

# Justice Select Committee

Oral evidence: [The prison operational workforce](#), HC 917

Tuesday 28 February 2023

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sir Robert Neill (Chair); Janet Daby; James Daly; Dr Kieran Mullan; Edward Timpson; Karl Turner.

Questions 96 - 138

## Witnesses

I: Natasha Porter OBE, CEO, Unlocked Graduates; Nina Champion, Director, Criminal Justice Alliance; and Peter Dawson, Director, Prison Reform Trust.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Prison Reform Trust](#)
- [Unlocked Graduates](#)



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Natasha Porter, Nina Champion and Peter Dawson.

**Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Justice Committee. I welcome our first panel of witnesses. We will come to you shortly, but first we must make our declarations of interest. I am a non-practising barrister and formerly a consultant to a law firm.

**Edward Timpson:** I am a former Solicitor General with a practising certificate but I am not currently undertaking any court work. I am the former chair of CAFCASS and the former chair of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. Peter will be aware that my brother is chair of the Prison Reform Trust.

**Karl Turner:** I am a non-practising barrister.

Q96 **Chair:** Maria Eagle hopes to join us later; she is a non-practising solicitor. James Daly also hopes to join us: he is a practising solicitor.

I ask members of the panel to introduce themselves.

**Natasha Porter:** I am chief executive at Unlocked Graduates.

**Peter Dawson:** I am a director at the Prison Reform Trust.

**Nina Champion:** I am director of the Criminal Justice Alliance.

Q97 **Chair:** What do you see, from your perspectives, as the key challenges facing the operational workforce in prisons? Who would like to go first?

**Peter Dawson:** It is a bad habit to take the floor if it is offered.

The immediate challenges are obvious. Prison regimes are in a terrible state. There are not enough staff in lots of prisons; prisons are operating below their staff capacity because of a lack of staff. That makes life very difficult for the people living and working in prisons.

I think that the Prison Service faces a much deeper challenge. I said in my evidence that when the Committee last considered this question it heard evidence from Professor Alison Liebling on what a sophisticated job being a prison officer is.

During the pandemic, and in the years that preceded it as people became scared in prisons that were not safe, the ability to do that sophisticated job diminished. It diminished because prison officers spent so much less time talking to and listening to prisoners.

After the pandemic, many prisons have not recovered from that. A lot of people are not used to working in that way and do not instinctively understand that that is where your safety comes from and where all the good reasons for being a prison officer lie.



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The existential challenge for the Prison Service is not to lose that model of how prisons operate. There is an alternative model: it relies on prison officers being equipped with weapons; it relies on prison officers being in an absurd majority when they are face to face with prisoners; and it relies on oppression and coercion. The prison systems that rely on that tend to be more dangerous and will never attract the people whom we want to work.

That is the challenge for the Prison Service. I hope it recognises it. A lot of its rhetoric is probably saying the right things, but I don't think it is delivering the opportunities for people to work in that way on the ground, and if you don't practise it you will lose it.

Q98 **Chair:** Thank you. That is helpful. Nina, you were nodding quite a lot.

**Nina Champion:** I agree absolutely. This is about relationships. Human beings are in prison, and we need to remember that that is at the heart of it. Many of our members deliver interventions in prison—prison education, employment, housing support and all the things that help people to build a stable bridge to leave prison and successfully carry on their lives outside, gain employment and keep relationships with families.

They tell us that the lack of prison staff is preventing those positive interventions. You need staff to be able to get people to classrooms, but prison officers play a critical role on the wings, having one-to-one conversations to encourage, support and nudge: "Why don't you think about doing education? Why don't you think about engaging with this organisation?" Having not those conversations but just a transactional relationship, opening and shutting doors, misses out on those opportunities. The real value is in officers, who spend a lot more time with people in prison than those organisations do, so it is very frustrating.

The lack of staff impacts on the amount of time available to do those activities—getting people to classes late or not getting them there at all and having them out for only half a day. There is huge potential there. Lots of organisations are ready and willing to provide the evidence-based interventions that can really help people while they are in custody and after release. They are not able to fulfil those functions without adequate staffing and the attributes of prison officers who are able to have those conversations.

Q99 **Chair:** We have been told that there is a particular issue with the recruitment and retention of band 3 prison officers. Does that impact on transactional relationships with prisoners, given their role?

**Natasha Porter:** At Unlocked Graduates we believe the prison officer is the most important person for many prisoners while they are in prison. Prisoners have told us that and we have heard it again and again. That is why our scheme is focused on the prison officer rather than on another job.



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There is definitely a challenge with understaffing at the moment. We saw that back in 2017 when we first started; it does feel like a cycle rather than a new thing altogether. Retention comes within that.

I echo what has been said and will add to it a bit. The role is incredibly complex. To do this job very well—it is a complex role—it needs to be focused on the relational as well as the procedural. There is a need to shift the way the public see the role. There is a need to shift the way prisons see this role, and even prison officers.

There is a recruitment challenge. There is also pressure with shortages just to fill vacancies. It is a real mistake to do that at the cost of quality. This is such an important role.

The other thing that we found to be crucial for our participants joining this is the support they get on the landings. There is one thing about recruiting the right people, but then it is about training them to do a job that, at its heart, needs to be relational as well as procedural.

What happens when you start on the landings in this incredibly strange environment? As a new prison officer you need the support to put in practice what you have learned in training. That requires a lot of careful thinking, especially if you don't have the expertise.

**Q100 Chair:** From what you have seen, do you notice any difference in staffing pressures between the male and female estate, or the adult as opposed to the youth estate, or is it more general?

**Natasha Porter:** We do think there is a difference between working in all those estates. Estate-specific training will help with that.

We are seeing staffing pressures. We place in predominantly local prisons, and place in women's prisons and the youth estate. We are seeing it across all the prisons we work in.

Working in a male estate prison is very different from working in the female estate, and that is very different from working with children. We were really pleased to see the estate-specific training come in. We think that will make a great difference for the quality of work they are able to do, and that will hopefully help with retention.

**Nina Champion:** I want to come in on something around self-harm, suicide and the lack of clinical supervision and counselling support for prison officers, who are having to deal with really appalling situations and mental health issues, which they're not trained to do, and once they've seen a traumatic incident to be able to access counselling and clinical supervision.

People in prison with mental health issues aren't getting access to those interventions, whether it is sport or purposeful activity, that support better mental health and wellbeing and relationships with families. The more time people are spending in cells, the more we are seeing those



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things increase. The people dealing with them are the officers on the wing, and they are not being supported adequately, so you end up with a vicious cycle.

**Peter Dawson:** Whichever part of the prison estate you work in, the fundamental difference with the prison population from what it was 10 or 15 years ago is that so many people are serving very long sentences. It used to be possible to get people through six to eight weeks in custody and off they went. You can't do that now because the problems that you need to solve and the relationships you need to build will persist for years.

Q101 **Chair:** According to Government estimates we are at about 80,000 prisoners now but could be up to 100,000 prisoners.

**Nina Champion:** The Committee's report on remand talked about the record levels of people on remand. People do not know what is happening. There is a feeling of instability and churn that that causes. It is a different dynamic that prison officers are then having to deal with.

Q102 **Chair:** Do you think the system is equipped to deal with that increase in prisoners?

**Peter Dawson:** Plainly not. It isn't. The consequences of changes that Ministers make are concealed or not acknowledged. The principal pressure on the prison population is the length of time people spend in prison. We are constantly seeing incremental changes that drive that up. The impact assessment always says, "We don't think it is significant," but cumulatively it is.

So, no, I can't see any prospect of prisons getting to a point where they are not overcrowded. The first thing you would do to make prisons run better would be not to have them overcrowded. It isn't even a policy objective.

Q103 **Chair:** There seems to be general agreement, but are there any other observations on that point?

**Natasha Porter:** Something that we found really interesting with participants on the Unlocked programme is how empowered—there is some really good research on long sentences coming through. I know that the Prison Reform Trust is doing some at the moment. Ben Crewe published some really interesting research last year. We had Ben Crewe come and do some training for our participants working with prisoners serving very long sentences, especially young prisoners, which is quite a difficult thing to get your head around.

What was really interesting was that, when equipped with the evidence and data about what that prisoner is going through, it wasn't necessarily that the young men in custody weren't showing that they were scared, upset or deeply regretful about what they had done. For the prison officers to hear that the evidence was really clear that that is the cycle



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they go through equipped the prison officer to look after those young men going through those long sentences.

We have a quite good evidence base about who is in our prisons and what helps them not to reoffend post release. We have a workforce we are asking to look after those prisoners. The next step is how we make sure that the evidence is getting to that workforce so that they are equipped to do their jobs with the most knowledge that they can.

Despite all this, it is worth pointing out that some of the most impressive public servants I have ever come across are prison officers, working on the frontline in prisons. They are going out and seeking this knowledge, almost despite some of the systems around them. They are doing phenomenal work with some people teachers or social workers haven't managed to reach. A prison officer with not very much training or support is doing amazing work. How do we codify what they are doing and what is working for them and roll it out across all prison officers? There is a way of working in prison that is incredibly effective.

**Nina Champion:** With the prison expansion plans and all the capital investment, you've still got to staff those prisons. We are struggling to staff the prisons we have now, so we think that the investment in prisons would be better spent on increasing the quality of what is happening in our current prisons and diverting more people from custody on remand or short sentences. There are ways of reducing those longer sentences. This doesn't have to be the direction of travel. There are alternatives.

Q104 **Dr Mullan:** Your organisation, Nina, has lots of people doing stuff in and out of prisons. Does the third sector have similar recruitment challenges? I know it is something affecting the entire economy at the moment.

**Nina Champion:** A lot of people want to work in the third sector because they do purposeful work—they want to go into prisons. The frustration is being able to get into prisons and deliver those services, or working with people coming out of prison they have not been able to work with through the gate. The most effective intervention is where you start with someone in prison and build a relationship rather than meeting at the gate and in the community—you have built that relationship of trust.

It is extremely frustrating for people working in the voluntary sector, who are trying to put on interventions but people aren't coming to the courses, you can't get access to the people you need to, you can't promote your interventions, and people are coming out of prison not knowing you exist or are coming to you without having had that lead-in. It is very frustrating for people working in the voluntary sector at the moment in trying to get into prisons.

The voluntary sector has a growing number of people who have personal lived experience of the criminal justice system as part of our paid workforce—peer mentors and people who are able to establish a good



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rapport with people in prison. The vetting processes to enable them to go into prisons and deliver those interventions are very opaque and difficult.

There are a lot of barriers to our members doing the work with their workforce that they want to do. People want to do that work because it is rewarding, purposeful work, but it is very frustrating when they start those roles and are not able to do the job they have applied to do.

Q105 **Dr Mullan:** Do any of you get a sense of whether we are on a flat line? Is it getting worse? Are things improving? What is the trajectory?

**Peter Dawson:** The numbers make it look as though we are on a bit of a plateau. Retention is the one indicator that still seems to be getting worse. That has to be the biggest worry. It is madness spending all that money trying to find people whom you think are appropriate for the job and losing them in the first 12 or 24 months.

That is the biggest worry. In, as you rightly point out, a very competitive labour market we seem to be succeeding reasonably well on recruitment but failing so much on retention. That is where the seat of the problem is, I would say.

Q106 **Dr Mullan:** I was going to ask to what extent prisons can run a full regime but I think that in answer to the Chair you highlighted that they are not. You have talked about interventions—pre-prison release. Peter, Natasha, if you were to pick one thing—the most important thing—that is not being done as part of the normal prison routine but which should be put back in, what would it be?

**Peter Dawson:** I will be brief because Natasha is closer to it than I am.

There is no definition of a full regime. We talk about it as though we know what it is, but it doesn't exist. I have tracked a series of parliamentary questions on this because a Minister said that the majority of prisons were running a normal or near-normal regime. When you pursue it, it turns out that what the regime is in any given prison is negotiated between the governor and their line manager. It can be vastly different—

Q107 **Dr Mullan:** Their line manager in HMPPS?

**Peter Dawson:** Yes. It turns out that the full regime is what you think you can do with the resources you've got. If you ask me, "What should a normal day in a training prison be like?", I would say, "Everyone gets up at 8 o'clock and they're not locked up again until 8 o'clock in the evening at the earliest."

There is absolutely no statement anywhere that says that is what the regime in prisons should be, so everyone has their own idea and we have no way of knowing whether we have got to an acceptable place on it.

**Dr Mullan:** That is very helpful.



**Natasha Porter:** I think we have a pretty good idea. If prison is a place where we want people to go, for whatever reason, and on release we don't want them to reoffend, which I assume most of us agree is what we want from it, we have a pretty good understanding of what means people then desist from crime—such as what happens which means that when they are released they don't reoffend. Put simply, it is having good people in their lives. It is having somewhere safe to live, a place to live, and it is having a purpose—something to get out of bed for.

For me, a good regime enables a prisoner to rebuild whichever areas of their lives where they're not where they need them to be, so that they have good family ties while they are in prison and they are getting visits, which are very important. The virtual visits have been great, moving some visits online, but it is anything that is encouraging. Face-to-face visits are obviously going to be more powerful for many people and sorting out a place to live.

The really big one is probably purpose. Unlocked came out of the Sally Coates review of education in prison. We know that discovering a passion for education, discovering work which you can do post release, is going to make a difference. For us, that would be, I think, the key thing.

I went to prisons throughout the pandemic because we had participants in them. I met a group of prisoners in Pentonville at the end of one of the lockdowns and asked them to tell me about it. One of them, because he only saw the prison officer, had learned every prison officer and knew who they were from the sound of their footsteps. He said he would lie in bed in the morning, hear the footsteps on the landing and know who was on duty. He would know whether it was going to be a bad day or a worse day.

The other thing about a restrictive regime is that the prison officer—to go back to this inquiry's topic—becomes so important in the prisoner's life. It is the person who is going to do things, or not, for your wellbeing. While we are in this time it is tempting to fill vacancies, but the quality becomes even more important. That is quite a brave thing to prioritise in a time of short-staffing, but it feels like an essential priority.

Q108 **Dr Mullan:** And recruitment for your programme?

**Natasha Porter:** It is a really good question. Prison officer is not the natural, attractive route for graduates. When we polled them, it is the least attractive job they can think of—about 3%. They might work in the Prison Service, not as a prison officer. Zero per cent. of male Oxbridge graduates will consider work in the Prison Service. When they see our offer, that goes up to 47%.

This year, we closed applications yesterday, so I'm sad if any of you were thinking you might go for it. We had our highest number of applications ever: 20 applications per place.





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People don't know what prison officers do. When you ask them what prison officers do, most of their knowledge comes from TV shows. If you're slightly older, it might be "Porridge" and it is now "Orange Is the New Black". They don't think good things because what they see on TV is often not a positive job.

What is interesting is they just don't know what prison officers do. They think they lock and unlock doors. They might use violence every once in a while. They don't realise the complexities of the job.

When people realise what you do in the job, it ticks a lot of boxes for what graduates are looking for. Graduates are looking for a chance to make a difference. They want a good social life. The graduate scheme appeals. They want clear development and training, but they also want to be working with clients straightaway. They want to have a challenge.

These are all things the prison officer job offers. The problem we see is the brand. When I am on campus and I say, "Come on to our graduate scheme; you can be a prison officer," they sometimes think they've misheard me: "I thought you said 'prison officer'." "Yes, I did." And then they go home and tell friends and family, and sometimes friends and family talk them out of becoming a prison officer, but they're happy to be social workers; they're happy to be teachers; they're happy to be police officers; they're happy to join the Army.

This job is seen so inaccurately, and there is a real piece of work for us all to do to change that.

We focus on a diverse workforce, but we have to fight hard to get them to apply to our programme. We put in a lot of energy and a lot of resource, but this year recruitment has gone well.

Q109 **Dr Mullan:** I completely echo your comments about the job needing to be perceived the same as the other jobs you mentioned.

Are your current members working a lot of overtime to try to cover this?

**Natasha Porter:** We advise our participants not to do a lot of overtime. They do a master's alongside the job, and we find it emotionally burns them out. They are also in their first two years.

They are adults; they can make their own decisions. There is pressure in some prisons to do overtime to deliver the regime. We keep an eye, and if people are doing a lot of overtime we have a conversation with them because we have seen people burn out.

Q110 **Karl Turner:** It seems fairly obvious that when experienced people leave any service there is bound to be an impact on the service. What impact has the loss of experienced staff had on the operation of the Prison Service and the prison workforce?

**Peter Dawson:** I think there is a track here. You wouldn't choose to have a workforce so short of experience as the Prison Service is at the



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moment. Prisoners recognise a potential good prison officer very quickly. Although it is a sophisticated job—Natasha is exactly right: we don't equip people properly to do it—the difference between a good prison officer and a bad prison officer is fundamentally the attitude you bring to the job.

There is an opportunity in what is happening—it can't be changed—to build a cadre of prison officers who have the right attitude, who are better equipped and who will do the job better than their predecessors.

When I listen to governors, the best governors say, "This is where we are and we must seize that opportunity." They don't moan about the fact that a lot of prison officers have left; that has happened and we can't undo it. You might not choose to be here, but I don't think it is the problem, necessarily, that everybody wants to portray it as.

**Q111 Karl Turner:** The Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody raised concerns in its evidence that the high turnover of staff and staff shortages means that important signs of mental health deterioration are missed. Do you recognise those concerns?

**Nina Champion:** Coming back to your original question about the loss of experience, what we really need to do now is focus on training and continuous professional development—whether that is around mental health, or around restorative practices and approaches. How do you engage with people on the wing? How do you support them to build better relationships with officers, with their families and with other people on the wing?

A lot of our members are involved in delivering not just interventions but training, support and coaching to support staff. When you don't have experienced officers who would naturally do that mentoring, coaching and training on the job, you need to fill that gap and that vacuum. Many organisations are out there with those skills and expertise, and are willing to do that. We really need to focus on bringing those organisations in.

Coming back to what you were saying, clinical supervision is really important for officers to enable them to deal with the day-to-day things they are witnessing.

**Q112 Karl Turner:** The panel drew attention to the impact of dealing with self-harm and death on the mental health and wellbeing of prison officers. Do you think that prison officers are sufficiently well supported to deal with the effects of what seem to me to be incredibly traumatic experiences and incidents, which they are expected to deal with as part of the job?

**Nina Champion:** We had one of the Unlocked graduates do work placements externally. Every year, we support a couple of graduates. One had come to us and the week before had had to deal with their first prison suicide. They were going on leave for a week to come and do a work placement, so they couldn't access any support or counselling and weren't entitled to anything. It deeply impacted them, and there really is



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a lack of that clinical supervision and support for officers, which you probably see, Natasha.

**Natasha Porter:** There are instances that are extremely difficult. A human reaction is to find them extremely difficult. It is probably good to feel traumatised. If you don't feel traumatised, you probably need to worry more.

In general, we find that prisons are really good at dealing with the big things. There always can be more support, but generally when big things happen prisons tend to deal with crises very well, including with staff. There tends to be quite good support.

We find that something that is as challenging and perhaps not thought about so much is the ongoing, day in, day out fear of what's going to happen when you open the door, especially after something like that.

We have mentoring prison officers—experienced prison officers who have all the right values—for participants going through our programme. I will come back to that, because it is something really exciting that we found: the difference that can make to retention and to wellbeing.

They provide group supervision, which is peer-led. We have taken it from social work. We did it because it is cheap and “roll-outable”, and it doesn't require a psychologist; therefore, we thought all prison staff could have a model like this that works. We took it from social work for dealing with that day-to-day, low-level anxiety that just builds up. It is hard to ask for help for something you can't name, but we found that that can be just as difficult as those incidents, and it would be strange if people didn't find them traumatic and difficult. We have found that most prisons have a good way of supporting people through those.

Q113 **Janet Daby:** Peter, you say that too many officers leave within the first year or 24 months. I find that quite alarming and concerning. That also came out of the annual report for 2021-22 by the chief inspector of prisons, Charlie Taylor.

What also came out of that was the question of there being too much haste to fill vacancies, and possibly an inability to filter out unsuitable candidates. Obviously, you get good candidates as well, but I am talking about the unsuitable ones.

When Mark Fairhurst came to the Committee he talked about the recruitment process not being fit for purpose. A lot of that was because the process is online. Among other areas, he was talking about prison governors not being involved in the process. I just want to get your view on that, and ask whether you feel the recruitment process is fit for purpose for bands 3 to 5.

Then, Natasha, we will go on to speak about the Unlocked Graduates programme. If you could both speak about those elements first, that would be great.



**Peter Dawson:** On recruitment—this is the last time you will have to listen to this—I did govern a prison for a bit, and it was unbelievably frustrating not to be able to pick the people who worked in your prison. I cannot really imagine any business where the person in charge would not expect to have an influence over that decision. There is nothing more important.

I understand why people became suspicious of interviews, but I think we are ready, now, to go back to recruitment processes that do include interviews, and those interviews should be with the governor. The governor should have a say.

One of the gifts of a prison is that it is such an obvious focus for loyalty. I listened to the permanent secretary giving evidence to you a couple of weeks ago and saying that of course the staff survey results will be poor, for the Ministry, because it includes a big operational service. I was shouting at the television because prisons should be the place where Ministry of Justice civil servants are most motivated, and most obviously loyal to the institution; so, yes, the governor should have an influence not just in picking but in doing all the things that you would want to do locally to attract people to that particular prison. I do not think that they are invited to do that at the moment. They are certainly not invited to pick their own staff.

On retention, again, the Ministry's written evidence is interesting. They have a long list of things that they think go to retention. Hidden within that is a line about the environment. There is a really uncomfortable thing to say about the prison environment, when it comes to retaining staff, which is that sometimes the reason staff do not stick is their colleagues. It is not prisoners, the stress of the job or the pay; it is that the culture that they go into isolates them if they try to do the job in a positive way.

I am not talking about corruption or bullying. The recent inspectorate report on race showed that that still exists, which is terrible; but, again, it is this low-level thing that, if you put yourself out to do more than the basics, people may look at you strangely for doing that. That is a terrible cultural indicator. I am not saying it is everywhere, but, interestingly, it is what we hear from prisoners. It is what the prisoners tell us when staff are leaving.

Q114 **Janet Daby:** Peter, you are saying that the prison officer culture is such that it puts other prison officers off from wanting to work with those who may be trying to do something a bit more positive, and that makes life quite difficult.

**Peter Dawson:** That is exactly right. I am not saying it is a universal thing. There will be prisons where that certainly would not be true, but it is the most uncomfortable thing for an organisation to confront, particularly after a period of prolonged crisis where, for a very good



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reason, it has been saying to all its staff, "You are fantastic. You have done a brilliant job."

Q115 **Janet Daby:** Can that evidence be found anywhere?

**Peter Dawson:** You can only find it by going and listening. You need to listen to the people who have left. I do think listening to prisoners is interesting, because of that very strong—"team spirit" is not the right word, really; but you do not grass up your colleagues. You probably do not grass up your colleagues when you are leaving, but I have heard from prisoners that that is what staff who are leaving say to them. I would say that the whole business of exit interviews needs to be done in a way that gives people a very safe space to say those uncomfortable things.

Q116 **Janet Daby:** I can see you nodding, Nina. Please do come in.

**Nina Champion:** I would like to pick up on that and take the angle, or lens, of race. The Criminal Justice Alliance published a report in the last year on the women's estate, in partnership with the independent monitoring boards, which go into prisons. HM inspectorate of prisons published a report earlier this year, which Peter mentioned, about black prison officers, and black men in prison.

Those reports, taken with the report that we are due to publish in the next couple of weeks on the whole criminal justice workforce and racial diversity, show that we have a real problem in many prisons with racism and with prisons not being a safe space for staff, or for people living or working in prison, if they are from a black or minority ethnic background.

Recruitment and attitudes to race are part of that. There are lots of examples in the reports of officers being locked out of staff rooms, called names, or bullied, and not feeling that they have the camaraderie of their colleagues; and of low-level banter going on, which they feel they cannot call out. On a wing, your safety is reliant on your other team members. If something happens to you, you need to be able to rely on the other officers on the wing. That makes it really hard to put your head above the parapet, call these things out, and make complaints, so we see a vicious cycle. It is critical that, as is happening in the police and with other parts of the criminal justice system workforce, that is part of the recruitment process.

Q117 **Janet Daby:** You are saying that the staff-to-staff racial discrimination is having a negative effect and causing black staff to leave.

**Nina Champion:** Yes.

Q118 **Janet Daby:** How, in your view, might those prison officers who are racially abusive to staff treat the prisoners themselves; or how could it affect those prisoners?

**Nina Champion:** We are seeing lots of evidence of prisoners themselves being subjected to direct racism and name-calling, and similar things; but



there is also indirect discrimination and racism. Something that came out in our report and the HM inspectorate of prisons report is a sort of politics on the wing, where a black prison officer, say, does not want to speak to a black prisoner, because of the additional scrutiny that they are under—the idea that they might be colluding, or there might be favouritism. The prisoners absolutely know this is going on, so you end up with toxic dynamics on the wing to do with that. It needs to be addressed.

**Q119 Janet Daby:** Natasha, you were saying that prisoners can tell from the steps of prison officers whether it will be a bad day or a worse day; but you did not say “a good day”.

**Natasha Porter:** No, the prisoner I spoke to was absolutely keen to make it clear that you do not have a good day in prison. That was also during the covid regime, so there would have been an hour a day out of the cell. He was adamant that there are no good days in prison. Nelson Mandela wrote of his time in prison, in “Long Walk to Freedom”, that whether you have an extra blanket depends on the prison officer on your landing. A modern day version of that is whether, when you ask for something or need something for your cell, the person you ask will go above and beyond. It is really key.

**Q120 Janet Daby:** Can you tell us a bit more about the recruitment process for the Unlocked Graduates programme? How many band 3 officers are currently employed under the scheme? What skills do your cohort bring to the Prison Service?

**Natasha Porter:** We recruit 130 a year and try to place them in cohorts of six in a prison. We find that that gives them a really good support network. It also gives them a group they can train with, which means that when they are on the landing they have people they can talk to about what they are going through, and it gives them a very good network, which we find useful.

While I am here, I want to bring up what I think is a problem between the public sector’s traditional offer and the people we are trying to recruit today. Traditionally, the public sector has offered a very attractive job for life, with a pension pot at the end. You could go home and say, “Mum, Dad, I’ve got a job for life and I am going to do it for 50 years and have a pension.” Everyone is very proud and pleased for you, and, there you go, you have sorted out a job and can do everything else.

Even at my age, which is not straight out of university, that is not attractive. The people we are recruiting do not want a job for life. At the moment they want a job for, on average, just over two years, and they want to explore different things. It is something about shifting to more acceptance that people can move in and out of the workforce and get different skills from other sectors, and bring them back. So we offer an initial two years as a prison officer. Actually, many stay beyond those two years, because they get hooked on a problem, but signing up for a lifetime job versus two years is quite different. We found that most



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graduate schemes, now, are two years, because that has been recognised, I think.

It is a two-year programme that they sign up for initially and we have a series of ways of attracting them to the job. We try to focus on the things about it that they will find really attractive, which are that they have real responsibility early on, and a challenge. In the selection process, we do a roleplay, which I think is very useful. We have an actor playing the part of a prisoner. Normally, the prisoner is acting out; but what is going on is not what they are telling you, so you have to try to work out the real reason they are acting out. We pause that and get them to reflect on how they have done. We give them a bit of feedback and get them to repeat the activity. That quickly shows us whether they can take on board feedback and reflect, and, therefore, whether we can train them quickly and effectively.

We also include ex-prisoners—not that being an ex-prisoner is the skill we are looking for; we employ them as recruiters and train them as recruiters. We can see how people will respond to prisoners as a concept—to ex-prisoners; but we also think that it is really important that, through recruitment and training, participants meet a number of ex-prisoners who have stopped offending, got jobs and turned their lives around. In prison, when you see people come back through the door again and again, there can be dark days on the landing when you stop believing that change is possible, and perhaps even dehumanise the people you are working with, if things are particularly tricky, but if people have, in the initial process, met people who have changed, they do not do that, because they remember that prisoners are human beings. We have spoken a lot about the procedural versus the relational, and we try really to focus on the relational.

Similarly to other graduate schemes, we have an assessment centre, situational judgment tests and a video interview, but we also treat our initial training as part of our selection process. People can perform for one day, and in interviews particularly. We know that a lot of biases come out. Over a six-week period we have a training programme with regular assessments, and we really use that as part of our assessment process. That is where you see whether someone can do the job. We have seen, pretty successfully, I think, people ending up joining the Prison Service even if they failed our initial training, and it had not gone well.

The only other thing that we add in, which we picked up from our tour of Scandinavian prison services, is to do with some people wanting to join, particularly for work with children in prison, because of their own unprocessed trauma or difficulties from childhood, which they want to live out with groups who are particularly vulnerable. We now try to find out their real motivations for joining, and we sometimes find people who just would not be ready for a role that requires this level of emotional resilience. We try to make sure that we work that out through the assessment and say, “Hey, this is what the job looks like. Maybe it is not



for you." Obviously, we would not off-board them, but people then say, "Oh, I didn't realise. It is probably not for me." We try to make sure that the people who start on day one will stick with it, because the last thing that we want is for prisoners to have another broken attachment—another person they thought would be there and that they could rely on, who leaves them and walks away.

**Q121 Janet Daby:** Do you find many people from your scheme leaving halfway through, before the two years?

**Natasha Porter:** Across the last six cohorts we have had 75% complete everything with us—the full programme plus the master's. Those who have not completed that have still completed the scheme, and we have had people who have stayed on at prison but have left our programme. We have a 13% better retention rate than through the standard route.

**Chair:** I will have to speed up both the questions and the answers, I am afraid, because we are quite pressed for time and we have another panel.

**Q122 Janet Daby:** One last question: obviously there is a challenge within the Prison Service to retain staff. If you are looking at people coming through your scheme being there for two years, that does not really help the long-term challenges that the prison is experiencing, and obviously we need the expertise in the prison.

**Natasha Porter:** Most do stay beyond two years and I guess those who leave sometimes get in touch and say, "Hey, I'd love to go back." We think it needs to be much easier to get back if you have left; but most do stay after the two years.

**Q123 Janet Daby:** My very last question: what needs to be done to retain new and existing staff? I will go back to Peter and Nina.

**Peter Dawson:** It is a whole series. The Ministry has a very good list, but the Ministry often has a good list of things to do. It needs to do them, and to listen to people.

**Nina Champion:** Just coming back on the point about staff of racial minority backgrounds, I think it is a feeling of support, adequate resourcing of staff associations and peer support networks, better complaints processes and ensuring that it is a safe place for them to work and bring their whole selves. Often, they are the ones who are expected to try to do that work as well—to educate their colleagues or do positive things about it. It cannot be their responsibility. It has to be the responsibility of the organisation. There are plenty of external organisations that could be brought in to support that.

**Q124 Edward Timpson:** Natasha, there are a couple more questions about the Unlocked Graduates scheme, which do not need to take too long, hopefully. You can always write to us afterwards.

What proportion of those who remain beyond the two-year programme remain as band 3 officers, and what is the average time that they then





continue in the service?

**Natasha Porter:** About half of all those who have stayed in the service since 2017 have been promoted.

Q125 **Edward Timpson:** That is helpful. Thank you. When we heard evidence from Mark Fairhurst, who was mentioned earlier—the national chair of the POA—he said, in relation to Unlocked Graduates, that he was in Wandsworth not long ago and staff with 25 or even 30 years' experience in the job were saying they had been overlooked for temporary promotion in favour of an Unlocked graduate. There was a sense that this was a bit unfair. Have you come across this in your experience? What would your response be?

**Natasha Porter:** We are explicitly not a fast-track scheme. If someone gets promoted out of uniform, they come off the programme, because we believe, as a leadership development programme, that that time spent on the frontline, really knowing your craft, is vital.

There is no preferential hiring. We do recruit from a lot of the most selective universities in the country, and these are people who want career progression and are going to go for that, and apply for things. We are really clear that if they are good enough they will get the job and they should not need any special treatment.

I know that quite a few have been promoted; they go for promotion and are, I think, very experienced at interviewing. They are people who have been very successful so far, and they are looking for promotion. They often find it in the Prison Service, when they go for it. From my sense, that is what I see.

Q126 **Edward Timpson:** Finally, now that your scheme has been in place for a number of years and you are starting to see people progress through the Prison Service—going back to the point that was made earlier by Nina and Peter about the culture in prisons and the prison officer service—are your graduates at a point where you are able to see them start to influence the culture and make positive changes? If so, how far has that got, and do you think you need a sort of critical mass within the overall Prison Service to be able to effect that more wholeheartedly across the whole service, and not just in pockets?

**Natasha Porter:** It is a great question and something I think about a lot. Often, they will arrive bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and enthusiastic, and their colleagues will think they are a bit weird at the beginning, but there is an infectiousness and they love them quite a lot by the end. There is that kind of journey.

My sense is that there are couple of things. We have spoken about the status of the prisoner officer job. There was a newspaper article last year about the president of the Oxford Union, who is doing Unlocked and is loving it. I think that tells other prison officers that this is an important job; but there is a real sense of being in a job that people do not



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recognise and take as valuable, and that is really hard. That is a big part of the culture issue that I see.

We do a lot of training about allyship and how to support your peers. We do a lot of training about how to deal with colleagues who are not going to like you very much, because you are on a graduate scheme and often people find that quite annoying. I think a lot of this can be solved through training and support.

What we see is that there can be a real infectiousness about positivity. Lots of prison officers joined because they did want to make a difference, and we have found that that can really be revitalised. We are much more positive about it, in that sense.

There has been an improvement in reporting systems, so there is a new way of reporting things in your prison that you are not happy with. We have seen that making quite a big difference.

Q127 **Janet Daby:** Nina, you mentioned the different experiences of black, Asian and minority ethnic prison officers compared with their white counterparts. The David Lammy review talks about black, Asian and minority ethnic members of the public being just as attracted to becoming prison officers as their white counterparts. When black and minority ethnic prison staff have a different type of working experience, what is being done to challenge this? How is that being managed, according to your knowledge?

**Nina Champion:** Once they are having that experience?

**Janet Daby:** Yes.

**Nina Champion:** What is clear from talking to officers is that they find it very difficult to make complaints, because they do not want to put their head above the parapet, or they are not taken seriously, so things do not go through those formal processes. That is why I think we need much better complaints processes. They will think that it will stop them getting promotion, and we know—the statistics tell us—that they are much less likely to get promotion, so that is borne out by the data.

As I said, there is a sense of wanting a safe environment and to be taken seriously. When you hear banter, or so-called banter, and see things on social media, or hear your colleagues say things, it is not an environment where you feel you can bring your whole self, or a safe place.

That has an impact on recruitment. Officers were saying to us, “Would I go back to my friends or family, or people in my community, and encourage them to join the service, based on my experience? Actually, no I couldn’t.” If we want a more diverse workforce, we want people in the job who feel they can go and promote it among friends and family and their networks. That is not what they feel at the moment.

Q128 **Janet Daby:** Thank you. That is nice and clear. Natasha, I saw you



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nodding. Could you respond to that question, but also tell us whether you are seeing people from diverse backgrounds in the cohort of young people coming in through your scheme? Are they having experiences to do with their ethnic backgrounds that impact negatively on them while they are in work?

**Natasha Porter:** On average, 20% of our participants come from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. That has always been a really important diversity that we have felt we need to focus on and recruit for.

There is a huge amount of intersectionality here. We have found that a black male prison officer will have a completely different experience from that of an Asian headscarfed prison officer; or a white female will have a different experience from a white male's. Gender plays into this heavily as well. To be a black male prison officer is a very different experience, we have found, from being a white female prison officer. It is also very different being a white male officer.

I think a lot of this comes back, again, to—I am chiming on the same old thing—training, development, support and line management. It is about training on how to respond if there is banter you are not comfortable with, and how to be an ally and say “Hey, that’s not okay.” To do that as a new member of staff in a new culture is very difficult—but not if you have been trained.

Q129 **Janet Daby:** How does your scheme support—

**Natasha Porter:** We explicitly train around some of the comments that we know have been made. It is very rarely overt, but there is a sense of how do you challenge if—I am making something up—a woman is always asked to make the tea, or something. We explicitly train people for that, because we know that there are challenges for different groups, going into this.

We also get panels of participants to come and say, “Hey, this is what it feels like.” One of the big things we do is the mentoring prison officer. That gives them someone they can just call, and 95% of our participants say they feel well supported on diversity and inclusion issues by their mentoring prison officer.

To go back to the question of feeling confident about raising issues, the mentoring prison officer is external to the prison but is an experienced prison officer. We never place them in a prison that they have worked in, which means it is someone who knows your job but is external enough for you to feel comfortable about picking up the phone and saying, “Hey, this happened. I wasn’t comfortable with it. What do you think?” I think it is difficult to do that with someone in your own prison if you feel the culture is not safe.

I guess the final thing on this—we did a huge amount of work on it—is that I still get participants saying to me, “I just wouldn’t take issues around racial discrimination to my colleagues. I wouldn’t take it to people



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at work. I speak to my mum, or my support network, about that." It is about how we create spaces that feel really safe. When people do not actually want to take it into work or feel comfortable doing that, I think a lot of that is about training and supporting other colleagues.

**Q130 Janet Daby:** Finally, you said that 75% of people go through the whole course and stay working as a prison officer. Of the remainder who leave, are you finding that many are from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds?

**Natasha Porter:** We aren't, because we actually have quite a small number, and when we break it down by black officers leaving, or Asian officers leaving, we see different trends in different years, but we have not seen it carried through from year to year. We have seen that people from different backgrounds have different experiences.

**Q131 Janet Daby:** Finally, in your written submission you recommended that there should be a diversity and inclusion strategy that is accountable and meaningful. What should that strategy look like?

**Natasha Porter:** I think for us, going back to Peter's point, which I think has been made before, there is something about speaking to and listening to frontline staff, seeing what is happening and responding to it.

I guess the other thing we found is the intersectionality. It is not as simple as saying, "Okay, all black, Asian and minority ethnic people all have the same experience; let's treat that with one brush." It needs to be much more nuanced and thoughtful.

**Janet Daby:** Thank you very much.

**Chair:** Mr Daly, it is good to see you.

**Q132 James Daly:** Can I apologise for being late? I expect the evidence has been brilliant, so I will just take that as read.

I want to talk about the retirement age for prison officers. This is a silly example: I obviously never go to pubs at all now, but I remember when I was young we used to go to nightclubs, where young men might cause trouble. It was generally felt that it was good to have people there, or staff on the door, who were not young and male. A different type of person might be responded to in a different way.

We can talk about the retirement age of 68, but it occurs to me that we should look to have more older people, if they were willing to go into that environment, because younger males in particular might listen to them a bit more and have a different attitude in interacting with older members of staff. I wondered what you think about that. I read that the Lord Chancellor said the Government do not intend to revisit the retirement age for prison officers, but what do you think about the wider question?

**Peter Dawson:** Natasha said earlier that some of the best people we have ever met are prison officers; and some of the best prison officers



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are in their 50s, and one or two are in their 60s—so everything you say is absolutely right.

Personally, I think it is pretty tough to say to someone at the age of 60 that they have to go on for another eight years in a job that is physically demanding. It is absolutely right that you should be able to do it if you want to and are good at it, and maybe the governor needs the flexibility to provide an incentive to you to carry on; but to require people to go on to 68 is—

**Q133 James Daly:** Can I ask a naive question? Forgive me; this is my naivety rather than anything else. If a prison officer has been part of the service for a long time, because they went in when they were 30, if they said, “No, I am going at 60 rather than 68,” what is the impact for them? There is an obvious financial impact. I am assuming that is the—

**Peter Dawson:** I am assuming that too—that you simply cannot claim your pension until you are 68, so you have eight years to find.

**James Daly:** Absolutely.

**Natasha Porter:** We do have some older career changers. The pension is very generous and no one seems to care very much. It is not an issue that is ever raised with us, even by our older career changers, but I do hear it a lot from Mark Fairhurst.

**Q134 James Daly:** Do prison staff have the equipment they need to keep themselves safe and carry out their roles effectively? In asking that question, I imagine that prison officers do not walk in with a baton or whatever. What we are talking about are the tools they need to be able to do their job properly. I suspect that in many sectors of the economy there is a certain amount of common sense, a certain ability to speak to people, a certain amount of human experience and a certain amount of understanding of people. Although training is very important, especially for people from different backgrounds, I wonder what you feel about natural work skills—I do not know what they are called—and how we ensure people have not only the equipment but the personal skills to be able to interact and do the job properly.

**Nina Champion:** I am glad you said that because we have seen an increase in the roll-out of PAVA sprays and the use of force. That is just a sticking plaster that makes the situation worse. What we need is what we have talked about throughout this evidence session: relational skills and the ability to have restorative conversations, to engage with people at a human level, de-escalate and get that kind of intelligence of what is going on on the wing through conversations and other things, and to have those conversations to know people.

That is really key. We know that some things like PAVA spray and the use of force are disproportionately used against black, Asian and minority ethnic prisoners. We need to be really careful.



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One thing I would add on the equipment side is technology. We have not talked yet about technology. One of the things that could be very usefully done is a much faster roll-out of technology that people in prison can use themselves rather than relying on written apps. That frees up the time for officers to have those conversations about education and family relationships rather than dealing with administrative things.

At the moment, there are only about 15 prisons with this technology. It enables the person in prison to take responsibility or autonomy over those sorts of things and it frees up prison offer time. I think technology would be one area of equipment I would want to see.

Q135 **James Daly:** If somebody is employed as a prison officer tomorrow, are they told what their mission is? They have a contract, which will set out a number of things—for example, you turn up and do this. Are prison officers made aware of the purpose of their job and the mission statement that goes along with it?

**Peter Dawson:** The Prison Service has had a corporate statement which it has fiddled about with over the decades. When you walk into a prison, very often you will see the governor's personal mission statement. Sometimes it is an acronym.

Q136 **James Daly:** Do you think the service has a purpose behind it in different prisons, or is it a reflection of the individual governor's viewpoint and how things should be done?

**Peter Dawson:** It is both. We are very rude about the Prison Service a lot of the time, but for the past four decades it has had a really good basic statement of purpose which encapsulates the fact that it is delivering punishment but is also seeking to deliver rehabilitation, so it is good.

You need the local statement to bring it to life, because on its own it is quite dry. I almost want to say that it is obvious when you do it. When you are a prison officer and you make a difference to someone's life in the course of the day, you have done the best job in the world. I think you feel it.

Q137 **Chair:** Peter, there is one other thing I might ask you about. There has been particular pressure in dealing with people on indeterminate sentences for public protection. There have also been policy changes in relation to the move to open conditions, in which I know you have taken an interest on behalf of the Prison Reform Trust. What is your assessment of the impact that is having on prisoners themselves and officers who have to work with them?

**Peter Dawson:** First, it is having a very dramatic impact on numbers. I heard the CEO of the Prison and Probation Service give evidence to you the other week and say it was almost inevitable that there would be 600 spaces in open prisons. I do not think that is right. I cannot imagine why the Prison Service would have 600 spaces in open prisons. One of the



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reasons for it is that effectively there is a ban on people serving indeterminate sentences, both IPP and lifers, going to open prisons. That has been operating since the spring of last year.

It is curious, because it is another one of the Prison Service's success stories that it does not want to acknowledge. There is a very low abscond rate and reoffending rate, and the Government do not know how many, if any, lifers have committed a serious offence while unlawfully at large from an open prison, so it feels curious that it is being done at all.

The impact on prisoners is a complete loss of hope. The process by which this is being done, which we discovered from a freedom of information request only last week, is that an unnamed official is effectively taking all the decisions about whether people can go to open conditions. The Justice Secretary said he wanted closer ministerial involvement. We know from another FOI that Ministers have not taken the decision in any individual case. The unnamed official must be operating to some kind of steer, but we do not know what that is except that the Justice Secretary wants a more precautionary approach. That is the only phrase we have found which informs the policy.

It is incredibly dispiriting for prisoners. Prisoners who have made the most effort—who have played the game and to the most co-operative extent—are the ones who are peculiarly disadvantaged by this. Staff have to deal with that. Somehow, staff have to explain to someone who has spent 20 years waiting for their move to open why the rules of that particular game have changed so dramatically overnight.

Q138 **Chair:** That is very helpful, and we will take it up with Ministers in due course. Thank you all very much for your evidence. In particular, may I thank Peter, because I know he is retiring?

**Peter Dawson:** I am indeed, but a new and better model is coming along in my place, so I am sure you will enjoy that.

**Chair:** Over the years you have been a regular witness before us. I want to thank you very much for the evidence you have given us over the years. I want to thank you enormously for the work you have done at the Prison Reform Trust. It is a great organisation and you have done a fantastic job for it. Thank you very much from all of us for your time and evidence today.