, Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Cambridge, noted a particularly good example of Parc Prison in Wales which “had fantastic contacts with the local community” but that “it was very much to do with the prison’s own ethos, leadership and vision of itself. I do not think size impacts on links with community; it is much more to do with leadership and vision.”¹⁴⁹
137. **A successful Governor must be visible to staff, prisoners, and the local community. However, what constitutes adequate visibility was unclear and, in the case of visibility to prisoners, we found disparities between what governors considered adequate and what prisoners experience. It is only when Governors are seen, and their presence is felt that they can set a clear direction in a prison. They must be afforded the time to do this.**
138. ***The Ministry of Justice and HMPPS should ensure that the importance of governor visibility is embedded within leadership development, training, and performance frameworks. Governors should be given sufficient authority to allow them to be present in their prisons and lead by example, and to be visible in their local community. Extra administrative burdens should not be placed on them such that they are prevented from doing so. While the Committee recognises the significant time pressures faced by governors, it is essential they protect time for meaningful engagement with prisoners and staff.***

144 [Q 107](#) (Professor Lynn Saunders)

145 *Ibid.*

146 [Q 98](#) (Julia Killick)

147 Written evidence from Prof Karen Harrison, Professor in Law and Penal Justice, University of Lincoln; Rachel Mason, Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln; and Dr Helen Nichols, Reader in Criminology, University of Hull ([PRI0008](#))

148 [Q 58](#) (Charles Clarke)

149 [Q 117](#) (Professor Alison Liebling)

Governor autonomy

Limitations on autonomy

139. We heard from several witnesses throughout the inquiry that governors' autonomy was limited and that this had wide-ranging impacts on the progress that could be made within prisons. This affected areas ranging from prison officer development and training to reducing reoffending and prison maintenance. Lord Timpson said "I do not think that the balance is right. There is a lack of operational freedom for governors". He added: "They need to be trusted more, but we also need to make sure that, where we provide central support in terms of HR, health and safety and so on, that is a really positive way of supporting them and does not get in the way of them trying to do their job too much."¹⁵⁰
140. Professor Ben Crewe highlighted that "Governors feel they have relatively little autonomy", adding that "one frustration that they have is that they are accountable for everything that goes on in a prison, but sometimes they do not have that much control of the education or health contracts that make quite a big difference to their establishments".¹⁵¹ Carl Davies also told us that "Governors would love to be autonomous and empowered, but they do not have the tools or freedoms to be either."¹⁵²
141. Charlie Taylor, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, highlighted the differences in governor autonomy between governors operating in private prisons and those operating in public prisons. He told us that "some of the most innovative practice that we see is in [private] prisons such as Oakwood, where they are doing things and using the autonomy in a way that we do not see often in public sector prisons". He noted that "there is more flexibility for private sector governors".¹⁵³
142. Professor Lynn Saunders, a former prison governor, emphasised the negative impact that the reduction in autonomy had on governors being able to carry out their role. She said that "centralisation made me feel, 'I cannot do this any more', and was why I left. It meant that all the good things about doing the job were taken away."¹⁵⁴
143. Charlie Taylor highlighted how many governors were "wrestling with a bureaucracy that is not geared up, really, to be able to support them" and that they get "tied up in sending returns back to the ministry about whatever the latest are of interest might happen to be".¹⁵⁵ In HMIP's annual report 2024–25, he wrote of "frustrated prison governors in a system that appears to value plodding managerialism over the sort of transformative leadership that we see in all the best prisons."¹⁵⁶
144. The role of the governor has changed over time. Witnesses told us that increased managerial responsibilities affect the governor's ability to remain engaged and visible within the prison and in their local community. Julia

150 [Q 169](#) (Lord Timpson)

151 [Q 111](#) (Professor Ben Crewe)

152 [Q 11](#) (Carl Davies)

153 *Ibid.*

154 [Q 98](#) (Professor Lynn Saunders)

155 [Q 84](#) (Charlie Taylor)

156 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, *Annual Report 2024–25* (8 July 2025): <https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2025/07/Annual-report-FINAL.pdf> [accessed 9 July 2025]

Thompson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams and Sunita Dobisz, serving operational governors (heads of unit) at HMP Send, told us that: “Governors are becoming more like business managers although most joined the Service to look after prisoners and help rehabilitate them.”¹⁵⁷ They explained:

“So many meetings are required for audit purposes that governors can spend 60–70 per cent of their weeks in meetings, once out of meetings there are emails with competing demands in them to tend to and consequently the strategic thinking and longer-term planning is very difficult to do. Most governors work 40–50 hours a week and things that make the difference (being out and about in their prisons really listening to prisoners and staff) are the things that end up being sacrificed.”¹⁵⁸

145. **Governors often lack the discretion to make important decisions on operational matters such as staffing, budgets, and regime design, undermining their capacity to create a coherent vision for their prisons. This is compounded by an administrative burden and top-down control that restrict their ability to maintain a visible and engaged leadership presence within their establishments, which has negative consequences for staff morale and prisoner safety.**
146. **Prison Governors are over-managed, and there are too many layers of management responsibility within HMPPS.**
147. **A culture of centralisation within HMPPS has stifled innovation and weakened the ability of governors to lead effectively. The balance between national consistency and local flexibility has shifted too far toward the former, undermining the leadership model and morale among governors and senior staff.**
148. *The Ministry of Justice should strike a better balance between governor autonomy and centralised control, ensuring that governors have the necessary authority to lead effectively. This would involve giving them more decision-making power on key operational matters like staffing, budgeting, and regime design, allowing governors to create clear, tailored visions for their prisons.*

Lack of autonomy over recruitment of staff

149. We also heard about issues with the centralisation of the recruitment process for prison officers. Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign told us: “HMPPS’s recruitment process is highly centralised, so perhaps consideration should be given to providing more autonomy to Governing Governors in the selection process.”¹⁵⁹ Julia Thompson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams, and Sunita Dobisz also told us that:

“It is ludicrous that prison governors cannot interview the staff who will be working in their prisons before they are selected. So much corruption and poor performance could be avoided if governors could look potential staff directly in the eyes and ask them ‘what is motivating you to apply for a job in this prison?’. Also, at training school we have evidence of many occasions when the training staff have identified significant concerns

157 Written evidence from Julia Thompson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams and Sunita Dobisz (PRI0020)

158 *Ibid.*

159 Supplementary written evidence from Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign (PRI0016)

about individuals (for example their general attitudes rather than ability to pass a written test) but governors at the receiving prisons have been powerless to prevent them arriving.”¹⁶⁰

150. Witnesses told us that governors should have more autonomy for recruitment within their individual prisons.¹⁶¹ Margaret Adams, Director at Magistra Ltd., said: “Despite rhetoric claims to improve Governors’ autonomy over several years this has not happened in practice as Governors are now excluded from their Staff selection and training.”¹⁶²
151. The Prisons and Probations Ombudsman noted that governors have “expressed that they would value the option to be able to recruit locally. Candidates currently apply through the service, as opposed to the individual prison, and in some cases have not had any interaction with the prison prior to working there.”¹⁶³ They informed us that prison officers who have not previously interacted with the prison struggle “to meaningfully connect and build strong relationships with the prisoners.”¹⁶⁴
152. Carl Davies, vice-president of the Prison Governors’ Association, explained that the new model of centralisation was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the “cost-saving initiatives of the Government”¹⁶⁵ and noted that this meant that the governor “does not have direct control and cannot recruit or employ a HR specialist.” He explained that running a prison is now a “multi-million pound business”, adding that “it is ludicrous to think that the governor doesn’t employ, recruit and appoint their own finance manager, their own business partner or their own organisational development (OD) manager or training manager.”¹⁶⁶
153. ***Prison governors should oversee the recruitment process in their prisons. A senior member of staff from the prison should hold a face-to-face interview with prospective candidates before the governor confirms a formal offer of employment.***

Limited influence over budgets

154. We heard from multiple sources the limited influence governors had over their own budget. HMIP noted that:

“Many of the governors that we spoke to as part of our Improving Behaviour in Prison thematic were particularly frustrated by finance rules and a general lack of control over their budgets which they felt prevented them from making improvements. Leaders in the privately-operated prisons we visited tended to have more flexibility in how they spent their budget, and better systems to bid for money from within their company.”¹⁶⁷

160 Written evidence from Julia Thompson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams and Sunita Dobisz (PRI0020)

161 Written evidence from Prison Officers Association, (PRI0009), supplementary written evidence from Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign, (PRI0016), written evidence from Julia Thompson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams and Sunita Dobisz, (PRI0020), written evidence from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons, (PRI0022)

162 Written evidence from Margaret Adams, Director at Magistra Ltd (PRI0006)

163 Written evidence from Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PRI0034)

164 *Ibid.*

165 Q 5 (Carl Davies)

166 *Ibid.*

167 Written evidence from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (PRI0022)

Rt Hon Michael Gove added that “What is absolutely required is to give the governor autonomy ... over choosing educational suppliers, getting prisoners to work and so on.”¹⁶⁸

155. Mr Philip Wheatley noted the impacts of the policy changes made to the role of governor since 2010. He highlighted that “Governors have lost the freedom to move money between budget subheads. This was a key flexibility that allowed Governors to redeploy funds to strengthen performance in weaker areas and to innovate.”¹⁶⁹ He added that:

“Governors’ freedom to spend in some areas has been severely restricted [so] that for example Governors can no longer spend even small amounts without the prior approval of their line manager (as an example they can no longer provide tea, coffee or any refreshments at public expense for official visitors). Micro-management of this sort is counterproductive and ultimately wasteful of expensive management resources, distracting effort from more crucial tasks.”¹⁷⁰

156. The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman provided us with an example of a governor “who spent three days trying to arrange for the replacement of a broken kitchen appliance. The process for replacing the appliance was centralised and difficult to arrange.”¹⁷¹

157. ***Governors should have more autonomy over their budget, in particular with regards to procurement.***

Performance of governors

Time in post

158. Transferring governors between prisons too frequently was reported to disrupt continuity and prevent long-term planning. We were told that “The length of time a governor is in post impacts how successful they can be. To have a meaningful impact on rehabilitation takes time.”¹⁷² HMIP also told us that “We frequently find that governors, deputies, and senior teams have changed since our last inspection visit. These changes can be very disruptive, often slowing the pace of improvement and unsettling staff.”¹⁷³
159. Lord Timpson said “I am a big believer that our governors need to be there long enough to develop a culture and also be accountable for their performance. In my book, that takes three to five years.”¹⁷⁴ He further stated that it was important that “when someone is in a position that is not right, they have the ability to move, or we have the ability to move them.”¹⁷⁵

Barriers created by a culture of blame

160. Penal Reform Solutions suggested that “Instead of a punitive focus, accountability should centre on culture change and development.”¹⁷⁶ It added

168 [Q 59](#) (Michael Gove)

169 Written evidence from Mr Philip Wheatley CB, Retired Director General of HMPS, Expert Witness and Adviser on Prison Management at Self employed ([PRI0001](#))

170 *Ibid.*

171 Written evidence from the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman ([PRI0034](#))

172 Written evidence from Prisoners’ Education Trust ([PRI0033](#))

173 Written evidence from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons ([PRI0022](#))

174 [Q 174](#) (Lord Timpson)

175 *Ibid.*

176 Written evidence from Penal Reform Solutions ([PRI0025](#))

that governors should be involved in the setting of standards and expectations as “using a collaborative and inclusive approach, will allow everyone to be a part of the solution and take ownership of the standards”.¹⁷⁷ Rather than addressing causes of poor performance and trying to identify solutions, poor-performing governors are often just rotated to another prison.

161. Evidence from Prospect Trade Union highlighted the challenges that a culture of blame rather than constructive accountability creates. It told us that the former would “lead to a culture of avoiding change at a time when the Service needs to become more effective.”¹⁷⁸
162. Professor Karen Harrison, Rachel Mason and Dr Helen Nichols told us: “Prison leaders believe they are held responsible and accountable for the success or failings of their areas of work, but do not have the autonomy to be able to influence this.”¹⁷⁹ We were told that the reduction in autonomy “does not foster a culture of learning from mistakes” and instead results in governors “feeling frustrated that they are penalised for outcomes that they have not been able to influence in the way they would have liked.”¹⁸⁰ Evidence also noted that governors feel “stifled in their ability to be innovative and consider solutions they feel would be responsive to their particular setting/context/population.”¹⁸¹
163. ***To improve continuity and long-term planning, governors should be allowed to remain in their positions for longer periods before being rotated. Sabbaticals should be encouraged for personal development and long-term wellbeing. This will allow for more strategic planning and greater stability in leadership, fostering better outcomes for both staff and prisoners.***

Knowledge sharing between prisons

164. Penal Reform Solutions told us that “systemic barriers prevent knowledge sharing.”¹⁸² Charles Clarke also noted the issue around the quality of data for prison performance, telling us that “the available data about prisons and prison performance was of much lower quality than it needs to be”.¹⁸³ Professor Liebling highlighted the point that there used to be an annual prison governors’ conference where everyone got together and shared best practice.¹⁸⁴
165. Tom Wheatley, President of the Prison Governors’ Association, told us that: “Formal training for prison governors is very limited. There is a reliance on people having learned from experience in their move through the prison system and having had opportunities to gain a range of experience in a range of different settings.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Written evidence from Prospect ([PRI0041](#))

¹⁷⁹ Written evidence from Prof Karen Harrison, Professor in Law and Penal Justice, University of Lincoln; Rachel Mason, Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln; and Dr Helen Nichols, Reader in Criminology, University of Hull ([PRI0008](#))

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Written evidence from Penal Reform Solutions ([PRI0025](#))

¹⁸³ [Q 59](#) (Charles Clarke)

¹⁸⁴ [Q 111](#) (Alison Liebling)

¹⁸⁵ [Q 3](#) (Tom Wheatley)

166. Lord Timpson noted his interest in improving performance and consistency across prisons. He said, “It is about accountability and being open with the information, so that people can compare how they are performing against others.”¹⁸⁶ He told us that what he would ideally like “is a situation where, when the governor and all the senior managers switch on their computers in the morning, how they are performing against similar establishments comes up straightaway.”¹⁸⁷
167. **There is considerable good practice taking place across the prison estate, often driven by committed leadership and strong local cultures. However, the Committee is concerned that these examples remain too isolated and are not consistently shared.**
168. *The Ministry of Justice should re-introduce a national annual governor conference to facilitate the sharing of good practice across the prison estate. It is crucial that successful models from all types of establishments—including public, private, and women’s prisons—are shared and considered for wider implementation.*
169. *Formal governor training should also be established to ensure that governors have the necessary skills required to manage complex modern prisons.*

Reform Prisons

170. The current approach, with centralised control and limited flexibility, is not the only way of running prisons. Indeed, previous governments have acknowledged the importance of greater governor autonomy and visibility in prisons, but attempts at reform have not been followed through consistently and with clarity of purpose. For instance, we heard about the experience of ‘reform prisons’, a pilot that was introduced in 2016–17 as a deliberate attempt to seek an alternative to the culture of managerialism in prisons.
171. Dr Jamie Bennett, Research Associate at the Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford, explained that reform prisons altered culture in several ways. Led by an “Executive Governor”, reform prisons were “an attempt to reimagine management culture”. Executive teams brought in people from a range of professional backgrounds including from the Probation Service, and there was more diverse leadership. Within the group of reform prisons, “there was an attempt to encourage greater collaboration between the prisons, sharing ideas, resources and common approaches”. Within prisons, there was an “empowering approach” and a move away from hierarchical compliance. Externally, prison leaders “were able to improve relationships with criminal justice agencies and public sector services, as well as local business”. This brought additional investment and opportunities for post-prison support and employment for prisoners.¹⁸⁸
172. The experiment with reform prisons was short-lived and “the political momentum receded as ministers moved on”. Michael Gove, who was keen on the creation of reform prisons, acknowledged that “there was a move away from that for a variety of reasons”.¹⁸⁹

186 [Q 175](#) (Lord Timpson)

187 *Ibid.*

188 Written evidence from Dr Jamie Bennett ([PRI0011](#))

189 [Q 52](#) (Michael Gove)

173. **The experiment with reform prisons is a lesson in the importance of continuity and consistency in developing a leadership strategy for prisons. *We believe new pilots should be established and they should be given the time and resources which are required to ensure they have a reasonable chance of success, such that others can learn from best practice.***

Leadership pipeline and future reform

174. The Committee heard that insufficient investment in the professional development of future leaders is limiting the quality and stability of prison leadership over time. The Prisoners' Education Trust said that "work should be done to develop the talent pool of potential governors with improved succession planning, so prisons benefit from good quality leadership which isn't lost when a governor moves on."¹⁹⁰ Concerns about the training provided to future leaders are not new. Saj Zafar, who joined the accelerated promotion scheme in the Prison Service in 2000, also told the Committee about first turning up in a management position: "When you transferred into a real prison, nobody prepares you for the challenges, and you need to have a certain level of resilience. It is more than just a job; it is a way of life."¹⁹¹

Governor retirement and succession planning

175. During the inquiry, it was made clear to us that there is a significant number of governors nearing retirement age and concerns were raised with us regarding a potential shortage of well-qualified people to take over. Lord Timpson told us that: "As of 31 March 2024, there were 14 Band 10–12 Operational Managers across Prison and Probation who were over 60 years old, and 127 who were aged 50–59."¹⁹²
176. This may be reflective of the seniority of the role, but witnesses noted that HMPPS was not doing enough to ensure that there were sufficient effective leaders in the pipeline to take over from retiring governors. Julia Thompson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams, and Sunita Dobisz stated: "What HMPPS has not been doing with any degree of success for years is to draw enough talented people into the Service in the first place from which to select and develop future governors."¹⁹³
177. HMIP also said that: "Despite the importance of the governor grade, the prison service often struggles to identify and enable the next generation of leaders through training, mentoring and continuous professional development. If high-performing prison staff are to stay in the service, career development and investment in them is crucial."¹⁹⁴
178. Lord Timpson highlighted the "lack of depth in future governors coming through" and told us that "If every governor won the EuroMillions this week, we would have a problem because we do not have enough talent coming through."¹⁹⁵

190 Written evidence from Prisoners' Education Trust ([PRI0033](#))

191 [Q 104](#) (Saj Zafar)

192 Letter from Lord Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, to the Rt Hon Lord Foster of Bath, Chair of the Justice and Home Affairs Committee (25 April 2025): <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/47704/documents/249230/default/>

193 Written evidence from Julia Thompson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams and Sunita Dobisz ([PRI0020](#))

194 Written evidence from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons ([PRI0022](#))

195 [Q 168](#) (Lord Timpson)

179. The MoJ told us that:

“Good quality succession planning for Governors is vital to ensure we have enough Governors ready to fill vacancies when they arrive. HMPPS supports talent management through leadership training and resources, and career advancement opportunities. As part of the ‘Enable Programme’, we are aiming to improve Governor succession planning and create a system with a greater focus on talent and development opportunities to ensure our Governors are fully prepared and ready for the next step.”¹⁹⁶

Future leaders

180. The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) said:

“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.”¹⁹⁷

The PRT has responded by setting up the Next Gen leadership project which “aims to support the next generation of prison service leaders to improve life in prison for all that live and work there.”¹⁹⁸ As of November 2024, there were 19 deputy governors in the group attending workshops and implementing a prison-base, prisoner co-created improvement project.

181. We heard that retention rates of recruits through the Unlocked Graduates scheme (a two year leadership development programme placing graduates in prisons) was better than for those entering by the standard route.¹⁹⁹ Several witnesses advocated for greater investment programmes such as Unlocked Graduates, but noted that HMPPS should use its experience and look at the data from the programme to implement a similar approach for its own training and recruitment of prison officers: “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.”²⁰⁰ Witnesses highlighted the importance of developing a diverse and robust pipeline for future leaders to improve the resilience of the Prison Service.²⁰¹

182. Lord Timpson confirmed that on 1 April 2025 HMPPS launched the Future Prison Leaders Programme which “aims to recruit and train the next generation of prison leaders. The three-year programme will recruit 35 talented individuals from diverse backgrounds, including successful

196 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#))

197 Written evidence from Prison Reform Trust ([PRI0035](#))

198 *Ibid.*

199 *Ibid.*

200 *Ibid.*

201 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#)), Prof Karen Harrison, Professor in Law and Penal Justice, University of Lincoln; Rachel Mason, Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln; and Dr Helen Nichols, Reader in Criminology, University of Hull ([PRI0008](#)), Julia Thompson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams and Sunita Dobisz ([PRI0020](#)) and Penal Reform Solutions ([PRI0025](#))

graduates, and offers a clear career pathway to a senior leadership position in prisons.”²⁰²

183. **We hope that the Future Prison Leaders programme will succeed; it is long overdue and HMPPS had been negligent in not developing such a system earlier. It is naïve to expect that enough talented governors will emerge from the ranks of prison officers who are recruited with minimum qualifications, limited life experience, and a lack of training and support.**
184. **We share the regrets of other witnesses that MoJ and HMPPS were negligent in losing the creativity and expertise of Unlocked Graduates, a major avoidable mistake. It remains to be seen if HMPPS has the confidence, creativity and radicalism to create as good a system to attract talent.**
185. **Talented young entrants will not stay if the system fails to support them. The present system within which prison governors operate is the reverse of what is needed, majoring on control and bureaucracy, rather than creative support. Major changes are needed so that governors are enabled to help prisoners stop offending and so keep the public safer.**
186. *The Government should invest in strengthening the leadership pipeline by providing more opportunities for the professional development of future leaders. The current Future Leaders Programme cannot, on its own, address the leadership crisis we face. The Government must expand support for external programmes such as Unlocked Graduates, while also enhancing internal development pathways for experienced officers. A strong leadership pipeline will ensure the long-term stability and resilience of the Prison Service.*

202 Letter from Lord Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, to the Rt Hon Lord Foster of Bath, Chair of the Justice and Home Affairs Committee (25 April 2025): <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/47704/documents/249230/default/>

CHAPTER 4: STAFF IN PRISON

Introduction

187. During our inquiry, we considered the role of the prison officer, and how a career in the Prison Service compares with those in comparable services. We heard that the role of prison officer is now defined by fire-fighting and crisis management rather than a holistic approach to offender management. The chapter highlights that in the absence of a clear definition of the purpose of prisons, prison officers lack clarity about the scope and focus of their own roles. The chapter also sets out key concerns around recruitment, retention, training, sickness, and the assessment of prison officers. We argue the lack of clarity around the purpose of prisons makes it difficult for officers to know what their role should be, and that the current assessment of, and training provided to, prison officers is woefully inadequate and is setting them up to fail, which may, in part, account for the nearly 60 per cent of prison officers who leave with under three years in post.

Box 3: Key staffing statistics (all figures correct as of 31 March 2025)

- There are 22,737 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) band 3–5 officers working in public prisons. This is a decrease of 878 (3.7 per cent) compared to 31 March 2024;
- Of the 22,737 band 3–5 officers working in public prisons, 2,308 (10.2 per cent) had less than one year service and 8,515 (37.4 per cent) had less than three years' service;
- There was a leaving rate of 12.2 per cent amongst band 3–5 prison officers for the year ending 31 March 2025. This equates to 2,985 officers. Of these leavers, 878 (29.4 per cent) had less than one year service and 1,728 (57.9 per cent) had less than three years' service;
- In the year ending 31 March 2025, there were 307,063 days lost to sickness amongst band 3–5 prison officers with an average of 13.2 days lost per officer.

Source: HMPPS, 'HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2025 (15 May 2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-march-2025/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-march-2025#band-3-5-prison-officers-and-band-2-operational-support-staff> [accessed 9 July 2025]

188. The Ministry of Justice described the role of prison officers as multi-faceted, stating that “officers must be peacekeepers, teachers, and counsellors whilst still delivering the key requirements of their role to maintain a safe and secure regime”.²⁰³ As well as delivering the regime, the best prison officers are those with emotional intelligence and an acute understanding of the complexities of the prison environment. This skillset is commonly referred to as ‘jail craft’ within prisons. The Committee heard that ‘jail craft’ is a skill which takes time and experience to acquire but is invaluable in keeping prisons safe. The Independent Monitoring Boards²⁰⁴ (IMBs) told us that “prison stability is ... affected by some officers’ lack of jail craft, which makes enforcing discipline difficult”.²⁰⁵ One former officer said: “It is hard to explain, but jail craft is

203 Written evidence from Ministry of Justice (PRI0003)

204 The Independent Monitoring Boards is made up of independent and unpaid volunteers who monitor the welfare of prisoners and report on whether prisoners are being treated fairly. The purpose of the board is to ensure that proper standards of care are being maintained.

205 Written evidence from Independent Monitoring Boards (PRI0027)

something once you have it, you never lose it. You can walk onto a wing/unit, and you can sense that something is not right, something is off.”²⁰⁶

189. A number of witnesses stated that jail craft is being lost from our prisons. The POA told us that the reduction in staffing numbers in the austerity period, and the loss of experience had a “huge impact” on the strength of jail craft.²⁰⁷ Professor Belinda Winder, Simon Scott, Dr Paul Hamilton, and the Lived Experience Research Panel told us that employing people without appropriate language skills is negatively impacting the ability to communicate, a key part of jail craft.²⁰⁸
190. Natasha Porter, Chief Executive Officer of Unlocked Graduates, told us that there was some ambiguity about what the role of an officer entailed:

“You would think that as a profession, as the prison officer role should be, it would have defined professional characteristics and that would set your training, assessment and career journey. In the absence of those, it is kind of up to prison officers what they decide to make of that.”²⁰⁹
191. We heard that the lack of clarity about the purpose of prison in general (discussed in Chapter 2) affected understanding of the officer role. Pia Sinha, Chief Executive Officer of the Prison Reform Trust, said: “The role of the prison officer is very much determined by our shared understanding of what the role of prisons needs to be, and getting clarity about what that role or purpose of prison needs to be will determine what the role of the officer becomes.”²¹⁰
192. A muddled and inconsistent purpose, and the dichotomy between punishment and reducing reoffending, is reflected in public debate about prisons. This contradiction in terms creates a challenge for prison officers in how they carry out their work. Ben Crewe, Professor of Penology and Criminal Justice, told us that “The inconsistency is in what you are asking staff to do every day in terms of their decision-making”. He added that the everyday practices of staff “require a kind of animating philosophy” that is currently lacking.²¹¹

Recruitment and retention

193. A significant concern expressed by witnesses was about the recruitment and retention of prison officers. The Committee received evidence that high turnover, recruitment challenges, and insufficient experience at all levels are creating instability within the prison service, which negatively impacts both staff morale and the quality of service. HMIP told us that staff survey findings from inspections in 2023–24 suggested that there was “significant room for improvement” and that “Across all staff, approximately 39 per cent of those surveyed described their morale at work as ‘low’ or ‘very low’. This rose to around 54 per cent for frontline operational staff”.²¹² The Prison Officers’ Association told us:

206 Anonymous written evidence ([PRI0039](#))

207 Written evidence from the Prison Officers Association ([PRI0009](#))

208 Written evidence from Prof Belinda Winder, Simon Scott, Dr Paul Hamilton (Nottingham Trent University); and the Lived Experience Research Panel ([PRI0037](#))

209 [Q 26](#) (Natasha Porter)

210 [Q 26](#) (Pia Sinha)

211 [Q 109](#) (Professor Ben Crewe)

212 Written evidence from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons ([PRI0022](#))

“Job satisfaction and morale are at rock-bottom due to numerous reasons, including the lack of industrial rights, an unrealistic retirement age, a violent workplace, lack of support on the frontline when in probation, lack of flexible working options that take into account childcare, primary care and partially retired shift patterns, lack of support and empathy from senior leaders, excessive workloads, a ‘them and us’ culture between officers and governors, a two-tier service of Fair & Sustainable and closed-grade staff, poor pay and lack of pride in the service, which is simply not disciplined anymore”.²¹³

194. The prison system in England and Wales is facing a severe recruitment and retention crisis, with staffing shortages leading to prisoners being locked in their cells for increased periods of time. The Ministry of Justice told us: “We are almost at 100 per cent of our national Target Staffing Figure (TSF) for Band 3–5 officers.”²¹⁴ However, other witnesses noted that newly-recruited prison officers were leaving the service shortly after joining, creating what Ben Crewe described to us as “a false economy”.²¹⁵ This leaves a void of experienced staff that contributes to poor staff-prisoner relationships. As His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) told us, “more focus is needed to increase staff knowledge and experience, as we know that many prisoners are very frustrated with inexperienced staff who are unfamiliar with the prison, the wing and the prisoners in their care.”²¹⁶
195. We were told that when the Prison Service was less overstretched and had a more experienced workforce, there were successful examples of identifying effective practice and implementing it across other establishments.”²¹⁷

Recruitment process

196. The Committee received evidence that the current emphasis on online recruitment is impeding efforts to attract and retain individuals well-suited to the specific demands of different prisons. The POA told us that: “It is impossible to assess someone’s suitability [as a potential prison officer] via a simulation conducted remotely over Zoom.”²¹⁸ Witnesses stressed the importance of adopting a more face-to-face and locally informed approach, enabling recruitment processes to reflect the particular needs, culture, and context of individual establishments:

“the current approaches to centralised recruitment including online recruitment processes are not working due to staff leaving within short periods of employment because they were not prepared to understand the reality of a Prison environment.”²¹⁹

213 Written evidence from the Prison Officers’ Association ([PRI0009](#)). Fair and Sustainable is a newer pay and grading system introduced to modernise prison staff employment terms, whereas closed-grade staff refers to those who were hired under the old pay and grading structure.

214 Written evidence from Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#))

215 [Q 111](#) (Professor Ben Crewe)

216 Written evidence from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons ([PRI0022](#))

217 Written evidence from Prospect ([PRI0041](#))

218 Written evidence from the Prison Officers’ Association ([PRI0009](#))

219 Written evidence from Margaret Adams, Director at Magistra Ltd ([PRI0006](#))

Box 4: Prison officer recruitment process

The recruitment process for public prisons is centralised and predominantly online. There are no specific qualifications required to be a prison officer however there are some eligibility criteria including:

- Being 18 years old and above;
- Passing a medical and fitness assessment;
- Having the right to work in the UK (and for high security prisons, having lived in the UK for the past 3 years).

There are up to 2 online tests as part of the application process. A scenario-based test which measure basic numeracy skills and behaviours, and a task-based behaviour assessment.

Upon passing the two tests, there is then an online assessment centre involving an interview, a role play, and a written test. For women's prisons, there is an additional written assessment.

HMPPS completes security, identity, past employment, and health checks once a position is available. Those working in high security prisons require a higher vetting level.

Source: HM Prison and Probation Service, 'Become a prison officer': <https://prisonandprobationjobs.gov.uk/roles-at-hmpps/prison-officer/how-to-apply/> [accessed 9 July 2025]

197. Michelle Jarman-Howe, CEO of Prisons at HMPPS, told the Committee that the recruitment process is "robust".²²⁰ She explained that recruitment is conducted "through an online assessment centre, but that online assessment centre is live. Candidates are engaging in real time with real individuals".²²¹
198. **We fundamentally disagree with the claim that the recruitment process used by HMPPS is robust.**
199. Prison officers do not currently undergo a formal interview in person as part of the recruitment process. As Dr Kate Gooch, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, told us, this removes "a key opportunity to establish suitability".²²² Giving evidence to the Justice Select Committee's inquiry on the Prison Operational Workforce on 7 February 2023 Mark Fairhurst, POA National Chair, said:

"For such a responsible role, there is absolutely no interview panel. We could save a hell of a lot of money by scrapping job simulation and reinvesting in interview panels, so that governors can see who they are recruiting ... how they react when they're under pressure. We don't have any of that."²²³
200. The current recruitment process does not provide the opportunity for assessors to ask why applicants want to become a prison officer or ensure they understand the complexities of the role. Witnesses told us that this is a key part of setting a healthy prison culture. One former prison officer wrote to us, saying:

²²⁰ [Q 121](#) (Michelle Jarman-Howe)

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Written evidence from Dr Kate Gooch ([PRI0044](#))

²²³ Oral evidence taken before the Justice Committee, inquiry on The prison operational workforce, 7 February 2021 (Session 2022–23), [Q 8](#) (Mark Fairhurst)

“At NO point during the recruitment process of becoming a Prison Officer did one single individual, who was part of the recruitment process, ask me, ‘Why do I want to be a Prison Officer?’ Nobody seemed to care. My motivation for wanting to be a Prison Officer was never questioned at any stage, nor was my skills set or what I could bring to the role.”²²⁴

201. This is in contrast to our international counterparts in Norway, where prison officers must complete a two-year training programme which assesses motivation and skillset. Dr Kristian Mjåland, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Agder, spoke to the Committee about prison officer recruitment in Norway and said: “There is a shared understanding among prison staff that our prison system should try to facilitate rehabilitation. We asked them, ‘Why did you want to become a prison officer?’”²²⁵

202. Other witnesses noted that shift patterns and the potential to be transferred to another establishment at short notice is not conducive to a healthy family life. Clare Pearson, a former prison governor, said:

“At the point when women start a family, there are some really significant considerations to make around the length of the shifts that you are expected to undertake, the environment that you are going into, in terms of health and safety, and whether that is something that you can make work for your domestic circumstances.”²²⁶

Retention and recognition

203. Witnesses gave a clear sense of operational staff feeling devalued and unsupported. The complexity of the work prison officers do and their contribution to public safety are not reflected in the resources they are equipped with or even the quality of their uniform. A former prison officer told us:

“I have seen new staff leave with less than a few weeks in the job with the shortest being less than a week. Even little things like offering a better standard of equipment and uniform. The uniforms issued were ill fitting, uncomfortable, impractical and dangerous. I witnessed an officer dealing with a cell fire whose so-called fire-resistant jacket went up in flames as if it had been doused in petrol. ... Decent uniforms may seem trivial but it all goes towards building a sense of pride in the job. Staff need to feel valued and supported, which is not something in my experience many of us did.”²²⁷

204. This sentiment was echoed by other witnesses who described a disparity between the depiction of prison life presented by HMPPS and conditions as they actually are, leading to frontline staff feeling ignored. Mark Fairhurst, Chair of the POA, said: “We have got non-operational staff with no experience of prisons writing prison policy telling us how we can do our job. That does not work.”²²⁸ One former officer told the Committee: “We are the ones on the ground, we are the ones talking to the prisoners, we are the ones that

224 Written evidence from Howard James Fatcher ([PRI0047](#))

225 [Q 108](#) (Dr Kristian Mjåland)

226 [Q 103](#) (Clare Pearson)

227 Written evidence from Paul Cosgrove ([PRI0019](#))

228 [Q 64](#) (Mark Fairhurst)

know something is not right. ... If an officer comes to higher management and expresses this, listen.”²²⁹

205. Prisons have become increasingly dangerous places for frontline staff to work. The rise in violence has been widely reported in the media.²³⁰ This is an obvious reason for the high turnover in operational prison staff. Reducing violence and prioritising staff safety is an integral part of improving retention rates. The Prison Officers’ Association said:

“What our members did not sign up for was to be punching bags, which too frequently feels like a role forced on them by the MOJ and HMPPS. Violence has again soared since the end of the pandemic, now reaching record levels of assaults against staff—clearly a key driver of poor morale and low retention of prison officers.”²³¹

206. The lack of experienced staff in prisons increases pressure on the remaining workforce. In order to increase retention, witnesses referenced the need for people to view prison work as a long-term career that is worth investing in and that comes with the status it deserves. Gavin Miller, National Secretary for Justice and Custodial at Community trade union, said:

“We need the public and the workforce to consider themselves to be on the same lines as firefighters, police officers, doctors and nurses. That is what they are—they are keeping the public safe.”²³²

207. Witnesses felt that prison work becomes vocational if officers can see a future within the service from the outset and have access to high-quality training. Natasha Porter, CEO of Unlocked Graduates, said: “You can retain them for their whole career. They can have a job for life, but they expect to have opportunities, progression and training.”²³³

208. Dr Kristian Mjåland told us that in Norway, “when prison officers are finished with their training they receive a decent wage. That is important. It is considered a respectable profession in Norway.”²³⁴

209. **The role of prison officer is misunderstood and undervalued in society. The role of prison officer is complex and highly demanding. A career in the prison service should be comparable in status to one in the police, Border Force, or in the Armed forces.**

210. **A career in the Prison Service is equally not for everyone, and is not necessarily the right choice for those considering a career in comparable services. Recruitment processes should reflect the reality of the role.**

211. **The Committee notes with concern the critical challenges in recruiting and retaining prison officers, with low pay, poor working conditions, increasing violence and high turnover contributing to ongoing instability within the prison service.**

229 Anonymous written evidence ([PRI0039](#))

230 ‘Call for action to protect prison officers “before there is a fatality”, *Evening Standard* (14 May 2025): <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/thames-valley-police-hmp-woodhill-milton-keynes-buckinghamshire-steve-b1227806.html> [accessed 9 July 2025]

231 Written evidence from the Prison Officers Association ([PRI0009](#))

232 [Q 70](#) (Gavin Miller)

233 [Q 36](#) (Natasha Porter)

234 [Q 110](#) (Dr Kristian Mjåland)

212. *Early face-to-face engagement is essential to improving recruitment outcomes. The MoJ and HMPPS should incorporate in-person assessments, realistic job previews, and direct interaction with experienced staff to ensure candidates have a clearer understanding of the role and its demands. This is essential for the purposes of candidate screening, and is consistent with our recommendation that Governors should oversee the process in their own prison, and that candidates should be interviewed face-to-face by a senior member of staff before a formal offer of appointment is made.*
213. *We recommend establishing a Prison Service Medal for exceptional service. Raising the professional status of a career in the prison service is not merely symbolic, it is essential for recruitment, retention, and morale.*

Training and development

214. Witnesses raised concerns about the adequacy of prison officer training. Several submissions suggested that current training provision is insufficient in preparing officers to deal with complex situations, such as managing high-risk prisoners or dealing with mental health issues. Penal Reform Solutions told the Committee that “the current six-week training is wholly inadequate”, adding that with over 20 years’ experience working in culture change, they “have never heard anything positive regarding the training.”²³⁵ However, the MoJ said that: “All new entrants undergo at least 10 weeks of training, comprised of a ten-day induction process that aims to familiarise them with the prison environment by meeting their line manager and colleagues and learning about security procedures.”²³⁶
215. Both initial training and in-service training were deemed insufficient by witnesses. We were told that in-service training is lacking, and much of what is available is delivered online. Staff are under pressure to complete training as quickly as possible in order to return to their frontline duties. Charlie Taylor, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, told us:
- “First, the initial training programme does not equip prison officers to walk on to the wing with the confidence that they need, but, secondly, we would like to see much more inservice training for officers who are working in the jail. Just because you have qualified as a prison officer, you are by no means the finished article. It is a difficult, sophisticated, complicated job where you are balancing all kinds of different situations at the same time, and yet in many places officers say to us that they get very little support.”²³⁷
216. Before his appointment as Prisons Minister, Lord Timpson led an Independent Review into prison officer training. He found that the “standard seven-week basic training simply wasn’t doing enough to prepare new recruits for the reality of this incredibly tough job”, and recommended that the Service should adopt “a more structured, longer-term approach.”²³⁸ He told the House of Commons Justice Committee that:

235 Written evidence from Penal Reform Solutions (PRI0025)

236 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice (PRI0003)

237 Q 83 (Charlie Taylor)

238 Ministry of Justice and Lord Timpson OBE, ‘Professional standards in the Prison and Probation Service Speech,’ (6 May 2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/professional-standards-in-the-prison-and-probation-service-speech> [accessed 10 June 2025]

“A lot of that is around much more in-depth training and training around the softer skills, not rushed training but more in-person training and a lot of training around how we support people, de-escalate problems and have a long-term vision for training, so that when someone joins they have a really strong, clear idea, if they are ambitious, how quickly they can progress through the organisation.”²³⁹

217. As noted in Chapter 3, management visibility is also important to staff. Mark Fairhurst of the POA spoke of a recent visit he had made to a prison, where he spoke with three staff with different levels of experience: “I asked where the management were and they did not know who the managers were.”²⁴⁰ Charlie Taylor found a similar situation when speaking to officers: “In some cases they have not seen their line manager for over a year; they often say they have never met their line manager at all.”²⁴¹
218. Witnesses raised the issue of how realistic the training is, questioning if classroom-based work adequately reflects the prison environment. The POA told us: “There are also not enough practical exercises to prepare recruits for the reality of the landings, while staff are recruited on false promises that they can enjoy a flexible working pattern when this is simply not the case.”²⁴² A former prison officer wrote to the Committee and said, “We need to be real with the people that are applying to become a prison officer. Let us stop sugar coating it. It is a dangerous job.”²⁴³
219. The training provided to prison officers in the UK compares unfavourably to that seen abroad, notably in Norway. Dr Kristian Mjåland told us:
- “In Norway, there is a two-year training programme. You spend one semester at the prison officer academy, one year in prison in practice, working as a prison officer with supervision and guidance, and then you are back one semester at school.”²⁴⁴
220. Professor Liebling told us that the Norwegian model has worked elsewhere:
- “If you want to see what Norway can teach us, a good place to look is in eastern European countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland, where there has been a huge importation of Norwegian training, learning and culture ... They have more military backgrounds, poor cultures and less resourcing, but a transformation is taking place because the Norwegians are building training schools and having exchanges.”²⁴⁵

The middle leaders pipeline

221. There is currently no training programme in place for prison officers who have been promoted to more senior ranks. This is further compounded by the lack of experienced staff in place to support those who have been promoted. Witnesses told the Committee that there is no official training

239 Oral evidence taken before the Justice Committee, Inquiry on work of the Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, 19 November 2024, [Q 29](#) (Lord Timpson). See also Supplementary written evidence from Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign ([PRI0016](#)).

240 [Q 62](#) (Mark Fairhurst)

241 [Q 83](#) (Charlie Taylor)

242 Written evidence from Prison Officers’ Association ([PRI0009](#))

243 Anonymous written evidence ([PRI0039](#))

244 [Q 110](#) (Dr Kristian Mjåland)

245 [Q 111](#) (Professor Alison Liebling)

provided for prison officers who are becoming Band 4 Supervising Officers, nor is there any official training for Band 4 Supervising Officers becoming Band 5 Custodial Managers. Mark Fairhurst said:

“It is not your fault that that training does not prepare you for the reality of life on the landings, and it is not your fault that you do not have support services in place to nurture you through those early months because there is a severe lack of experienced staff to nurture you. When you get promoted, you do not get any training. You can be a prison officer today and a custodial manager next Monday, but you do not get any training.”²⁴⁶

222. Inexperienced management was raised as an issue in much of the evidence we received. Charlie Taylor told the Committee “There are some very inexperienced staff in many prisons that we visit, often being managed by almost equally inexperienced staff.”²⁴⁷

223. The Committee is aware that Unlocked Graduates have recently launched a leadership development programme for custodial managers that aims to transform the quality of middle leadership in prisons. The view of the Committee is that this is a logical and much-needed initiative that has the potential to increase retention and build experience within the workforce. Natasha Porter, CEO of Unlocked Graduates, told us:

“We have seen that great line management is the thing that can fix almost all these problems. As to career progression, a great line manager talks to you about what that looks like. As to support, you have a rough day and your line manager calls you up to ask if you are all right and follows up with you afterwards. As for development and opportunities, your line manager says, “Hey, what courses do you want to go on? How are we developing you? How can I develop you?” We have embedded that. We have a mentor who works alongside our participants for the full two years of the programme. Essentially, they step into where a line manager should be. We see that when there is a great line manager they stay; they stay long-term and they see a career for themselves.”²⁴⁸

224. There was a clear sentiment from witnesses that high-quality training not only develops officers’ skillsets but enables them to build peer support networks. Poor quality, rushed training delivered through a screen does not make staff feel valued, nor does it communicate the skill and merit attached to the work they do. A group of serving governors told us that:

“Most training is online and while this might save money in the short term, in the long run it means that staff no longer feel invested in by HMPPS in the same way they did when they could have a few days away from the frontline to be re-energised, developed and have the opportunity to network with staff from other prisons.”²⁴⁹

Experience of female staff

225. The Committee recognises that many prisons in England and Wales are male-dominated environments and that this could deter women from considering

246 Q 62 (Mark Fairhurst)

247 Q 83 (Charlie Taylor)

248 Q 28 (Natasha Porter)

249 Written evidence from Julia Thomson, Julie Blacklock, Richard Williams and Sunita Dobisz (PRI0020)

a career in the Prison Service. Dr Jamie Bennett, a Research Associate, told us “Most prison managers are men, although the number of women is increasing. In operational bands 10–11, 38.2 per cent are women, and 39.4 per cent in operational bands 7–9.”²⁵⁰ Julia Killick, a former Governor, said: “By definition in a male prison, there is a maximum of only 25 per cent female officers, and so having a female governor was really good for them. Role modelling, mentoring and coaching them for their future careers is a big opportunity.”²⁵¹

226. The Committee was told that the male dominated culture could hinder progression for female officers. We heard of how a “macho” culture meant that some roles were for women and some were for men. We heard from Professor Lynn Saunders how “I was told I could not be a security governor, because a security governor was too tough, and I was not tough enough.”²⁵²

Working in the women’s estate

227. The Ministry of Justice told us, ‘All new entrants undergo at least 10 weeks of training. This is followed by either 7 weeks within the male estate, 8 in the female estate or 9 in the Youth Custody Service (YCS).’²⁵³ However, evidence submitted to the Committee suggested that there was a lack of gender-specific training provided to staff working with women in the prison estate. Kate Fraser, Head of Practice at Women in Prison, told us:

“An officer had come in and shouted for somebody to come for meds or for exercise, something like that. She [a female prisoner] said, ‘I could not really hear him but just could hear shouting. In my house, when you hear a man shouting downstairs, you do not go downstairs, because if you do you are going to get leathered’. So she stayed upstairs, got nicked and was adjudicated. I would say officers are absolutely ill equipped. The training is just inadequate for the real issues that women are coming into prison with.”²⁵⁴

228. Kate Fraser stated that the current training process is ‘process driven’²⁵⁵ and fails to prepare new prison officers for the kinds of gender-specific situations that they might encounter. Clare Pearson, a former Governor in a women’s establishment, said:

“Some of the women coming in through the courts would be pregnant and would need to give birth during their stay, and the babies would be removed at birth. We were asking our prison officers, some of whom were very young, to go out and to sit with a woman giving birth, and then to be with the woman while her baby, who was detoxing for the four-day period, detoxed and was very uncomfortable, and was then taken away. I am not sure how you would prepare anybody, let alone young people, for witnessing and being part of that level of distress.”²⁵⁶

250 Written evidence from Dr Jamie Bennett ([PRI0011](#))

251 [Q 94](#) (Julia Killick)

252 [Q 94](#) (Professor Lynn Saunders)

253 Written evidence from Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#))

254 [Q 149](#) (Kate Fraser)

255 *Ibid.*

256 [Q 106](#) (Clare Pearson)

Training

229. In addition to training being inconsistent and of low quality, the Committee heard that much of the current available training is considered irrelevant to the role of a prison officer. This contributes to staff feeling unsafe and poorly equipped to deal with the situations that arise in prison. Written evidence from the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman said:

“Only 25 per cent of Band 3–5 staff say they receive regular training that is relevant to their role. We do not think that the number of officers who feel unsafe and the lack of relevant and regular training is unrelated. From our investigations, we appreciate the highly stressful, difficult and demanding situations officers are presented with. To retain officers, especially in light of current staffing demographics where the service lacks experienced officers, it is vital that better and more regular training is provided to staff.”²⁵⁷

230. Mark Fairhurst, the National Chair of the POA told us that the lack of training can lead to corruption amongst staff. He said that after the initial six weeks of training, there is subsequently very little support on the landings to nurture officers. He went on to say, “we do not get enough training on how you get conditioned by prisoners.”²⁵⁸

231. **The current training provided to prison officers is woefully inadequate and lacks reference to the purpose of prisons. New recruits are being set up to fail.**

232. **We note that the current training programme does not address key areas such as managing high-risk prisoners and dealing with mental health issues. Current training programmes undoubtedly contributes to a lack of clarity about the purpose of prison officers’ role and what is expected of them on a day-to-day basis.**

233. *The Ministry of Justice should introduce more frequent and role-specific training for prison officers, with a particular focus on equipping staff to respond effectively to the range of complex situations that arise within the custodial environment. Such training should be embedded throughout officers’ careers, with clear frameworks for ongoing professional development and scenario-based learning. The additional training for staff working with children and women should be reviewed and potentially lengthened.*

234. *HMPPS should implement targeted women’s leadership groups and support for female staff to aid with succession planning. This should recognise the additional obstacles facing female staff in prison, including concerns about whether prison work—with its potential for short-notice transfers—can realistically support a long-term career when starting a family.*

Staff appraisal

235. Currently, formal appraisals are only used for prison officers on probation. Witnesses suggested that extending this process would improve staff performance and morale. A group of academics working on prison culture

257 Written evidence from Prisons and Probation Ombudsman ([PRI0034](#))

258 [Q 62](#) (Mark Fairhurst)

told us: “The re-introduction of an appraisal process for all staff would help to identify and nurture talent. Currently appraisals are only used with those on probation. This should be extended and could include peer mentoring.”²⁵⁹

236. Academics also told us that an additional basic function of appraisals is communicating value to staff:

“Appraisal systems could help to foster a culture of discussing innovation and any learning from this, linking to progression opportunities and development of staff. This also demonstrates value to staff through providing dedicated safe and confidential space to discuss their careers and wellbeing.”²⁶⁰

237. Following the implementation of ‘Fair and Sustainable, a new pay and grading structure, introduced by HMPPS’, line management responsibilities were removed from Band 4 Supervising Officers and given to Band 5 Custodial Managers, equivalent to the previous Principal Officer grade. This restructuring of middle management has meant that Custodial Managers are now “routinely line managing upward of 20, in some cases 30, individuals.”²⁶¹

238. Witnesses described a disparity between a system of assessment that the MoJ understood as practical and the realities of day-to-day prison work. Mark Fairhurst of the Prison Officers Association told the Committee:

“When we were consulted about the change in how we were going to appraise people, we read in policy, ‘You must have a meaningful conversation’. We said, ‘That is all well and good if you are sitting in the office in the MoJ and you are only line-managing six people’, but when you are a custodial manager and you are managing 26, you have leave to take, you have mandatory training, you are on nights, and then you have a week of rest days. What happens if you go sick? What happens if you are looking after the jail as Oscar 1²⁶², dealing with incident after incident? Where are you going to hold these meaningful conversations on a busy wing—in a converted cell while everything is going off? I do not know of a single prison where a custodial manager sits down with their hierarchy every eight weeks and has a meaningful conversation.”²⁶³

239. **It beggars belief that Custodial Managers are expected to line manage between twenty to thirty staff. This is unsustainable given the nature and complexity of the role, and the volume of new staff entering the Service. HMPPS must reassess this management structure urgently.**
240. **We are astounded by the confusion surrounding the current appraisal system. An appraisal system which does not make provision for a formal appraisal record and regular reviews is not a system at all. A formal and regular appraisal should apply for all staff rather than just those on probation, ensuring that areas identified for improvement lead to targeted training, while high-performers are supported through progression plans and development pathways.**

259 Written evidence from Professor Karen Harrison, Professor in Law and Penal Justice, University of Lincoln; Rachel Mason, Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln; and Dr Helen Nichols, Reader in Criminology, University of Hull ([PRI0008](#))

260 *Ibid.*

261 [Q 16](#) (Carl Davies)

262 The Orderly Officer—a Custodial Manager who has general oversight of the prison that day.

263 [Q 66](#) (Mark Fairhurst)

Sickness and wellbeing

241. Another significant issue highlighted in the evidence was the high levels of sickness within the prison service, which are higher than in many other sectors. Phil Copple told the Committee that “it is more about levels of sickness that are stopping availability on the day, rather than just not having enough people hired at a given point in time”.²⁶⁴ This section will highlight that certain factors contribute to the high sickness rates, including stress, mental health issues, and the physical demands of the role.
242. The role of a prison officer can be extremely stressful. Prison officers intervene in incidents of a traumatic and violent nature as part of their daily work, while balancing this with the pressures of delivering a regime. A former prison officer stressed that the operational pressure on staff means that officers rarely have a debrief in the aftermath of challenging incidents and are instead expected to continue with their duties. This officer wrote:
- “We NEED to support staff. This I think must be number one priority. Staff are burnt out; they have had enough and there is little to no support. I have been involved in extremely violent and harrowing incidents with little to no support. Prison is run on a timed regime, so if there is an incident once this has been resolved you might get a quick de-brief if you’re lucky or you will just be told ‘right its now time for ‘xyz’ No time to decompress, no time to discuss what you have just seen, dealt with, its on to the next task/duty.”²⁶⁵
243. Unlike other public servants, prison officers are confined to their workplace. The physical working environment can have a negative impact on officers, though several witnesses felt that small changes could be made to mitigate that. Genevieve Glaister, a former prison officer, told the Committee: “There are some environment things. There was never any soap in any staff bathrooms that I ever saw. There is absolutely no place to go and just sit down on a break. On a break you have to stand in the bike sheds outside.”²⁶⁶ Similarly, Mark Fairhurst of the POA commented, “The staff office is a converted cell.”²⁶⁷ Julia Killick, a former Governor, said: “If you are working in a male prison—this is a small thing, but it matters—there are not many facilities for women. The female changing rooms were usually outside, so you could not use the gym easily. You were really made to feel that you were a minority.”²⁶⁸
244. The kinds of conditions in which we are expecting prison officers to do potentially life changing, transformative work in needs to be given further consideration. As Dr Kate Gooch put it: “Whilst there are some exceptionally good, motivated, and skilful officers, this is often despite the working conditions rather than because of them.”²⁶⁹
245. HMPPS acknowledged the need for high quality and easily accessible support programmes for staff. Dominic Herrington, Executive Director of Transforming Delivery Directorate at HMPPS, told the Committee: “We have a helpline, free counselling, mental health allies and peer support

264 Q 176 (Phil Copple)

265 Anonymous written evidence (PRI0039)

266 Q 28 (Genevieve Glaister)

267 Q 65 (Mark Fairhurst)

268 Q 94 (Julia Killick)

269 Written evidence from Dr Kate Gooch (PRI0044)

systems. Obviously we have incident response teams as well. If something goes wrong in a prison, we have to make sure that the staff are looked after immediately.”²⁷⁰ However, this was at odds with what we heard from other witnesses. Mark Fairhurst of the POA said, “HMPPS directors will tell you about the massive support we have in place for staff, but in reality there is virtually nothing. Why do 50% of new recruits leave within two years of joining the service and 34% of them leave within the first 12 months?” Professor Belinda Winder, Simon Scott, Dr Paul Hamilton and the Lived Experience Research Panel wrote to the Committee saying, “Wellbeing support needs massive improvement; some placement students who have witnessed death in custody have been put on [an] 8 month counselling list.”²⁷¹

246. Prison officers are exposed to trauma and violence routinely. Evidence submitted to the Committee suggested that, in spite of the rise in violent incidents, the support package available to staff had remained minimal and performative. The Prison Officers’ Association told the Committee that they had repeatedly requested that professional support be made available to prison staff. As opposed to an Employee Assistant Helpline or a limited amount of free counselling sessions, the POA are calling for specialised support, to be made available on-site and in-person, that recognises the serious trauma and violence prison officers are routinely exposed to:

“Do not forget that when a prison officer deals with trauma, who deals with our trauma? What support do we get when we are cutting people down, covering up cuts or trying to resuscitate someone who has tried to take their life? Who looks after us? Who do we offload to? There is nobody. There are volunteer prison officers to deal with trauma. Who do they offload to when I offload to them? We have asked year after year for professional support on site in every prison. During the core day, Monday to Friday, there needs to be a psychologist, a trained mental health nurse and a counsellor. Employ someone so that when I have just dealt with a traumatic incident, I can go off the landing and offload in private to a professional. They can signpost me to additional support in my community if I need it. This might stop me from going off sick, leaving the service or getting PTSD, which more and more members are being diagnosed with because there is no support in place. It is time to invest in the service and it is time to invest in people, who are the biggest asset.”²⁷²

247. Staffing shortages have had a clear impact on the provision of support services for prison staff. The need to deliver a regime and unlock prisoners is viewed by some as more of a priority than the needs of officers. Witnesses spoke of staff counselling appointments being postponed or cancelled because there were not enough staff to continue with the regime. Kate Fraser, Head of Practice at Women in Prison, told the Committee:

“One of them told me that he was about to go to his 13th inquest around a death in custody—13 inquests. However, he got to his 13th inquest and decided that he might benefit from speaking to somebody. On the day when he had his appointment, he went on to the wing or wherever and said, ‘I’ve got to go now, you know, I’ve got my appointment’. They

270 [Q 124](#) (Dominic Herrington)

271 Written evidence from Prof Belinda Winder, Simon Scott, Dr Paul Hamilton (Nottingham Trent University); and the Lived Experience Research Panel ([PRI0037](#))

272 [Q 68](#) (Mark Fairhurst)

said, ‘You’re not going anywhere. We’re short-staffed. We need you to cover whatever’s happening’.²⁷³

248. Professor Karen Harrison, Rachel Mason and Dr Helen Nichols spoke of prison staff who had been “putting trauma into mental boxes but now the lids of the boxes were beginning to rattle.”²⁷⁴
249. Written evidence from the Prisoners’ Education Trust pointed out that comprehensive psychological support can enable staff to feel able to discuss their own vulnerability. This is a key factor when considering how to protect staff from becoming susceptible to corruption. The Prisoners’ Education Trust told the Committee: “It is important that staff feel safe, both physically and psychologically. The former is obviously important in a prison setting, but the latter is also critical in creating a culture where people are safe to speak up with ‘ideas, questions, concerns and even mistakes’”.²⁷⁵
250. The challenges facing prison officers have not escaped the attention of prisoners. Several former prisoners provided evidence to the Committee, recognising the conditions prison officers are working in and how this directly has an impact upon their ability to support prisoners in their care. Zak Addae-Kodua, founder and director at xconversation, told the Committee: “The conditions and the environment for prison officers need to change. They need more support. Prisons need better funding, and the staff need better pay and better incentives. They are trying to do a challenging job under difficult conditions.”²⁷⁶
251. There are lessons that can be learned from abroad. Pia Sinha, CEO of the Prison Reform Trust told us that in The Netherlands “they are much more concerned about well-being and morale, and that shift in priorities is having an impact [on staff retention].”²⁷⁷
252. ***It is critical that the Ministry of Justice undertakes a thorough review of sickness levels across the prison estate and develops a targeted strategy to reduce absence rates. This should include measures to improve staff wellbeing, enhance occupational health support, and to identify the root causes of long-term and frequent sickness. We also recommend that prison staffing models be adjusted to reflect the operational impact of consistently high absence rates.***
253. ***HMPPS should undertake a full review of the support programme available to staff and consider its suitability given the dramatic increase in staff assaults, serious violence and accumulated exposure to trauma facing prison officers in England and Wales. A revised support programme should include on-site, specialised psychological support, free and unlimited counselling and increased supervision for trained peer support teams.***

273 [Q 150](#) (Kate Fraser)

274 Written evidence from Professor Karen Harrison, Professor in Law and Penal Justice, University of Lincoln; Rachel Mason, Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln; and Dr Helen Nichols, Reader in Criminology, University of Hull ([PRI0008](#))

275 Written evidence from Prisoners’ Education Trust ([PRI0033](#))

276 [Q 157](#) (Zak Addae-Kodua)

277 [Q 28](#) (Pia Sinha)

The Prison Service of the Future: Role of Unlocked Graduates and collaboration across HMPPS

254. We have already acknowledged the positive work of Unlocked Graduates and we acknowledge the disappointment for several stakeholders now it has been confirmed that the contract will not be renewed.
255. The Committee is aware that Unlocked Graduates and HMPPS have been unable to agree on terms to continue to deliver the scheme. Natasha Porter told us that Unlocked have not signed a new contract because it resembled a “service-style delivery”²⁷⁸ as opposed to a partnership between Unlocked and HMPPS. Dominic Herrington of HMPPS told us that this was “disappointing”, saying “The terms and conditions evolved and changed in the way that any contract from four or five years ago would be different to the conditions now.”²⁷⁹
256. The Committee understands that various stakeholders are disappointed that Unlocked Graduates will not be continuing their partnership with HMPPS. Compared to the HMPPS prison officer training package, Unlocked Graduates benefit from ongoing education, receive 30 half days of dedicated training in addition to HMPPS induction training, and are assigned experienced officer mentors for the duration of the two year programme. In written evidence specifically discussing the impact of Unlocked Graduates, the Prison Reform Trust stated:

“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 these descriptions can apply, the value for money case of enhanced investment appears very strong.”²⁸⁰

Cross-agency collaboration

257. A key issue that was highlighted in several written evidence submissions was the lack of collaboration between (1) staff in the Prison Service and the Probation Service, and (2) other partners delivering services in prisons. Despite efforts to join up the two services, evidence suggests that a lack of clarity and communication continues to hinder progress.
258. The Committee heard from Penal Reform Solutions that “The integration of prison and probation services into ‘One HMPPS’ has increased division in some ways rather than built cohesion.” They went on to say that “The prison and probation services remain culturally distinct, with different pay bands, systems, and databases.”²⁸¹ The union Prospect told us, in reference to the Prison Service and the Probation Service “the culture and skills of core operational staff are different”.²⁸²
259. HMPPS acknowledge that they must work well with other providers. Dominic Herrington, Executive Director of Transforming Delivery Directorate at HMPPS told us “We need to have those partnerships with a range of other providers, because we cannot meet every need just from prisons and probation.”²⁸³

278 Q 30 (Natasha Porter)

279 Q 118 (Dominic Herrington)

280 Written evidence by Prison Reform Trust (PRI0035)

281 Written evidence from Penal Reform Solutions (PRI0025)

282 Written evidence from Prospect (PRI0041)

283 Q 129 (Dominic Herrington)

260. Poor cross-agency collaboration can lead to catastrophic results. We heard from Women in Prison the devastating story of the death of a baby in HMP Bronzefield. The inquest highlighted “poor information sharing between prisons and health agencies and several missed opportunities to increase observations that might have led to labour being discovered. Instead, the mothers alarm was not responded to when pressed and she was left to give birth alone in a prison cell without any care or assistance.”²⁸⁴
261. A number of witnesses told us that HMPPS needed to work more closely with third sector organisations. The Committee received numerous letters from serving prisoners noting the impact of staffing shortages on access to external agencies. Prisoners wrote that reduced staffing and inexperience among officers meant that prisoners were unable to arrange appointments with services that were supposed to be available [see Appendix 3].
262. External agencies also told us about the need for closer collaboration. For example, in order to maximise the impact of third sector organisations, the Charity StandOut told us that each prison should have a Voluntary Sector co-ordinator. They told us that HMP Wandsworth had one in 2017 and that it improved strategic planning and ensured joined up thinking, enabling projects to connect.²⁸⁵
263. The Lord Bishop of Gloucester, Anglican Bishop for prisons in England and Wales, told us: “There should be opportunities for prison and probation staff to come together for training on shared areas of interest.” She did however identify pockets of good practice, such as at HMP Eastwood Park “which has developed peer mentoring and training to teach officers how to manage Suicide Watch”.²⁸⁶
264. An example of positive internal staff support was provided by HMIP who cited HMP Woodhill where “leaders had increased staff support through weekly supervision or ‘team time’ for most house units, regular training and wellbeing events”. It noted that “These simple, practical actions can make a significant difference.”²⁸⁷
265. A further example of good practice included prisons “where joined up working across partners delivering services in prison was established, facilitating greater support for those detained in prison and a more holistic response to their needs.” However, success “required collaboration and support from senior leaders across HMPPS and NHS to facilitate this”.²⁸⁸
266. **While recognising the cultural differences between the Prison Service and the Probation Service, we believe that achieving a reduction in reoffending requires close co-operation between the two arms of HMPPS.**
267. ***We recommend the appointment of a voluntary sector co-ordinator in each prison.***

284 Written evidence from Women in Prison ([PRI0040](#))

285 Written evidence from StandOut Programmes ([PRI0024](#))

286 Written evidence from The Lord Bishop of Gloucester, Rt Rev Rachel Treweek ([PRI0048](#))

287 Written evidence from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons ([PRI0022](#))

288 Written evidence from Prof Karen Harrison, Professor in Law and Penal Justice, University of Lincoln; Rachel Mason, Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln; and Dr Helen Nichols, Reader in Criminology, University of Hull ([PRI0008](#))

CHAPTER 5: REDUCING REOFFENDING THROUGH PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY

Introduction

268. Protecting the public and reducing reoffending are core functions of the prison system; however, witnesses emphasised that these objectives cannot be met through punishment alone. In 2024, 78 per cent of those cautioned or convicted for any crime had previous offending history. This figure rises to 83 per cent for those convicted of indictable offences (and therefore more likely to receive a prison sentence).²⁸⁹
269. Access to purposeful activity such as education and appropriate career training was identified as essential to prisoners' personal development and to the reduction of reoffending upon release.²⁹⁰ This chapter examines how purposeful activity needs to be productive and how it contributes to public safety through reducing reoffending, and preparing individuals for successful reintegration into society.²⁹¹ The chapter will also highlight the impacts that overcrowding, staff shortages, and poor physical condition of buildings have on the ability to deliver productive purposeful activity for prisoners.

Prioritising purposeful activity

270. Throughout the inquiry, witnesses highlighted the importance of productive activity in occupying prisoners with work, education, skills development, and building self-esteem. Such engagement was seen to reduce time spent in cells, lower levels of violence and self-harm, and contribute to a reduction in reoffending. We also heard from former prisoners that there were governors who prioritised purposeful activity that would allow prisoners to reintegrate into society once they leave the prison. Former prisoners noted that “if the governor is about rehabilitation, that is what the prison, the staff and the prisoners will also be about.”²⁹²
271. HMIP assess prisons against four ‘healthy establishment’ tests. One of these tests is for purposeful activity, highlighting how fundamental to the purpose of prisons it should be. In HMIP’s annual report 2024–25, Charlie Taylor wrote “Purposeful activity continued to be the worst performing of our four healthy prison assessments and in many prisons, we reported on prisoners stuck in their cells or on the wings with little to do”²⁹³.
272. Kate Fraser, Head of Practice, Women in Prison, told us that the issue was acute in women’s prisons: “One of the big killers in prison is boredom ... That is why we see so much self-harm among women. It is because of not just mental health issues but boredom.”²⁹⁴ In response to this boredom, “lots of people will engage in work and in education because it gets them out of their cell for the amount of time they need to be out”.²⁹⁵

289 Ministry of Justice, ‘First time entrants (FTE) and Offender Histories: 2024’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/first-time-entrants-fte-and-offender-histories-2024/first-time-entrants-fte-and-offender-histories-2024> [accessed 10 June 2025]

290 Written evidence from Prisoners’ Education Trust ([PRI0033](#))

291 [Q 166](#) (Lord Timpson)

292 [Q 156](#) (Zak Addae-Kodua)

293 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, *Annual Report 2024–25* (8 July 2025): <https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaccede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2025/07/Annual-report-FINAL.pdf> [accessed 9 July 2025]

294 [Q 151](#) (Kate Fraser)

295 *Ibid.*

273. Howard James Futchter, a former prison officer, referenced the full version of the statement of purpose (see Chapter 2), which refers to the role of the Prison Service in helping prisoners to lead “useful lives” in prison and post-release. He told us:

“For Prisoners to lead “useful lives” in custody falls upon the Prison Service to provide meaningful activity in the way of employment and/or education; to provide purpose to one’s life, motivation to continue with this, and therefore meet the final part of this purpose; to continue this after release. Despite this well-meaning purpose statement, there is a serious lack of educational and training opportunities across the Prison Estate.”²⁹⁶

274. Helen Berresford, Director of External Engagement at Nacro, highlighted that “prisons are facing a huge range of challenges with high rates of self-harm, high rates of violence and low participation in purposeful activity”. She noted the importance of creating “a system where people are engaged, active and productive, and moving towards being rehabilitated and released”.²⁹⁷ She added:

“There is currently a pattern of inactivity across prisons. In HMPPS prisons alone, only around 50 per cent of the population are in work or education, and when they are it is often just part time—a few hours a week. That is a huge amount of wasted potential and opportunity to help people build better lives and build the skills, training and patterns of work and education for release.”²⁹⁸

275. Charlie Taylor told us that “in Manchester prison, 35 per cent of prisoners were locked up during the working day”. He noted that “These prisoners were not getting to do any purposeful activity. They were not getting to work. They were not getting education or training, or the sorts of things that we would want them to get in order that, when they come out, they do not just go back into offending.”²⁹⁹

276. This issue is not limited to one prison. Speaking to the Financial Times on the publication of HMIP’s annual report 2024–25, Charlie Taylor wrote that his team “still go to lots of places where classrooms and workshops are empty and getting prisoners into activity is not really a priority”, even though “one of the ways you make prisons safer is by having prisoners do something productive with their time.”³⁰⁰ Prisoners’ experience of this is further outlined in Appendix 3 of this report.

277. The Prisoners’ Education Trust told the Committee:

“People in prison suffer as the opportunities available to them are likely to be more limited. Increased time locked in cells leads to an increase in frustration for people when in cell and feeling less safe when unlocked. Levels of stress and noise increase, and there is a deterioration of mental

296 Written evidence by Howard James Futchter ([PRI0047](#))

297 [Q 134](#) (Helen Berresford)

298 *Ibid.*

299 [Q 89](#) (Charlie Taylor)

300 ‘Prisons’ chief Inspector seeks more power for governors unable to even buy a washing machine’, The Financial Times (7 July 2025): <https://www.ft.com/content/c72e569e-ece0-49c5-919a-34bf577885a9> [accessed 9 July 2025]

and physical health, impacting people's ability to engage positive with the regime."³⁰¹

278. Lord Timpson also told us that he had “walked past too many classrooms and workshops with no one in them”, recalling a recent visit to HMP Millsike “which is a state-of-the-art prison that has 25 workshops” but adding that the challenge was to fill them.³⁰²

Education

279. The Committee heard that “access to education is limited despite its ability to improve rehabilitation.”³⁰³ A report published by the Ministry of Justice in 2023 stated that “Prison education is proven to have a positive impact; prisoners who engage with prison education are less likely to reoffend.”³⁰⁴ However, Phil Copple told us that at the moment “We are not allocating prisoners to education and work as efficiently as we could.” He added that this was “about management focus and grip, and it is a priority among all the other priorities”.³⁰⁵
280. Witnesses highlighted that 57 per cent of adults in the prison system have literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old.³⁰⁶ Evidence from Philosophy in Prison noted that “Education allows a prisoner to gain self-confidence and provides mental health benefits in isolating conditions, while improving their behaviour in prison.”³⁰⁷ The Prisoners' Education Trust also highlighted that evidence suggests that “participating in education while in prison reduces reoffending and increases the chance of securing employment on release.”³⁰⁸
281. Former prisoners told us that education was prioritised to a certain extent within prisons. We heard that level 2 English and Maths was necessary for all prisoners and that “there are organisations within the prison, such as the Shannon Trust, that really want to help and support people to get to that level of reading and writing”.³⁰⁹ However, Kieron Bryan said that “The prison system is geared towards assuming that the majority of prisoners are not able to read and write, and it is true that the majority do need help within that entry level up to level 2 or 3. But once you go past that—or if you are at a starting position where you do not need that—you are stuck.”³¹⁰
282. Kieron Bryan also highlighted that he “did not have a positive experience with the education system in prison because, to me, it came across as more of a façade or a tick-box exercise.”³¹¹ Similarly, Rt Hon Michael Gove noted that “in too many cases education in prison is seen as box ticking by the

301 Written evidence from the Prisoners' Education Trust (PRI0033)

302 Q 176 (Lord Timpson)

303 Written evidence from Mariam Swehli (PhD candidate and PGTA at UCL), Professor Carol Rivas (Professor of Health and Social Care at UCL) and Dr Gillian Stokes (Associate Professor of Inclusive Social Research at UCL) (PRI0031)

304 Ministry of Justice, *Prison Education Statistics and Accredited Programmes in custody April 2022 to March 2023*: (28 September 2023): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/653bb69d80884d000df71c4f/Prisoner_Education_2022_23_emailupdated_271023.pdf [accessed 12 May 2025]

305 Q 176 (Phil Copple)

306 Written evidence from Sebastian Groes, Professor of English Literature, University of Wolverhampton (PRI0028) and written evidence from Philosophy in Prison (PRI0014)

307 Written evidence from Philosophy in Prison (PRI0014)

308 Written evidence from the Prisoners' Education Trust (PRI0033)

309 Q 158 (Juliana Rowan)

310 Q 158 (Kieron Bryan)

311 *Ibid.*

prisoner to show that they have done certain courses on impulse control and so on.”³¹²

283. Kieron Bryan noted that “everyone says that they are trying to help you and believes that education is the best thing but, when you ask them for help, there is no help.”³¹³ Zak Addae-Kodua added that “When you leave the prison system, and you have a level 1 or level 2 qualification, it does not really help you to try to get employment”.³¹⁴
284. A number of submissions highlighted the role that the prison governor can play in encouraging and prioritising education for prisoners. The Prisoners’ Education Trust told us that “Governors are critical to setting the ‘tone’ of a prison and, though they do not control all education delivery in their establishments, they can create a culture with education at its core.”³¹⁵
285. Kate Fraser noted that for women serving longer sentences, there appears to be a greater focus on support, including access to quality education programmes and partnerships with private sector organisations.³¹⁶
286. Good practice in prison education and literacy development was demonstrated through innovative initiatives such as The Big Bookshare, funded by the Arts Council England. The pilot “aimed to increase the number of prisoners reading fiction for pleasure, and to give prisoners opportunities to discuss reading and take part in creative writing sessions.” This pilot ran in four prisons in Kent from September 2023 to April 2024. It showcased how structured, creative programmes, supported by collaboration and internal resources, can positively influence prisoner engagement and educational outcomes.³¹⁷
287. Witnesses urged the Government to implement further initiatives to boost literacy by increasing funding for prison libraries and their staff to engage in collaborative work with prison education services and external partners such as universities, the Prisoner Reading Groups and the Shannon National Trust.³¹⁸ We heard that: “While many prisoners regularly borrowed books from prison libraries, some reported problems obtaining physical access to the library”³¹⁹ and noted staff shortages as the main reason for this.
288. **Access to education remains inconsistent across the prison estate. Despite the acknowledged importance of education in reducing reoffending, there are significant barriers to its delivery, including limited resources, outdated infrastructure, and staff shortages. While basic qualifications in English and maths are available, higher-level education and training opportunities remain scarce, limiting prisoners’ ability to develop skills that could assist with their reintegration into society.**

312 Q 55 (Michael Gove)

313 Q 158 (Kieron Bryan)

314 Q 158 (Zak Addae-Kodua)

315 Written evidence from Prisoners’ Education Trust (PRI0033)

316 Q 151 (Kate Fraser)

317 Written evidence from Sebastian Groes, Professor of English Literature, University of Wolverhampton (PRI0028)

318 *Ibid.*

319 *Ibid.*

289. *The Ministry of Justice should take steps to improve access to a more diverse range of educational opportunities in prisons. This includes expanding access to higher-level education and vocational training, as well as providing governors with greater autonomy to tailor educational provisions to the needs of the local population, including involving external agencies to assist. Investing in quality libraries within prisons and guaranteeing prisoners frequent access to them is essential for any serious effort to promote education and reduce reoffending.*

Employment

290. Several witnesses urged the Government to take a more strategic approach to prison employment, linking regimes more directly to labour market needs and ensuring that prisoners are better prepared to enter work on release. This includes calls for more investment in pre-release work opportunities and for greater use of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) to enable external placements. The Prisoners' Education Trust told us that "ROTL can play a hugely important role in accessing education and employment opportunities in the community and in helping to prepare for release."³²⁰
291. Some prisons do offer courses which are particularly valued by prisoners because they provide skills directly linked to employment post-release. These included a fork-lift driver initiative, a roadworks course, and a course allowing prisoners to work on train tracks when released. However, Zak Addae-Kodua told us that such courses "were highly sought after and rarely run."³²¹ This could exacerbate issues where prisoners would transfer prisons to take part in these courses, find they were unavailable, but that the transfer had moved them away from their families and support networks, which led to further issues.³²²
292. We heard of one prisoner who talked of the lack of relevant training courses at any of the jails they were based in. They were conscious of a criminal record being a barrier to employment and said:
- "the thought was to retrain as either an electrician or a plumber. I could, you know, I could do that. And then get myself a job. Get my own trade, but all the jails that I was at that wasn't offered ... what they do in jail was teach you how to write a CV, but if you've never had a job, how are you going to write a CV?"³²³
293. Juliana Rowan echoed these concerns and told us that there were opportunities, while she was serving her sentence in an open prison, to work in a supermarket; however, she emphasised that more targeted opportunities needed to be provided to ensure prisoners took advantage of them.³²⁴

320 Written evidence from Prisoners' Education Trust, (PRI0033)

321 Q 158 (Zak Addae-Kodua)

322 Written evidence from Paul Cosgrove, Former Prison Officer (PRI0019)

323 Written evidence from Mariam Swehli (PhD candidate and PGTA at UCL), Professor Carol Rivas (Professor of Health and Social Care at UCL) and Dr Gillian Stokes (Associate Professor of Inclusive Social Research at UCL) (PRI0031)

324 Q 158 (Juliana Rowan)

Box 5: Prisoner Employment Schemes

There are a number of schemes offered by employers that work with prisons and prisoners to provide skills training and employment opportunities. This takes many different forms such as providing training in prison (such as the Rail Engineering Centre of Excellence programme based at HMP Highpoint). It may also take the form of providing opportunities towards the end of a sentence with prisoners on Return on Temporary Licence (ROTL) such as the Timpson scheme. Other employers such as Greggs, Iceland, and COOK have joined newly launched Employment Councils which will work closely with the Department of Work and Pensions and the Probation Service to increase employment opportunities to former prisoners. Groups like the Fair Chance Business Alliance also work with employers to increase their recruitment of people with criminal records.

294. Zak Addae-Kodua highlighted his experience in one prison:

“The governor wanted to make sure that when you leave the prison, you are best prepared for life outside. There were various incentives. He said, ‘We want to get you working in the community. We want to fast-track your ability to work in the community—but not just to work anywhere doing a mundane job; we want you to do something that interests you, that will get you motivated, and that you can take to develop skills to go forward’”.³²⁵

295. Prison Reform Trust highlighted in their report that despite the Government announcing plans in 2021 to use technology “enabling prisoners to interview for jobs in the community via video technology”³²⁶ the developments have “not yet materialised.”³²⁷

296. Professor Ben Crewe highlighted the widespread scepticism among prisoners regarding the value of training and skills programmes that are not directly linked to employment opportunities. He explained that:

“if you say to people, ‘Well, you can learn this skill and that will help you on release,’ most people in prison just do not believe that, because they know that they will come out with a criminal record that means that they will be at the bottom of the pile when it comes to employability.”³²⁸

In contrast, he pointed to the impact of programmes that offer a guaranteed employment pathway, such as those provided by Railtrack or Timpson. He stated that initiatives such as these—which train individuals during their sentence and offer a job upon release—“make a huge difference”.³²⁹ He further emphasised the importance of partnerships with local employers, noting that “having links with the local community that mean that local firms might train people and give them a pledge or promise of a job when they come out is a really important direction in terms of employability post-release”.³³⁰

325 [Q 156](#) (Zak Addae-Kodua)

326 Prison Reform Trust, ‘Update and Restart’, (June 2025), <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/update-and-restart/> [accessed 26 June 2025]

327 *Ibid.*

328 [Q 117](#) (Professor Ben Crewe)

329 *Ibid.*

330 *Ibid.*

297. Howard James Futchter also said:

“there is a serious lack of educational and training opportunities across the Prison Estate. Not to mention the fact that various statistics suggest a recidivism rate of approximately 50 per cent; suggesting the mechanisms in place to achieve this purpose are not working or are insufficient.”³³¹

298. Juliana Rowan noted how being offered a work placement had changed her life. She told us that she managed to get a placement with David Lloyd which allowed her to leave prison with a level 3 PT. Five years later, Juliana is a self-employed personal trainer; she told us that “it has changed my life completely.”³³²

299. The MoJ emphasised the importance of prisons engaging “with the community to encourage local stakeholders to provide opportunities for prisoners, including jobs facilitated by Employment Councils, chaired by local business leaders.”³³³ It added that “Prisons can also encourage community members to volunteer in prisons, helping them to understand that prisoners are part of their community and to invest in their rehabilitation.”³³⁴

Prisoner-led initiatives

300. We heard that purposeful activity does not just mean education and work, it also applies to giving prisoners the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on their time spent in prison through prisoner led-initiatives. Academics told us that Prisoner Led Initiatives³³⁵ “helped to provide opportunities for people in prison to have an input into the running of prisons.”³³⁶ A blog published by Charlie Taylor, following a visit to HMP Oakwood, also noted the importance of Prisoner-Led Initiatives and said, “I hope other governors and leaders in the prison service will be able to learn from its success.”³³⁷

The role of the third sector

301. Witnesses noted the importance of the third sector in providing education and employment opportunities for prisoners.³³⁸ Lord Timpson said, “The third sector is vital ... A lot of the time, it is volunteers who quietly come in—prison visitors, or people helping with specific training needs—and they do an amazing job.”³³⁹

302. Professor Alison Liebbling also told us that:

“It feels like there is a huge interest in engaging employers inside prisons and helping to make sure that there are opportunities for prisoners in employment on release. I have seen a lot of third sector movement, some

331 Written evidence from Howard James Futchter, former Prison Officer (PRI0047)

332 Q 158 (Juliana Rowan)

333 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice (PRI0003)

334 *Ibid.*

335 Prisoner Led Initiatives are programmes instigated and run by prisoners to benefit other inmates.

336 Written evidence from Prof Karen Harrison, Professor in Law and Penal Justice, University of Lincoln; Rachel Mason, Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln; and Dr Helen Nichols, Reader in Criminology, University of Hull (PRI0008)

337 HM Inspectorate of Prisons, ‘What makes Oakwood so good?’ (14 August 2024): <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/news/what-makes-oakwood-so-good/> [accessed 23 May 2025]

338 Written evidence from StandOut Programmes (PRI0024)

339 Q 179 (Lord Timpson)

of it run by ex-prisoners and ex-prison officers. There is a lot of potential here.”³⁴⁰

303. We heard that “The food industry is very good; Brixton has a very good example of a restaurant where prisoners are trained as chefs or to work in the food industry, and because there is so much demand outside in the community, that has been a very good link.”³⁴¹

Barriers to providing purposeful activity

304. Throughout the inquiry, several witnesses emphasised that while governors and prison staff broadly recognise the importance of providing purposeful activity, delivering access to meaningful work, education, or training remains a significant challenge. A range of barriers were identified, including the number of prisoners experiencing mental health issues and addiction, the growing remand population, chronic overcrowding, significant staff shortages, prisoners being moved to different establishments during their sentence, and the poor condition of prison buildings. Witnesses highlighted that these issues limit the capacity of establishments being able to run structured regimes.

Mental health and addiction

305. Mental health and addiction issues (such as drugs, alcohol, gambling) disproportionately affect the prison population (see Box 6) and were raised by witnesses as underlying drivers of reoffending. They emphasised the need for improved support for prisoners and staff training to help address the root cause of repeated imprisonment. We heard that “a lack of resources and reduced access to education, employment training, and mental health support, undermine safety and rehabilitation.”³⁴² We also heard that more focus was needed on “why people are actually going in and out of jail” since reoffending often stems from mental health issues.³⁴³

Box 6: Mental health and addiction issues in the prison population

Mental health and addiction issues are far more common in the prison population compared to the general population:

- 30 per cent of women and 23 per cent of men report having a drug issue upon entering prison;
- For those prisoners serving less than 12 months in prison, 60 per cent had an identified substance misuse need;
- For those prisoners serving less than 12 months in prison, 39 per cent had an identified alcohol misuse need;
- 54 per cent of men and 62 per cent of women reported mental health problems, with anxiety/depression (29 per cent), psychosis (22 per cent), and personality disorders (17 per cent) the most common amongst those reporting mental health issues;

340 [Q 117](#) Professor Alison Liebling

341 *Ibid.*

342 Written evidence from Clinks ([PRI0046](#))

343 Written evidence from Mariam Swehli (PhD candidate and PGTA at UCL), Professor Carol Rivas (Professor of Health and Social Care at UCL) and Dr Gillian Stokes (Associate Professor of Inclusive Social Research at UCL) ([PRI0031](#))

- Amongst those with mental health conditions, 54 per cent reported having self-harmed, 40 per cent had attempted suicide, and 39 per cent had a history of substance misuse;
- 53 per cent of women and 27 per cent of men experienced abuse as a child; and
- 23 per cent reported that they think they have a gambling problem.

Source: Prison Reform Trust, *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile*, (February 2025): <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Winter-2025-factfile.pdf> [accessed 9 July 2025] and The Forward Trust, *Gambling Harm: A survey of prisoners' experiences*, (December 2020): <https://s34767.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/the-forward-trust-gambling-report-with-summary-final.pdf> [accessed 9 July 2025]

306. Women in Prison shared experiences from prisoners who felt that staff “need more training in stuff like mental health and trauma and addiction. They have no idea why people take drugs, and they tell you this. They think you just want to get off your head when it’s really about escaping and blocking off your feelings.”³⁴⁴ We also heard from academics that “Increased investment in mental health services, alongside the expansion and incentivisation of relevant educational programmes, can contribute to lasting change.”³⁴⁵

Proximity and access to family

307. The toll of being separated and distant from families can have a serious detriment to prisoner mental health and well-being, and subsequently their ability to engage meaningfully with purposeful activity. Spark Inside told us that young men in custody “are amongst the most isolated ... and have fewer pro-social family relationships available to them.”³⁴⁶

308. Former Home Secretary Rt Hon Charles Clarke told us of the importance of being close to family. He said that mothers “have a particularly important impact on the way in which prisoners behave when they are looking at their future lives.”³⁴⁷ The issue is particularly acute for female prisoners. As Julia Killick told us, because the women’s prison estate is small, women can be separated by hundreds of miles from their families, particularly children. She cited a hypothetical woman from Manchester who needed a form of therapy only available in Surrey.³⁴⁸ Kate Fraser, Head of Practice at Women in Prison, told us the challenge of maintaining family ties for women, particularly with respect to distance. “For most women it is around 60 miles from their home. For some women, it is 150 miles.” She added that “many women will choose not to go to an open prison if it moves them further away from their family.”³⁴⁹

Prisoners on remand

309. One particular concern that was raised by witnesses was the difficulty in providing meaningful work or education to prisoners on remand (who

344 Written evidence from Women in Prison (PRI0040)

345 Written evidence from Mariam Swehli (PhD candidate and PGTA at UCL), Professor Carol Rivas (Professor of Health and Social Care at UCL) and Dr Gillian Stokes (Associate Professor of Inclusive Social Research at UCL) (PRI0031)

346 Written evidence from Spark Inside (PRI0010)

347 Q 46 (Charles Clarke)

348 Q 106 (Julia Killick)

349 Q 145 (Kate Fraser)

make up 20 per cent of the prison population).³⁵⁰ Rt Hon Michael Gove acknowledged that “if a significant amount of the prison population is on remand ... it is very difficult to exercise rehabilitative work with them.”³⁵¹ This was also emphasised during our visit to Belmarsh prison, where the majority of men are on remand or are yet to be sentenced.³⁵²

Overcrowding

310. Witnesses also identified overcrowding as a significant barrier to the safe and effective delivery of purposeful activity within prisons. Michael Gove told us:

“When you have a crammed prison estate, prisoners are in their cells for an excessive amount of time and they are denied work, education or other activity. That makes the prison population more unstable, which in turn, because of the isolation and the lack of purpose, means that prisoners who might be tempted towards taking drugs and other psychoactive substances are more tempted to do so in order to make the time that hangs heavy on their hands pass more easily.”³⁵³

Charlie Taylor also said:

“If these prisons had the population for which they were originally designed, with men in single cells in most circumstances, there would be enough space for education, there would be enough staff to give prisoners the attention that they needed and people would be able to get into training for those sorts of skills.”³⁵⁴

Staff shortages

311. We received evidence that limited resources and high levels of staff sickness have contributed to prisoners spending substantial periods of the day confined to their cells, significantly reducing access to purposeful activity. During the visit to HMP Belmarsh, members were informed by current prisoners that work placements, activities, and education or employment classes are frequently cancelled because of staffing shortages. Evidence highlighted the negative impact that this has on reducing reoffending, as well as the rise in tension and violence on prison wings.
312. In response to a question about whether staff shortages were a problem causing a lack of education, Lord Timpson said: “It is a problem in a number of prisons, yes.”³⁵⁵ Phil Copple said that the “challenge to do better has been set by me and the chief operating officer of prisons to all of our managers in the system. Some prisons have problems of significant staffing shortfalls, and it will mean that they cannot run everything.”³⁵⁶

350 Ministry of Justice, HMPPS, ‘Offender management statistics quarterly: October to December 2024’, (24 April 2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2024/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2024> [accessed 26 June 2025]

351 [Q 47](#) (Michael Gove)

352 HM Inspectorate of Prisons, ‘HMP Belmarsh Inspection Report. Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Belmarsh by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (3-13 June 2024)’ (16 September 2024): https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-belmarsh-3/ [accessed 10 June 2025]

353 [Q 47](#) (Michael Gove)

354 [Q 85](#) (Charlie Taylor)

355 [Q 176](#) (Lord Timpson)

356 [Q 176](#) (Phil Copple)

313. Women in Prison highlighted what the IMB's inspection of HMP/YOI Peterborough said:

“The Board’s principal concern this year is that the impact of population pressures, staff shortages, management changes, and lack of good quality purposeful activity is adversely impacting on prisoners. As well as planned restrictions of regime, exercise and time out of cell is too often curtailed at short notice.”³⁵⁷

Buildings

314. A further barrier to the provision of purposeful activity in some cases is the condition of the prison estate itself. Lord Timpson acknowledged that “a number of workshops cannot be used because the roofs have collapsed or there is no heating and so on”.³⁵⁸
315. **Providing purposeful activity is not a ‘nice thing to have’ but central to the Prison Service’s purpose of preparing prisoners for life outside the criminal justice system and reducing reoffending. Prisons which fail to provide an adequate regime of purposeful activity are failing in this core purpose.**
316. **Several evidence submissions noted that purposeful activity is not sufficiently prioritised within the prison estate. While prisons may maintain formal timetables for work, education, and programmes targeting reducing reoffending, chronic staffing shortages have led to many activities being cancelled or significantly reduced. This undermines the goal of the prison system to reduce reoffending and increases tension, potentially contributing to higher levels of violence and reoffending.**
317. **Addressing mental health and addiction is essential to delivering purposeful activity and reducing reoffending. Unless these needs are met, many prisoners will be unable to engage in meaningful education, work or other constructive activities. Prisons that fail to provide adequate support in these areas will be unable to meet their core purpose of breaking the cycle of reoffending.**
318. *Where structural issues limit the ability of prison governors to provide purposeful activity, this should be reflected in inspection rankings, and HMPPS should address them as a priority. Performance reviews of governors should assess local delivery of purposeful activity, taking into account these wider constraints.*
319. *The Ministry of Justice should prioritise purposeful activity as a core function of the prison regime, ensuring that work, education, and rehabilitative programmes are protected from disruptions caused by staffing shortages. This will require a strategic focus on maintaining consistent activity delivery, even in the face of staffing challenges.*
320. *A strategic approach to employment in prisons should be introduced, ensuring that work opportunities are linked to labour market needs and provide prisoners with valuable, transferable skills. This should*

357 Written evidence from Women in Prison (PRI0040)

358 Q 176 (Lord Timpson)

include expanding the use of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) for external placements and ensuring that employers are supported through simplified vetting and clearance processes.

CHAPTER 6: ACCOUNTABILITY

Introduction

321. The chapter will look more closely at the role of HM Inspector of Prisons and other accountability mechanisms. It will argue that the Chief Inspector is hamstrung at present and that his reports are not responded to in a satisfactory way. The powers of the Inspectorate should be enhanced, and these powers should include the power to impose conditions and to monitor progress in a more structured way. We also argue that there should be still greater collaboration between the Inspectorate of Prisons and the Inspectorate of Probation.
322. As stated in Chapter 2, we believe that in order to ensure political focus is kept on prisons, the Prisons Minister should always be at the rank of Minister of State, though we acknowledge that ultimate political responsibility for prisons in the department rests with the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State. The Minister and the Secretary of State for Justice should be supported by the Prime Minister and given sufficient authority within government to drive change in co-operation with other departments. The Minister and the Secretary of State for Justice are accountable to Parliament for HMPPS, and to that end we welcome continued engagement with the Ministry of Justice. Continuity in key Ministerial posts should be encouraged, where possible.

Oversight of prisons

HMIP

323. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) is an independent body responsible for inspecting prisons across England and Wales. The Chief Inspector of Prisons, who leads HMIP, is appointed by and reports directly to the Secretary of State for Justice. HMIP conducts both announced and unannounced inspections, evaluating outcomes for prisoners including in areas such as safety, respect, purposeful activity, and preparation for release. While HMIP can make recommendations—both to individual prisons inspected and to HMPPS and ministers—it does not have the powers to enforce compliance with its findings.
324. Witnesses highlighted various reports published by the Inspectorate following inspections of prisons. These reports identified areas of good practice, highlighted concerns, and made formal recommendations for improvement.³⁵⁹
325. We heard however that recommendations are not always acted upon. Independent Reviews of Progress (IRPs) take place a year after a full inspection and are designed to assess progress made against the report's recommendations. Charlie Taylor, Chief Inspector at HMIP told us that "things are going well if 50 per cent of our concerns get dealt with".³⁶⁰ Of the 62 concerns raised by HMIP in IRPs published in 2025, 25 were rated as having 'insufficient' or 'no meaningful' progress.³⁶¹

359 Written evidence from Prisoners' Education Trust ([PRI0033](#)), supplementary written evidence from Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign ([PRI0016](#)), written evidence from Serco Ltd ([PRI0015](#)) and written evidence from Spark Inside ([PRI0010](#))

360 [Q 78](#) (Charlie Taylor)

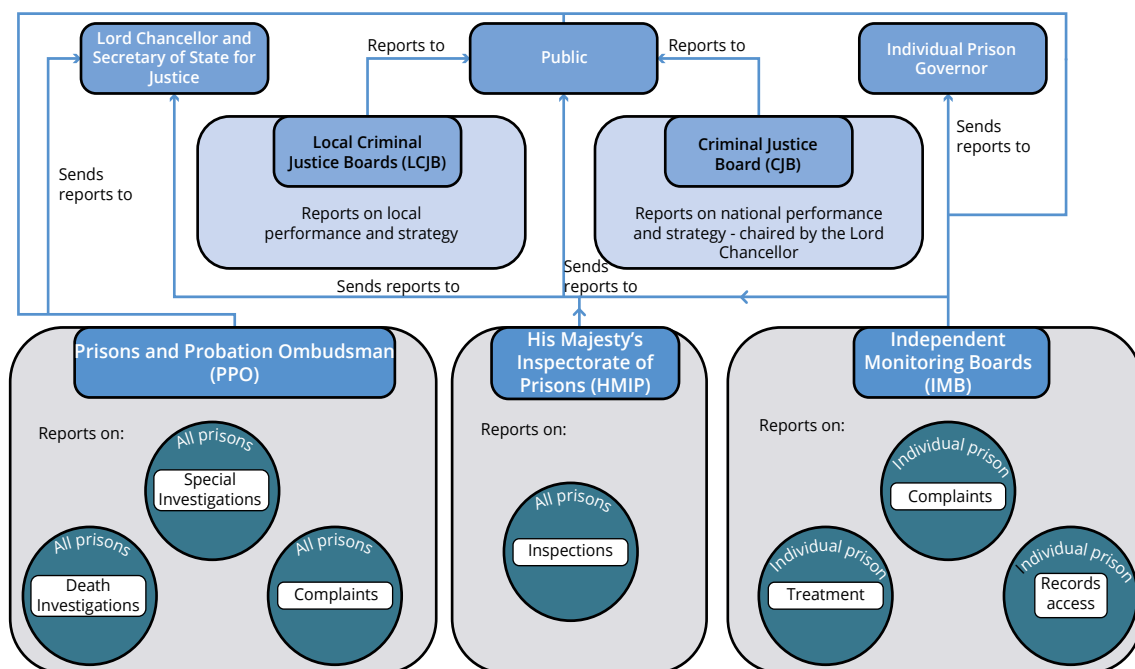
361 HM Inspectorate of Prison, 'Reports into HMP Erlestoke, HMP Hull, HMP Belmarsh, HMP Wandsworth, HMP Brixton, HMP Nottingham, HMP Durham, HMYOI Parc'. Available at: https://hmiprisoninspectorates.gov.uk/our-reports/?listing_search=&publication_typeyear=27&detention_type=0&report_themes=0, [accessed 5 June 2025]

326. A stark example of this was a story recounted by Charlie Taylor regarding a conversation with Lord Ramsbotham [former Chief Inspector of Prisons] in 2019:

“I said, ‘There’s a terrible report on Feltham that’s just come out’. He said, ‘Don’t bother to read it. Read my report from 2001 before you read the Feltham report’. Quite honestly, apart from one or two things, you could have cut and paste between the two of them without even noticing which one you were reading.”³⁶²

327. Helen Berresford reported that “The inspectorate and the independent monitoring boards play an important role in that independent ability to come in and shine a spotlight on what happens within prisons.”³⁶³ However, Andrew Neilson told us that “the limitations that they face have been obvious as the situation in prisons has got worse.”³⁶⁴ He noted that traditionally when a prison got a bad inspection, resources, such as money and staffing, would be found from elsewhere in the system. He noted that this “would work for a time, then problems are likely to develop somewhere else in the system because, ultimately, the system as a whole gets no extra resource at all.”³⁶⁵

Figure 3: Current accountability and oversight mechanisms



Independent Monitoring Boards, Criminal Justice Boards, and the Prison and Probation Ombudsman

328. The Independent Monitoring Boards (IMB) are independent watchdogs, made up of volunteers that monitor the day-to-day life and conditions of prisons. IMBs are aligned with individual prisons. The Criminal Justice Board brings together criminal justice leaders to maintain oversight of the system and promote a collaborative approach to addressing its challenges. There is a national Criminal Justice Board chaired by the Lord Chancellor, and local Criminal Justice Boards based on Police Force areas. The Prisons

362 Q 78 (Charlie Taylor)

363 Q 139 (Helen Berresford)

364 Q 139 (Andrew Neilson)

365 Ibid.

and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) carries out investigations into deaths and complaints in custody in England and Wales.³⁶⁶

329. The IMB told us:

“IMB members are a regular presence, visiting the establishment, monitoring the treatment and conditions of prisoners, reporting what they find to those running the prison, and dealing with queries and concerns from individual prisoners. They are unpaid but have statutory powers, granting them unrestricted access.”³⁶⁷

330. Former prisoner Kieron Bryan told us:

“In my experience of the ombudsman and the independent monitoring board, I saw their power diminish because I was doing such a long time. At first when you complained to them, it was a thing; but by the end of my sentence, it was all just a joke. They had no real powers or ways to help you, because whatever influence they had to help with was gone; it was taken away from them.”³⁶⁸

He added that:

“I started my sentence at the end of 2010, and I finished it in 2023. When I started that sentence, if I put in a complaint to the IMB or the ombudsman, it was taken seriously. But by the end of my sentence, it was not taken seriously—it did not even matter.”³⁶⁹

331. Rt Hon Michael Gove told us on the subject of Criminal Justice Boards “Unless the Justice Secretary has been in place for a long time, has the backing of the Prime Minister and is a big hitter, the Criminal Justice Board tends to be a place where the lowest common denominator prevails rather than where strategy is driven.”³⁷⁰

Oversight of HMPPS

332. HMPPS is held accountable through a range of oversight bodies, including the MoJ, IMB, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO), and HMIP. The MoJ noted the role of scrutiny bodies in carrying out “Regular inspections, monitoring visits and investigation reports from HMIP”³⁷¹ as well as “the Independent Monitoring Boards and the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman [which] highlight key concerns and recommendations for improvement”.³⁷² It added that:

“the Chief Inspector of Prisons can write to the Lord Chancellor to alert them to any acute performance concerns found during an inspection. The Lord Chancellor has 28 days to publicly respond to these concerns and outline the immediate action taken to improve the situation.”³⁷³

366 Written evidence from the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman ([PRI0034](#))

367 Written evidence from the Independent Monitoring Boards ([PRI0027](#))

368 [Q 159](#) (Kieron Bryan)

369 *Ibid.*

370 [Q 48](#) (Michael Gove)

371 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#))

372 *Ibid.*

373 *Ibid.*

333. Regarding legal accountability, the MoJ noted that in cases of severe failings, judicial reviews, negligence claims, inquests and public inquiries can be carried out.³⁷⁴
334. HM Inspectorate of Prisons also works alongside HM Inspectorate of Probations to scrutinise HMPPS. The two Inspectorates, together with HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPPI), and HM Inspectorate of Fire and Rescue Services (HMIFRS), form the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, which addresses issues that involve more than one criminal justice agency. In England, Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), and HMI Prisons jointly inspect "purposeful activity" in prisons and Young Offender Institutions.

A gap in system-level oversight

335. We heard of the failure to build upon and share examples of good practice identified in Inspector Reports. HMIP raised concerns that, although inspectors regularly report examples of Notable Positive Practice (NPP), these are not consistently identified, shared, or sustained at a system-wide level. HMIP stated that "more could be done by the service to identify, disseminate and learn from positive practice, including that identified by the inspectorate." It added: "It is particularly disappointing when we return to jails where we had previously identified NPP, only to find that it no longer exists."³⁷⁵
336. The MoJ told us that where mistakes or risks are identified following inspections, prisons are "encouraged to take necessary action to prevent the same issues occurring again".³⁷⁶ HMIP explained that establishments are "required to submit an action plan that sets out planned or forthcoming action, with clear timeframes".³⁷⁷ It is not clear what frameworks are in place to ensure that these actions are carried out.
337. When asked about his views on the current means of holding services to account for failures, Michael Gove said "It is not good enough, and so much devolves on to the heads of the Chief Inspector of Prisons."³⁷⁸
338. In response to a question on how we assess prisons and whether the current accountability measures are efficient, Michael Gove said "No."³⁷⁹ He added that, in order to improve accountability measures, there was a need to "gather and publish data that was clearer about which prisons worked and which did not."³⁸⁰ Charles Clarke added that: "The question for prisons is about the quality of their data. Only when you have that can you make proper assessments of operations." He added: "The path of change has to be to increase the data collection that allows targets to be set, judgements to be made."³⁸¹ When asked whether the internal information systems were good or bad, Carl Davis said: "they are indifferent and do not help to improve performance, because they do not necessarily in themselves explain what needs to happen to achieve those targets. There is no underpinning

374 *Ibid.*

375 Written evidence from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons ([PRI0022](#))

376 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#))

377 Written evidence from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons ([PRI0022](#))

378 [Q 59](#) (Michael Gove)

379 *Ibid.*

380 *Ibid.*

381 [Q 59](#) (Charles Clarke)

process or standards beneath.”³⁸² We were also told that “Additional oversight is provided through the Prisons Performance Framework, which is an established prison performance tool that includes Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for measuring prison performance, including data on safety, purposeful activity, and rehabilitation.”³⁸³

339. Where the Chief Inspector finds a significant concern in a prison, they can issue an Urgent Notification. This alerts the Lord Chancellor to the issue, and they then have 28 days to respond with an action plan to improve the prison. Andrew Neilson, Campaigns Director for the Howard League for Penal Reform told us that HMIP has issued many urgent notifications and nothing has improved. He said: “Increasingly, it has felt like the Chief Inspector has been reduced to ringing an alarm bell that has no clapper in it and does not make any sound.”³⁸⁴
340. Mark Fairhurst, National Chair of the POA said: “The inspector of prisons has got no power whatsoever; he just makes recommendations ... There is nothing legally binding that forces anybody to change anything with any recommendation within the service. Maybe you should start holding people to account.”³⁸⁵
341. **To improve cross-agency working, to improve accountability, and to ensure recommendations from relevant inspectors are not easily ignored, other complex services often have an inspectorate or standards office with enhanced powers. The most relevant example in this context is Ofsted, which retains the identity of His Majesty’s Chief Inspector. The Prison and Probation Service currently does not have an equivalent.**
342. **The Committee considers oversight bodies, particularly the Chief Inspector of Prisons and Independent Monitoring Boards, vital to ensuring accountability and improvement. However, we find it concerning that the Chief Inspector’s recommendations are often disregarded and find the Urgent Notification process is insufficient in addressing the most significant concerns. We also find the capacity of Independent Monitoring Boards to deliver robust and consistent oversight has diminished.**
343. **The failure to retain and share positive practices over time indicates a systemic failure to embed and sustain effective approaches, reflecting a wider lack of coordinated follow-up and accountability within the prison system.**
344. *The Government should review the role and resourcing of Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) to ensure they are able to carry out consistent, in-person monitoring across the prison estate.*
345. *In the case of HMPPS, the Chief Inspector of Prisons provides vital scrutiny for His Majesty’s Prison Service and HM Chief Inspector of Probation provides an equivalent scrutiny of the Probation Service. We acknowledge that the two Inspectorates already work together on Criminal Justice Joint Inspections, but we believe there would be*

382 [Q 14](#) (Carl Davies)

383 Written evidence from the Ministry of Justice ([PRI0003](#))

384 [Q 139](#) (Andrew Neilson)

385 [Q 67](#) (Mark Fairhurst)

merit in both Inspectorates working more closely together—perhaps in a combined Inspectorate—reflecting the wider combined role of HMPPS. This body should also involve the Independent Monitoring Boards.

346. *An enhanced Inspectorate should have powers to oversee performance, enforce the implementation of inspection recommendations, and promote the systematic adoption of effective practice across the prison system. It should also have power to comment on the policies and structure of HMPPS, and to make recommendations as necessary, for example where it believes that they are impinging on the freedom of prison governors to provide good leadership. The Inspectorates working together should focus on the development of the One HMPPS strategy, and measure its effectiveness.*
347. *HMI Prisons or an enhanced Inspectorate should continue to work jointly with Ofsted in inspecting the provision of purposeful activity in prisons and YOIs, though the enhanced Inspectorate would be free to comment more widely of the approach of HMPPS in terms of purposeful activity.*
348. *The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State should report annually to Parliament on actions that have been taken to address the reports of HMIP (or any successor organisation), and the Secretary of State and Prisons Minister should commit to an annual joint appearance before a Parliamentary Select Committee.*
349. **We believe that the current Prisons Minister understands the need for change and what needs to be done; he should be strongly backed by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Justice.**

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF MEMBERS AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members

Lord Bach
 Baroness Bertin (member from 30 January 2025)
 Baroness Buscombe
 Baroness Cash (member from 6 March 2025)
 Lord Dubs
 Lord Filkin
 Lord Foster of Bath
 Lord Henley
 Baroness Hughes of Stretford
 Lord McInnes of Kilwinning (member until 30 January 2025)
 Baroness Meacher
 Baroness Prashar
 Lord Sandhurst (member until 30 January 2025)
 Lord Tope

Declarations of interest

Lord Bach
No relevant interests to declare
 Baroness Bertin
No relevant interests to declare
 Baroness Buscombe
Former Barrister at Law
 Baroness Cash
Founder of Parent Gym which has partnered with the prisons charity PACT to provide training in parenting skills to inmates
 Lord Dubs
No relevant interests to declare
 Lord Filkin
Step-daughter was a Prison Governor for many years and then worked in the Ministry of Justice until December 2024
Strategy Adviser to Serco plc from 2004–2012
 Lord Foster of Bath
No relevant interests to declare
 Lord Henley
No relevant interests to declare
 Baroness Hughes of Stretford
Former Prisons Minister and former probation officer
 Lord McInnes of Kilwinning
No relevant interests to declare
 Baroness Meacher
No relevant interests to declare
 Baroness Prashar
Member of Penal Reform APPG
 Lord Sandhurst
Retired member of the Bar and was a Recorder of the Crown Court 1993–2012
 Lord Tope
No relevant interests to declare

A full list of Members' interests can be found in the Register of Lords' Interests:
<https://www.parliament.uk/hlregister>

Specialist Adviser

Alex South

Paid work answering Criminal Record Support Service queries with the charity NACRO. Provides advice on housing, employment and support for people with criminal records and guidance on understanding the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974

Trustee of the Raphael Rowe Foundation (non-remunerated). The RRF seeks to implement conflict reduction initiatives in prisons globally to improve relationships between staff and prisoners and create safer prisons. Ongoing projects include planting trees in prison grounds (both staff and prisoners) and sports programmes between staff and prisoners

Trained volunteer with Belong Charity at HMYOI Isis. Mentoring prisoners at HMYOI Isis from April 2025

Author of a book about prisons and occasional media articles relating to prisons

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF WITNESSES

Evidence is published online at <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/8565/prison-culture-governance-leadership-and-staffing/> and available for inspection at the Parliamentary Archives (020 7219 3074).

Evidence received by the committee is listed below in chronological order of oral evidence session, and then in alphabetical order. Those witnesses marked with ** gave both oral evidence and written evidence. Those marked with * gave oral evidence and did not submit any written evidence. All other witnesses submitted written evidence only.

Oral evidence in chronological order

*	Carl Davies, Vice-President, Prison Governors' Association	QQ 1–23
*	Vanessa Frake–Harris MBE, Author and Former Prison Governor	QQ 1–23
*	Tom Wheatley, President, Prison Governors' Association	QQ 1–23
*	Genevieve Glaister, Author, <i>'The Prison Officer'</i>	QQ 24–40
*	Natasha Porter OBE, CEO, Unlocked Graduates	QQ 24–40
*	Pia Sinha, CEO, Prison Reform Trust	QQ 24–40
*	Rt Hon Charles Clarke, former Home Secretary	QQ 41–61
*	Rt Hon Michael Gove, former Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice	QQ 41–61
*	Mark Fairhurst, National Chair, Prison Officers' Association	QQ 62–69
*	Gavin Miller, National Secretary for Justice and Custodial at Community Trade Union	QQ 70–76
*	Charlie Taylor, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Prisons	QQ 77–92
*	Julia Killick CBE, former governor, HM Prison Service	QQ 93–107
*	Clare Pearson, former governor, HM Prison Service	QQ 93–107
*	Professor Lynn Saunders CBE, (Professor of Applied Criminology, University of Derby, and former governor, HM Prison Service)	QQ 93–107
*	Saj Zafar, leadership psychologist and former governor, HM Prison Service	QQ 93–107
*	Professor Ben Crewe, (Professor of Penology and Criminal Justice, and Deputy Director of the Prisons Research Centre, University of Cambridge)	QQ 108–117
**	Professor Alison Liebling, (Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice and Director of the Prisons Research Centre, University of Cambridge)	QQ 108–117

- * Dr Kristian Mjåland, (Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Agder) [QQ 108–117](#)
- * Louise Alexander, People Director, HMPPS and Business Partnering [QQ 118–133](#)
- * Dominic Herrington, Executive Director of Transforming Delivery Directorate, HMPPS [QQ 118–133](#)
- * Michelle Jarman-Howe, Chief Operating Officer of Prisons, HMPPS [QQ 118–133](#)
- ** Helen Berresford, Director of External Engagement, Nacro [QQ 134–144](#)
- * Andrew Neilson, Campaigns Director, Howard League for Penal Reform [QQ 134–144](#)
- * Kate Fraser, Head of Practice, Women in Prison [QQ 145–152](#)
- * Zak Addae-Kodua, Founder and Director, Xconversation [QQ 153–160](#)
- * Kieron Bryan [QQ 153–160](#)
- * Juliana Rowan [QQ 153–160](#)
- * Phil Copple, Director General of Operations, HMPPS [QQ 161–179](#)
- * Lord Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, Ministry of Justice [QQ 161–179](#)

Alphabetical list of witnesses

- Margaret Adams, Director at Magistra Ltd [PRI0006](#)
- Dr Maria Adams (University of Surrey) [PRI0030](#)
- * Zak Addae-Kodua, Founder and Director, Xconversation ([QQ 153–160](#))
- * Louise Alexander, People Director, HMPPS and Business Partnering ([QQ 118–133](#))
- Anonymous [PRI0021](#)
- Anonymous [PRI0036](#)
- Anonymous [PRI0039](#)
- Jane Ball, Director, Dialogue Associates [PRI0043](#)
- The Bell Foundation [PRI0023](#)
- Dr Jamie Bennett, (Research Associate at Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford) [PRI0011](#)
- ** Helen Berresford, Director of External Engagement, Nacro ([QQ 134–144](#))
- Julie Blacklock, operational prison governor [PRI0020](#)
- Dr Talitha Brown (Research Fellow at University of Leicester) [PRI0030](#)
- * Kieron Bryan ([QQ 153–160](#))

- ★ Rt Hon Charles Clarke, former Home Secretary
([QQ 41–61](#))
- Dr Andrew Clements, (Aston University) [PRI0013](#)
- Clinks [PRI0046](#)
- Mr Nigel D Cook (Retired PM3 Expert) [PRI0042](#)
- ★ Phil Copple, Director General of Operations, HMPPS
([QQ 161–179](#).)
- Paul Cosgrove, Former Prison Officer, HMP Erlestoke [PRI0019](#)
- ★ Professor Ben Crewe, (Professor of Penology and
Criminal Justice, and Deputy Director of the Prisons
Research Centre, University of Cambridge) ([QQ 108–
117](#))
- ★ Carl Davies, Vice-President, Prison Governors’
Association ([QQ 1–23](#))
- Sunita Dobisz, operational prison governor [PRI0020](#)
- Dr Daniela Duc, (Lecturer in Pharmaceutical &
Health Technologies, Cardiff University) [PRI0045](#)
- ★★ Mark Fairhurst, National Chair, Prison Officers’
Association ([QQ 62–69](#))
- ★ Vanessa Frake–Harris MBE, Author and Former
Prison Governor ([QQ 1–23](#))
- ★ Kate Fraser, Head of Practice, Women in Prison
([QQ 145–152](#))
- Howard James Futch, former prison officer [PRI0047](#)
- Professor Jon Garland (Professor in Criminology at
University of Surrey) [PRI0030](#)
- ★ Genevieve Glaister, Author, ‘*The Prison Officer*’
([QQ 24–40](#))
- Dr Kate Gooch, (Senior Lecturer in Criminology,
University of Bath) [PRI0044](#)
- ★ Rt Hon Michael Gove, former Lord Chancellor and
Secretary of State for Justice ([QQ 41–61](#))
- Sebastian Groes, (Professor of English Literature,
University of Wolverhampton) [PRI0028](#)
- Dr Paul Hamilton (Nottingham Trent University) [PRI0037](#)
- Professor Vicki Harman (Professor in Sociology at
University of Reading) [PRI0030](#)
- Prof Karen Harrison, (Professor in Law and Penal
Justice, University of Lincoln) [PRI0008](#)
- ★ Dominic Herrington, Executive Director of
Transforming Delivery Directorate, HMPPS ([QQ 118–
133](#))

	His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP)	<u>PRI0022</u>
	Christopher Hobbs, Chaplain at HMP and YOI Hatfield	<u>PRI0007</u>
	Independent Monitoring Boards (IMB)	<u>PRI0027</u>
*	Michelle Jarman-Howe, Chief Operating Officer of Prisons, HMPPS (<u>QQ 118–133</u>)	
*	Julia Killick CBE, former governor, HM Prison Service (<u>QQ 93–107</u>)	
	Professor Gail Kinman, (Birkbeck, University of London)	<u>PRI0013</u>
**	Professor Alison Liebling, (Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice and Director of the Prisons Research Centre, University of Cambridge) (<u>QQ 108–117</u>)	<u>PRI0032</u>
	Lived Experience Research Panel	<u>PRI0037</u>
	Rachel Mason, (Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln)	<u>PRI0008</u>
	Professor Daniel McCarthy (Professor in Criminology at University of Surrey)	<u>PRI0030</u>
*	Gavin Miller, National Secretary for Justice and Custodial at Community Trade Union (<u>QQ 70–76</u>)	
	Ministry of Justice	<u>PRI0003</u>
*	Dr Kristian Mjåland, (Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Agder) (<u>QQ 108–117</u>)	
	Andy Mouncey, Founder, Run for Your Life Community Interest Company	<u>PRI0012</u>
	Nacro	<u>PRI0026</u>
*	Andrew Neilson, Campaigns Director, Howard League for Penal Reform (<u>QQ 134–144</u>)	
	Dr Helen Nichols, (Reader in Criminology, University of Hull)	<u>PRI0008</u>
*	Clare Pearson, former governor, HM Prison Service (<u>QQ 93–107</u>)	
	Penal Reform Solutions	<u>PRI0025</u>
	Philosophy in Prison	<u>PRI0014</u>
	Mr David Pike, Retired Prison Governor at HM Prison Service	<u>PRI0002</u>
*	Natasha Porter OBE, CEO, Unlocked Graduates (<u>QQ 24–40</u>)	
	Dr Erin Power (Lecturer in Criminology at Liverpool John Moore's University)	<u>PRI0030</u>

	Prisoners' Education Trust	PRI0033
**	Prison Officers' Association (POA) (QQ 62–69)	PRI0009
	Prison Reform Trust	PRI0035
	Prisons and Probation Ombudsman	PRI0034
	Prospect	PRI0041
	Professor Carol Rivas (Professor of Health and Social Care at UCL)	PRI0031 PRI0038
*	Juliana Rowan (QQ 153–160)	
*	Professor Lynn Saunders CBE, (Professor of Applied Criminology, University of Derby, and former governor, HM Prison Service) (QQ 93–107)	
	Simon Scott, (Nottingham Trent University);	PRI0037
	Serco Ltd	PRI0015
*	Pia Sinha, CEO, Prison Reform Trust (QQ 24–40)	
	Spark Inside	PRI0010
	StandOut Programmes	PRI0024
	Dr Gillian Stokes (Associate Professor of Inclusive Social Research at UCL)	PRI0031 PRI0038
	Mariam Swehli (PhD Candidate and PGTA at UCL)	PRI0031 PRI0038
*	Charlie Taylor, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Prisons (QQ 77–92)	
	Julia Thompson, operational prison governor	PRI0020
*	Lord Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, Ministry of Justice (QQ 161–179)	
	Professor Philippa Tomczak, (Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Nottingham)	PRI0005
	The Lord Bishop of Gloucester, Rt Rev Rachel Treweek	PRI0048
	Wandsworth Prison Improvement Campaign (WPIC)	PRI0004 PRI0016
	Mr Philip Wheatley CB, Retired Director General of HMPS, Expert Witness and Adviser on Prison Management at self employed	PRI0001
*	Tom Wheatley, President, Prison Governors' Association (QQ 1–23)	
	Richard Williams, operational prison governor	PRI0020
	Professor Belinda Winder, (Nottingham Trent University)	PRI0037
	Women in Prison	PRI0040

- ★ Saj Zafar, leadership psychologist and former governor,
HM Prison Service ([QQ 93–107](#))

APPENDIX 3: SUMMARY OF CORRESPONDENCE FROM PRISONERS

This is a summary of key themes that emerged from letters addressed to the Committee following the Call for Evidence printed in *Inside Time*. A total of 45 letters were received from both male and female prisoners serving their sentences in a variety of prisons (including several outside England and Wales).

Governor visibility

Governor visibility was one of the most prominent themes to emerge from letters written to the Committee by serving prisoners. Prisoners were clear in their views that regularly seeing a governor around the prison, visiting residential units and engaging with prisoners, had a notably positive influence on the culture of an establishment. Different prisoners had had vastly different experiences in this regard; one prisoner stated that he had only seen the Governor once in seven years while another recalled seeing the Governing Governor once a fortnight at that particular jail. As well as visibility, the author of one letter commented on the value of governors holding regular drop-in sessions on residential units, where prisoners could raise issues and make queries. From the letters received, this type of prisoner engagement seemed to be rare. There was a widespread consensus that governor visibility counted for a lot and the lack thereof was noticed by prisoners. There were multiple references to governors sitting in an ‘ivory tower’.

Generally, it was felt that there was a lack of leadership amongst Senior Management Teams which left prisoners feeling unseen and unheard. Some commented on the need for more local autonomy amongst governors in order to make changes that could improve the culture of individual prisons. Though some prisoners spoke highly of individual governors whose interest and engagement had had a positive effect on them, these were the exception. Governors who were considered ineffective in their roles were viewed as facing little accountability. One prisoner believed this issue was reflected by the wider lack of accountability of HMPPS. Generally, the prisoners who wrote about what constituted a good prison governor felt that there were no consequences for being a poor governor. It was noted by the Committee that there seemed to be some confusion around the differing types and titles of Governor: Governor, No 1 Governor, Governors of various departments, etc. Prisoners did not always have clarity on who they were talking to and who was in charge of what within the prison, which made them lose trust in the ability of the prison to deal with their problems.

The prisoners also reflected that visibility was merely one part of leadership and beyond just being visible, the governors also had to make sure that their values and vision were passed through to staff.

Mental health

Mental health was noted as a key concern by many of the serving prisoners who provided evidence. They spoke of extensive periods of time locked in their cells and how the lack of interaction with people and different physical spaces within the prison exacerbated mental ill health, often leading to increased violence. Many prisoners commented on feeling unsafe and at risk in their establishments. Specialised interventions were also lacking—one prisoner described himself as a veteran with experience of active service and lamented the lack of support for prisoners in his position. Although fewer female prisoners wrote in than male prisoners, the issue of poor mental health was notably present in letters written by

women. One such letter highlighted the impact of overcrowding in the women's estate and how this had affected the emotional wellbeing of prisoners. Additionally, it was felt that the reduction in staffing levels had led to poorer mental health provision generally—staff were not only less accessible for conversation but had less time to arrange contact with external services that could provide support to prisoners. The living conditions prisoners described were not conducive to good mental health; prisoners wrote of broken showers, no hot water, dirty accommodation and buildings in disrepair. Food was described as inedible. The delay in Parole Board hearings was another reason given for a general feeling of hopelessness and despondency—one prisoner said his parole hearing had been delayed by several months.

Lack of regime

Multiple prisoners specifically highlighted the extensive periods of time they spent locked in their cells and the lack of regime available to them. They expressed the value of having meaningful activity to occupy them during their sentences, such as education, training, exercise and activities. Without these things, prisoners became increasingly low in mood and bored. One wrote of how boredom tended to make prisoners more violent. Another commented on how small and dirty the cells are in many establishments, compounding the effect of spending so much time in them. He went on to compare confinement in those conditions to a form of cruelty. Spending as much as 23 hours a day locked in their cells meant prisoners were unable to interact with each other; to talk, build relationships and socialise. Equally, prolonged periods spent in their cells meant they were not able to develop relationships with staff either. One prisoner noted that a lack of contact with the officers left them increasingly unable to access services that could directly improve their chances of desisting from crime on release, such as employment support or CV writing workshops. Some prisoners felt that the only way to get attention and time out of cell was to behave poorly. They felt that bad behaviour was rewarded with increased resources and staff focus, whereas the quieter, more compliant prisoners were ignored.

Of particular concern to the Committee was the lack of reading material available to some prisoners, though whether this was due to a lack of books being available or not having enough staff to facilitate reading sessions was unclear. It was generally felt that though some prisons offered opportunities for GCSE studies and even higher education, there wasn't enough provision for basic education such as low-level numeracy and literacy. Of those courses that were on offer, prisoners struggled to see the real-world value of them. Prisoners felt that the courses that were available to them bore little relevance to the outside world and were performative rather than rehabilitative.

Officers

Almost all of the prisoners who contributed written evidence felt that officers working on residential units did not have time to engage with them. One prisoner stated that staffing levels had dropped from six officers on a unit to only two, meaning that prisoners had less time to make conversation with the officers and less time to find out what opportunities were available to them within the prison. These views demonstrated the scope of the officer role—prisoners needed in-person contact to develop positive relationships and also to make use of what the prison had to offer. Lack of officer contact meant prisoners did not always know what interventions and services were available to them.

A good officer was described as one who had a combination of qualities, such as the drive to do more tedious but necessary work, the resilience necessary to overcome challenging moments, and the ability to remain friendly and approachable throughout. Good officers were described as those who kept to their word and did what they said they would. Prisoners wrote of respecting officers who were prepared to say 'no'. It was clear that honesty and integrity were valued by those prisoners who provided evidence, even if that meant being told how little could be done for them. Conversely, an ineffective officer was described as one who cared too little and quickly became dragged down by the prison environment or cared too much and burned out. Some prisoners observed that there seemed to be no consequences for poor conduct among officers. They believed that the perceived indifference of Senior Management Teams directly affected the culture of an establishment. These issues were mirrored in descriptions of the internal communications/administrative process within prisons; prisoners wrote of complaints not being acknowledged or acted upon, and of letters failing to be delivered.

A good prison officer was one who was deemed to be non-judgmental of the prisoners.

Many of the prisoners had clearly spent a considerable amount of time preparing their evidence. They wrote in great detail of their experiences within prison and their understanding of prison culture and governance. Their contributions are valued enormously and the Committee is extremely grateful.

Other considerations

Many prisoners remarked that there was not a culture of rehabilitation. Largely, this was not deemed to be solely because of the individual prison systems, but rather the Criminal Justice System at large.

Many prisoners were highly critical of the living conditions that they stayed in, believing that it helped contribute to a culture of violence and frustration.

APPENDIX 4: NOTE OF A PRIVATE MEETING HELD ON 25 FEBRUARY 2025 WITH FIVE SERVING PRISON GOVERNORS

On 25 February, the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee met five contributors who are serving Governing Governors at prisons in England. They led Category A, B, C and D prisons, and the panel included male and female governors. This anonymised note summarises the meeting.

There was a general discussion with contributors about experiences working in prisons in the role of governor. The following themes were explored:

- Leadership Lessons & Successes;
- Governance Structure;
- Staff Qualifications & Support;
- Workforce Development & Retention; and
- Leadership Autonomy & Visibility

How contributors think about their Leadership Lessons & Successes

Four of the five contributors emphasized understanding their prison's unique context as a key leadership lesson. One stressed grasping existing culture, setting ambitious standards, and attending to details like litter and graffiti to reflect values. Another highlighted tailoring leadership to the prison's demographics and team limitations, prioritizing diversity, inclusion, and procedural justice in communication while fostering creativity despite resource constraints.

Views on longevity were contrasted: one underscored its value—backed by HMIP—for deeply knowing the prison and empowering staff through changes, like shifting from training to resettlement, while another contributor added that governors must learn from setbacks, communicate personal values (e.g., rehabilitation), and keep staff focused. In most cases contributors found that motivating staff and setting standards were critical to success, with one noting the need for a “thick skin” to buffer political pressures and scrutiny from inspectors, wielding autonomy as decision-makers.

One contributor added that prisons are like “little societies” and require adaptive leaders matched to their specific needs—some needing a firmer hand—though development for governors remains lacking. Agreement emerged on understanding each prison's nature, aligning leadership with its demands, and the centrality of staff morale—“happy staff, happy prisoners”—to success, despite differing emphases on longevity, autonomy, or creativity.

How contributors understand the Governance Structure

Four of the five prison governors in the session highlighted intense pressures on management. One described small senior teams facing increased workloads from new services: the Governing Governor role has not changed but where the Service failed as an organisation is in relation to Custodial Managers. It was unrealistic to expect middle managers to have 30 staff.

Contributors noted that Custodial Managers are stretched by line managing 20–25 officers, made more difficult with periodic absence due to night duties. Another argued that spans of control are unchanged but unrealistic, stressing visibility via walk-arounds and issues at lower grades. Views on complexity were contrasted:

one emphasized busyness and operational chaos—such as 80 admissions or 25 fights—and the need for better training, while another contributor added that HR processes weaken managers, though “Enable” proposals excited them.

In most cases contributors found that staff face demanding situations—violence, self-harm, substance abuse—with inadequate support, one citing Probation’s lessons for adding support layers. Agreement centred on resource strain and support needs. When asked about the ‘fear factor,’ one contributor noted that people are in some respects afraid of the governor, even where that was unwarranted. On fear of prisoners, another argued that “risk” is a better word.

How contributors evaluate the quality of existing staff qualifications & support

All five contributors were supportive of the “Enable” programme, with one emphasising that this needs appropriate investment. One contributor spoke of the importance of training and upskilling, and the usefulness of setting standardised expectations for roles, formalised with documents such as success profiles. Another agreed with a previous witness that there is a lack of training for newly promoted custodial managers.

One contributor managed to fund custodial managers’ training with resources from an alternative budget. Views on progression were mixed, with one contributor suggesting that prisons are over-reliant on assessments for promotion; they want to move more towards development for promotion. One contributor singled out praise for Unlocked Graduates and emphasised the challenges of line management.

One contributor reported that Custodial Managers struggle to adequately support the Prison Officers that they line-manage due to shift patterns as well as workload. They suggested that the current shift pattern for Custodial Managers is not conducive to regular, meaningful contact with new starters, because a week of nights followed by a week of rest days takes them out of the jail for a fortnight as often as once every six weeks. Another suggested that clinical supervision should be implemented as an additional layer of support for operational staff.

A contributor criticized the ‘Fair and Sustainable’ policy for removing HR and line management duties from Band 4 Senior Officers and assigning them to Band 5 Custodial Managers. They noted that Band 4s worked more closely with staff, and Band 5s have taken on roles like Orderly Officer, which pulls them away from their units.

Regarding vetting prospective new prison officers, one participant stressed the importance of learning from specific mistakes, via investigations and hearings, making comparisons with vetting processes in the police force.

How contributors perceive prison workforce development & retention

Four of the five contributors agreed there is a weakness in training within the Prison Service, with concerns about its sufficiency and resilience against budget cuts. Some agreed with a Committee Member’s suggestion that prison workforce training should be equivalent to that in the police or military. While learning and development programmes exist, accessibility remains an issue. There was support for the Enable training and development programme in the earlier conversation, but then contributors revealed doubts about whether it would be implemented. One wanted to be an advocate for the Enable programme, but didn’t know enough about it yet.

There was some doubt as to whether Enable would live up to its potential, given budgetary and planning uncertainty. Some saw it as a promising start, with benefits for retention through mentoring and induction improvements, while others felt it was too early to assess its effectiveness. A review of entry-level training was widely supported, as the current programme presents a daunting challenge for new officers. Another contributor added that making time for training and development is a persistent difficulty, yet most agreed that long-term investment in development would be beneficial.

One contributor observed that investment in Governing Governors seems to stop once you have attained that rank. They spoke about being supported up until that role and then there are fewer opportunities for development.

When asked about how HMPPS might reinforce internal processes to prioritise training and development, contributors were uncertain.

Regarding the Unlocked Graduates Programme, contributors were unanimous in their praise, highlighting its high-quality intake and the retention of all participants. However, geographic distribution was noted as a challenge, with some recruits unwilling to relocate to areas such as the Northwest of England. Despite this, the investment in the programme was seen to outweigh its limitations.

How contributors gauge leadership autonomy & visibility

When asked about leadership autonomy and visibility, contributors expressed mixed views. One felt there was enough autonomy overall but wanted more involvement in projects and contracts, noting concerns about excessive costs. Another contributor added that visibility was important but depended on who was seen. Some felt decisions were imposed from above, making it difficult to have input, with one citing the example of prisoners being charged £5 for coffee that should cost £1.99. Another contributor highlighted financial restrictions, such as the £10,000 capital spending limit, as a key challenge. In most cases, contributors found that even a short absence required re-establishing expectations. All contributors agreed on the importance of leadership visibility, though in one case fitting it in at times is really difficult.

One contributor suggested that they accepted that as a Civil Servant, they wouldn't have enough autonomy: there were inevitably constraints on their freedom. When asked whether they would support a professionalisation of the Prison Service, most contributors were uncertain but were broadly content with the status quo (one noting this was a difficult question to answer for someone who had always been a civil servant). One described the challenge of operating both within a prison and a wider system, making it difficult to define their status.

Overall recommendations

Most contributors supported maintaining the current One HMPPS programme, arguing that keeping HMPPS and Probation together was the right long-term approach. They felt there were green shoots of progress but felt that there would not be significant benefits for five to ten years. One contributor, however, was less convinced about the change (not seeing the green shoots that others suggest). Contributors highlighted the importance of nurturing the Probation relationship and investing in training and professional development. Another contributor added that aligning IT services should also be a priority. There was also a lively exchange about the extent to which collaboration with Probation was delivering results. While most saw positive signs, one disagreed, stating they had yet to see

the expected improvements and arguing for broader collaboration, particularly with health services.

On the issue of rehabilitation, all contributors agreed it was essential, describing it as the core purpose of their work. Some noted that while significant investment had been made, its impact remained unclear due to sentencing changes and prisoner churn. Another contributor emphasised the benefits of open prisons in building social capital and strengthening societal bonds. Training was seen as critical, with initiatives like Enable helping staff create meaningful change. One contributor added that recent shifts in investment, particularly under former Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State of Justice Rt Hon Dominic Raab, had altered the focus towards reoffending.

Regarding overcrowding, all contributors agreed it was a significant challenge. Another noted that early-release policies, combined with difficulties in detaining prisoners long enough to complete rehabilitative work, were undermining efforts to reduce reoffending.

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