HOUSE OF COMMONS

Justice Committee

Oral evidence: The Prison Operational Workforce, HC 917

Tuesday 21 March 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 March 2023.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Sir Robert Neill (Chair); James Daly; Edward Timpson.

Questions 139 - 208

Witnesses

I: Dame Anne Owers, National Chair, Independent Monitoring Boards; and Charlie Taylor, HM Chief Inspector, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– Independent Monitoring Boards

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dame Anne Owers and Charlie Taylor.

Chair: Welcome to this session of the Justice Committee and our inquiry into the prison operational workforce. I welcome our witnesses. We will come to you shortly, but first we must make our declarations of interest. I am a non-practising barrister.

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.

James Daly: I am a practising solicitor and partner in a law firm.

Q139 **Chair:** I ask Mr Taylor and Dame Anne to introduce themselves for the record, even though they are well known to all of us.

Charlie Taylor: I am chief inspector of prisons.

Dame Anne Owers: I am national chair, Independent Monitoring Boards.

Q140 **Chair:** Thank you for coming to see us again, and welcome back.

What is your assessment, Mr Taylor, as chief inspector, of the key challenges facing the prison operational workforce. You refer to them in a number of your reports, but we would like your take and any update on those reports.

Charlie Taylor: We are extremely concerned about the current state of play with the operational workforce and with the non-operational workforce—staff who are not directly operational but who nevertheless work in education, workshops, training and those sorts of things.

The lower numbers of prison officers in many of the jails that we inspect are having a knock-on effect on all sorts of other things. In particular, we are seeing very much reduced regimes, with prisoners spending longer than ever locked in their cells or locked on the wings without being able to get to productive activities, and increased prisoner frustration about the ongoing cancellation of regimes—the unpredictability of what will happen day by day.

That is certainly increasing prisoner frustration. Gym sessions or chances to go to the library are being cancelled.

We see that that is worse in some bits of the country than in others, but we also see that some governors seem to be dealing with it better than others. Perhaps we can talk in more detail about this later, but some prisons with relatively poor staffing numbers appear to be doing a better job of getting prisoners out of their cells, whereas jails with slightly better staffing profiles seem to be fairly stuck in what feels a bit like a covid regime.

Q141 **Chair:** We will come on to that. Are there any geographical differences?

Charlie Taylor: Certainly. There are two factors. It is either geographical in remoteness—jails on the Isle of Sheppey or Weyland in Norfolk, but places where the economy is fairly vibrant and the cost of living is high, so anywhere in the south of England, up the M1 corridor and west of London and in London itself.

Q142 **Chair:** You mention not only the operational grades—the 3s to 5s—but specialists, educators and non-operational staff.

Charlie Taylor: Absolutely, and operational support grades that would normally do things like operate the gate. If they are not able to do some of those critical functions, officers get pulled away from their other duties to do some functional, low-grade work that simply has to be done to keep the prison running.

Q143 **Chair:** Is it just a question of numbers, or is it the mix in the workforce?

Charlie Taylor: In many of the prisons that we went to—I think of Woodhill just outside Milton Keynes—we found that some very junior officers were being supervised by some fairly junior staff members. There was not a level of experience among people on the wing to be able to share knowledge and lead in those environments.

The danger is that if newly arrived prison officers are not being well looked after they may decide they want to leave if there aren't good role models among the staff. In some places it isn't just at band 3 level but particularly at band 5, where there are some very newly promoted or temporarily promoted staff who have far less experience than you would have found, say, five or 10 years ago.

Q144 **Chair:** When you have done reports raising concerns, what is the level of response from the Ministry?

Charlie Taylor: A lot of time and effort is obviously being put into recruitment. We are often assured that by March, or by whenever, the prison will have a full complement of staff.

Simply filling the bucket is not enough: you have to fill the bucket with the right people and ensure it doesn't have a leak.

Although we get assurances and, I think, understanding in prisons more generally of the strain that staffing levels are putting prisons under, nevertheless some are struggling to maintain a reasonable contingent of staff.

Q145 **Chair:** You, Dame Anne, kindly provided some written evidence, in which you point out that the independent monitoring boards have raised concerns about the impact of staff shortages for several years.

Dame Anne Owers: This is true; it does feel like the same tune on a different string.

My first national annual report started: "Staffing issues dominated annual reports in this period. They affected every kind of prison and every aspect of prison life." That was 2017-18. We repeated the message in 2019-20 and 2020-21. My most recent annual report began: "Staffing problems, rather than Covid, are now the principal brake on safe, humane and rehabilitative regimes," and mentioned restricted regimes, the risk to stability and, as Charlie Taylor said, not just uniformed staff but vocational skills instructors, healthcare staff and educators. We have constantly referred to the theme.

Q146 **Chair:** What response have you had from the Ministry, the Justice Secretary or officials?

Dame Anne Owers: The same as the chief inspector—it is recognised that it is an issue; things are being done; hopefully it will be better next year, or whatever.

Part of the problem is that when you get to a level of staffing crisis that we have seen in many prisons it becomes, as Charlie Taylor said, a vicious circle: you bring in staff, there are not sufficient experienced staff to mentor them, they feel scared, unsupported and not sure what they are doing and so a lot of new staff leave. According to the latest statistics that I saw, a quarter leave within a year.

You also get far too swift pull-through to the more senior ranks. You don't get sufficient experience at every level, so it is a real problem.

Q147 **Chair:** The Committee surveyed just under 7,000 prison officers as part of our inquiry. When asked whether morale in their prison was good, over 75% did not agree and said that morale was not good. Does that surprise you?

Dame Anne Owers: Not really.

Charlie Taylor: No.

Dame Anne Owers: Not given what we have just said.

Q148 **Chair:** That would seem to be in line with your experience.

Charlie Taylor: Yes. We now survey prison officers as part of our pre-inspection work. Low morale certainly comes up frequently as an issue of concern.

Dame Anne Owers: That is reflected in the levels of ineffective staffing in prisons that are allegedly almost fully staffed. I was in Wandsworth a couple of weeks ago. Up until fairly recently, it had 50% ineffectiveness among staff. It is a sign of a lot of things, but it certainly includes pressure and low morale.

Q149 **Chair:** It manifests itself in high levels of sickness, for example.

Dame Anne Owers: Exactly.

There is the issue of leadership that Charlie Taylor has already referred to: how leaders motivate staff.

Q150 **Chair:** I won't forget to come back to that, Mr Taylor.

One of the other things we picked up on was your inspection, Mr Taylor, of HMP and YOI Eastwood Park, where you refer to staff shortages, high levels of mental health problems and appalling conditions.

It sounds as though you were quite close to issuing an urgent notification notice.

Charlie Taylor: It was certainly something that we considered at that prison. We use urgent notification very sparingly. In that case, as well as some extremely concerning things going on, there were some examples of really good practice, too, so we felt it would have been unfair to have done that, but certainly we were close to it.

At that prison, 83% of women said they were suffering from mental health problems. The levels of self-harm had more than doubled since we had inspected before. Women who required expert staff to look after them—to give them the attention they needed and to prevent the growth in self-harm—simply were not able to get that support because staffing levels were very poor.

That meant there was a real fragility about that prison that we will certainly return to within the next year, and we will want to see some progress made there.

Dame Anne Owers: One of the disappointing things was that our board, the independent monitoring board at Eastwood Park, wrote to the Minister after the MOJ response to the chief inspector's report, stating that, far from things being better, the situation had, in their opinion, deteriorated since the inspections. Their last sentence was: "Staff are burnt out and morale is the lowest that we have ever known."

There was a degree of misplaced confidence that things were getting better that our board was not able to substantiate.

Q151 **Chair:** More generally, a serving prison governor in the female estate gave evidence to one of our previous sessions in this inquiry, stating that poor mental health among female prisoners was a driver of staff attrition. It was not only bad for prisoners, but dealing with it was causing some people to leave the service.

Charlie Taylor: I was particularly concerned by some very young, inexperienced staff at one unit in Eastwood Park who were looking after some women who were self-harming at the most extreme end. They were dealing with women in enormous distress who should have been in hospital—they should have been in prison before.

I was very worried about the mental health of the staff and the effect of having to deal with those women without the training or support that you

would expect for hospital or mental health staff, for example, with the real danger that they were going to lose good people as a result.

Q152 **Chair:** The Government's plans anticipate perhaps an extra 20,000 coming into the prisons, with their anticipated increase to 100,000. Given the current situation, what impact is that likely to have?

Charlie Taylor: It has to be a cause of great concern, particularly as many prisons are opening in parts of the country where there are already challenges. The M1 corridor, which is where Five Wells is, is a part of the country that is struggling; the economy is fairly vibrant there. Lots of equivalent jobs that prison officers could get often pay slightly more. We are concerned about that.

There are prisons like Fosse Way, just a little further north, that it will be difficult to staff. Some jails in south England are having to close wings simply because they do not have enough staff to run them safely.

Unless there is some fairly substantial change, with the growing prison population and new prisons opening, it feels a little bleak in being able fully to staff those places.

Dame Anne Owers: I agree. With Operation Safeguard, people are coming from police cells first thing in the morning, at the same time as prisons are getting people to court. Charlie referred to the shortage of OSGs, so that becomes a problem.

You have additional crowding in some prisons. Dartmoor—the first prison I inspected when I was in Charlie's shoes; I described it as the prison time forgot—has improved but has rightly been scheduled for closure for a long time because it is in the wrong place and does not have the right facilities. It is now being told it must take 8% more prisoners, without the infrastructure to do it.

You have rapid deployment units coming up in many prisons, which will exacerbate staffing issues because they have to be staffed. As Charlie said, there are already wing closures in some hard-pressed prisons like Swaleside, Woodhill and so on. It is inevitably going to add to the difficulties.

Q153 **Edward Timpson:** May I take us back to prison regimes? During covid and lockdowns they came to a grinding halt, but the expectation was that when we came out the other end in May 2023 we would move back to the normal regime.

We asked other witnesses about the definition of a full regime and what it would look like from your perspective as an inspector or someone monitoring prisons on visits. What are you looking for as a full regime?

Dame Anne Owers: To some extent, that depends on the prison you are running. If you are running a training prison, there is no excuse for

prisoners not being able to spend the core day in education or training. That doesn't happen.

It is more difficult, particularly now, in reception prisons, which receive prisoners directly from court. The throughput is so quick.

The aim used to be at least six hours out of cell a day. Even for those kinds of prisons, that is a long way away. A recent report from our Pentonville board stated that 50% of prisoners are not in work and are locked up 22 hours a day.

It is difficult to say what is the ideal regime for all prisons, but it is certainly about a lot more than people are getting. There is no way prisons have gone back to pre-covid regimes.

Charlie Taylor: You would have routinely seen evening association in prisons. We recently conducted a thematic report on prisons at weekends, which we haven't yet published. If things are bad in a prison during the week, you can be sure they are much worse at weekends. Prisoners describe being locked up for very long periods.

We would expect to see people in training prisons out of their cell for 10 hours a day, and longer if possible, involved in purposeful activity that will get them into decent working habits when they come out. Nobody goes to work for two hours in the morning, spends two hours having lunch and then maybe does an hour and a half of work in the afternoon. That isn't what the world of work is like, but for many prisoners it is the best they get. In preparing them for release, it doesn't get them close to what they would need to do to be properly prepared.

Q154 **Edward Timpson:** We received written evidence from a prisoner about their experience of what they called "spontaneous lockdowns" three years post covid, and spending 45 minutes a day out of their cell. Is that consistent with what you found on recent inspections and visits?

Charlie Taylor: It has been a huge frustration for us. In some prisons that we visit you would think that the pandemic was in full swing. For whatever reason—there are a number of reasons why it might be the case—things just have not got close to being back to normal.

Sometimes we are told it is because of staffing numbers; sometimes it is because of the inexperience of staff; sometimes it is because of the relationship with trade unions. It often comes down to the governor's level of ambition to get things up and running.

What is interesting is the correlation between the extent to which a prison regime is open and the levels of staffing don't necessarily read across.

Q155 **Edward Timpson:** Are there prisons where you have seen that the governor has got a grip on the post-covid need to return to a full regime and they have had results by which you have been impressed?

Charlie Taylor: We have not yet published, but we recently inspected Stocken in Rutland. Staffing is poor, but the governor is very ambitious about getting prisoners out of their cells and into activity. There were 50 prisoners on the move at the same time. The prison remained one of the category C prisons. It was being driven by a governor who wanted to get back to evening association as well.

Thirty miles north is Ranby, another category C prison, that has much better staffing, yet we found prisoners locked up for far longer periods. First-class workshops were being left empty, sadly.

Those are two prisons with different staffing profiles; one is doing a better job in opening up than the other.

Q156 **Edward Timpson:** Is there a sense that in some prisons there was a hangover of covid culture that has not seeped away and been replaced by the type of regime that we would want to see?

Dame Anne Owers: I very much agree with that. Given the staff turnover we have been talking about, a number of staff haven't experienced anything other than the covid regime. If there isn't management and if there isn't mentoring, and so on, that becomes a default setting—a comfort setting—and it takes quite a bit to get out of it.

Following on from what Charlie Taylor was just saying, we found regimes being poor across all kinds of establishments, including young adult establishments—for example, Deerbolt, where the board reported that young prisoners were in their cells for 22 hours a day. This can't be good.

On women's prisons and training prisons, the board at Wayland reported that they were essentially warehousing prisoners. That isn't good for anybody. It isn't good for what happens afterwards. It's not good for what happens in prisons, because when people are let out of their cells after being locked up for so long they are sometimes very lively.

There are safety issues on both sides: self-harm because of the length of time of lock-up, and not being able to manage violent behaviour when people are eventually let out of their cells, frustrations having built up.

It has implications for all kinds of things that should not be happening in prisons and things that should be happening in prisons.

Charlie Taylor: Prisons have a duty to protect the public. That duty extends to what happens to prisoners when they come out. If prisoners are simply locked away—warehoused, as Dame Anne said—without any chance to get involved in rehabilitative work or purposeful activity, the risk to the public when they come out has to continue.

Q157 **Edward Timpson:** Have you had a chance to share with the Ministry of Justice, and particularly with the prisons Minister, your experience of prison regimes? How does it square with a ministerial statement that he made last November in which he told the House that "the majority of

prisons are delivering a full or near full regime"? Is it time that you went to see him again?

Charlie Taylor: I wrote to the Secretary of State, particularly after we had inspected a number of prisons that were in parts of the country that didn't have particularly poor staffing levels—Stoke Heath, Lancaster Farms and Ranby. We compared them with prisons that have fairly tricky staffing levels but are managing to get things up and running—Channings Wood in the south-west and Stocken.

I flagged up our concern about the post-covid torpor when it comes to opening up regimes and the way in which it doesn't appear to be explicable why some prisons are able to get things going but others aren't. It isn't just about staffing; it is also about leadership ambition.

Dame Anne Owers: It also goes to your first question: what is a full regime? The ambition has been lowered, it seems. As we have already mentioned, evening association used to be normal. It depends what your ambition is for a full regime.

Q158 **Edward Timpson:** What assessment have you made of the impact of staff shortages on the ability to provide key work for prisoners?

Dame Anne Owers: It is struggling. It was struggling before covid. It started with a lot of optimism, but even in our pre-covid reports we reported that it was falling off. In Pentonville, for example, the last report I had was that it is non-existent. In other prisons, you are talking about a quarter of targeted appointments.

It is partly, at least, the result of pressures on staff, but it is certainly not working as it should in most prisons that we monitor.

Charlie Taylor: I can think only of two prisons in the past couple of years—New Hall and Wakefield—where we have commented positively on the key work. Everywhere else, we see it as often being fairly piecemeal and not able to give the level of support for which it was designed.

We put out a report with our colleagues at the inspectorate of probation, in which we looked at the entire OMiC—offender management in custody—model, of which key work was a critical part. It simply isn't happening in the way it was supposed to, so prisoners are not getting the support they need.

Q159 **Chair:** Apart from the leadership ambition that you identified, were there common themes in prisons where, despite staffing problems, they were getting back to a better regime?

Charlie Taylor: Yes: recruitment and the quality of supporting services, particularly the quality of the education provider and whether they have enough staff as well as workshop staff. Sometimes, prisons want to be able to take things further and move more quickly but they do not have

enough staff to accommodate the prisoners they would want to move around.

Q160 **James Daly:** Dame Anne, Mr Taylor, indulge me for 10 seconds. I shall tell you an anecdote that is very boring. I have been a school governor for many years. One of the schools was failing. We could not get to the heart of it, but the head teacher was replaced and a new head teacher came in. With exactly the same pupils, exactly the same staff and exactly the same budget, it turned around and became outstanding.

There are a number of other things that I shall ask you about, but the nature of leadership in these organisations is fundamental. If you have poor or sub-standard leadership, the organisation or prison is bound to fail. Would I be right in that?

Charlie Taylor: I think that leadership is of absolutely critical importance. It is one of the reasons I have introduced a leadership section into our inspection reports. We consistently see that where there is good leadership progress is able to be made.

The isn't to say that there aren't some prisons where the headwinds are so strong that even with good leadership it is hard to keep the show on the road—Pentonville is an absolute case in point. Nevertheless, we see that retention improves, morale improves, the regime improves and the prison is able to operate in a more functional way.

Q161 **James Daly:** May I develop that point further? Are you the sole body that holds the governor accountable, or is another mechanism with the Department and the civil service meant to do that?

Charlie Taylor: There is us, but there are others. Dame Anne and her boards apply that public scrutiny. The Prison Service has its own internal mechanisms and Ministers have set some key performance indicators by which they are able to measure the progress of different prisons.

Sometimes, it feels as though there are a lot of assurance systems, and I feel that at times governors would be better off spending less time doing assurance and more time being able to get on with the job.

Q162 **James Daly:** Absolutely.

We have made some comments about staff shortages, which are clearly a problem. You conduct your assessments and use the term "staff shortages". Forgive me for saying this: it is an easy thing to say. Somebody from my background would be looking at how you quantify that. Where are the staff shortages? Where do they need to be? How do you know? When you inspect a prison, do you know whether it needs 20 more people or 30 more people, with three people doing this and four people doing that? How do you assess that?

Charlie Taylor: The scale of the prison and the nature of the prisoners it holds has, in effect, a setting for how many staff it ought to have. We tend to see that governors will focus on keeping the regime going as

much as they possibly can. We therefore see the other services that the prison should provide fall by the wayside.

Q163 **James Daly:** Can you give me a practical example of prisons you have assessed where you view there to be staff shortages? Do you have an idea of the number?

Charlie Taylor: I will give you a good example—Winchester, a wealthy part of the country where prison officer pay does not necessarily go very far. People are often travelling from places like Southampton and Portsmouth to get there for work; they cannot afford to live locally.

You see that in a prison like Winchester prisoners cannot, for example, get their hands on their property. Property arrives with the prisoner and needs to be checked. It needs a sniffer dog to go over it and to search it before it is given to the prisoner. That property sometimes sits for weeks on end because prison officers whose job it is to oversee the searching of property are tied up on the wings.

In a small way—or in a large way, actually—that adds to prisoners' frustrations. They cannot get their hands on their stuff.

It is a classic way in which there is a knock-on effect from simply trying to focus as much resource as possible on just keeping prisoners fed, giving them fresh air and unlocking them for things like showers.

Q164 **James Daly:** Dame Anne, what skillsets should we be looking for in new prison officers? What should we be doing in nurturing the skills and opportunities for people and in encouraging people to apply to the sector?

Dame Anne Owers: There is a need for more training—more professional development. I have always said—I said the same when I was inspecting prisons—that we are not good enough. The initial training is relatively short when you consider the challenging and vulnerable nature of the population being looked after—mental health issues, neurodiversity issues and all kinds of things they need to do.

We don't train the middle managers, who are the culture carriers. It isn't a vaccination.

Q165 **James Daly:** I understand the term—people who are already in the service.

We have a problem with recruitment. When the Prison Service advertises for people, is there a mandatory requirement for certain skills? Do they have to have a degree? Do they have to have a certain background in the sector? Or, putting it bluntly, no matter your background you can apply to be a prison officer: there is no bar to you doing that.

Dame Anne Owers: No, there is no bar. There is no specific educational qualification, although the Prison Service has been targeting graduates through the Unlocked Graduates scheme.

Q166 **James Daly:** Do you agree with that approach?

Dame Anne Owers: I think it is more about the interpersonal skills that people need. That is crucial—and being able to stick with it. As Charlie Taylor said, prisons are a bucket with a hole in it: they are losing people before they can get the experience that means they can mentor other people.

You mentioned leadership. Two characteristics of effective leadership are not always in prisons, one of which is staying around long enough for your own mistakes to haunt you—but for continuation, so that people aren't digging things up to see whether they are growing all the time.

The second is that good prison governors, in my experience, do not spend all their time in their office; they spend time walking the wings. I have been in a number of prisons where they say, "We never see them."

I have said in this role that you have to be careful of what I call the charcoal filter: the messages that get passed up the line get purer and purer, so what ends up in the governor's office is the prison that ought to be running rather than the prison that is.

Q167 **James Daly:** I am sure there are similar staff shortages in the youth custody estate; I will take that as read, bearing in mind what we have just been saying. With our younger people in particular, what impact do you think this is having on the safety and rehabilitation of young offenders?

Charlie Taylor: The youth estate has an advantage at the moment: the numbers of children locked up are at historically low levels. Around 400 children are currently in custody. That has provided a little breathing space within the youth estate.

However, we are seeing continued staff pressures on almost every youth prison—apart, perhaps, from Parc in south Wales—where they are struggling to hang on to enough staff to run a meaningful regime.

Feltham is doing reasonably well in staffing and in running a decent regime, but in prisons such as Cookham Wood in Kent and Werrington in Staffordshire there are real challenges.

Q168 **James Daly:** Is one of the problems that the youth custody estate is becoming more violent?

Charlie Taylor: We have been raising concerns since before even Dame Anne's day about levels of violence in the youth estate. Children who end up in custody are often much more volatile and need a particularly skilled cadre of officers to give them the support they need.

The Youth Custody Service has made some good moves in professionalising the workforce, but if there aren't enough staff, no matter how good they are, they will struggle.

Q169 **James Daly:** You talk about interpersonal skills, Dame Anne. As you probably know, I have a background in this. When you are dealing with human beings you need human beings not with a degree but with a degree in life to understand and to cope. I completely understand the difficulties with retention and with getting people in in the first place, making sure that we do not have a campaign but something that encourages, with us all playing a part in saying what a great career this can be.

What impact has the loss of experienced staff had on the operation of the Prison Service? You have touched on this already. I should like a few more details on how it is hindering the service.

Dame Anne Owers: As we have said, the loss of experienced staff is part of what creates this vicious circle. New staff do not have the experienced staff to mentor them and give them confidence in dealing with what can at times be a very challenging situation. You are then drawing people through very quickly into senior roles.

That lack of experience, which began in the teens, has been an important factor in staff instability and therefore in prisons.

Q170 **James Daly:** To what extent does the band 4 supervising office role provide valuable leadership to lower grades?

Charlie Taylor: Dame Anne raised my big concern about the level of training and support for people in those critical grades. As Dame Anne said, they are often the culture carriers. We see some really impressive people in those roles but also some who are not having the impact they could have and are potentially having a detrimental impact on the prison.

People with more experience of prisons than I have will say that those officers aren't given enough responsibility and that too much accountability is pushed up to custody managers, who manage a large number of prison officers and therefore spend their time sitting at a computer doing HR issues when they should be doing what they are good at: walking the wings to make sure that things are running smoothly and mentoring young officers so that they gain experience and feel confident.

It is critical because we have a different group of people now coming in as prison officers. In the past, you had to be 21 to be a prison officer; now you only have to be 18. In the past, the Prison Service relied a lot on ex-services people. If you have been a corporal in the Marines, you have a bit more about you than someone who left school six weeks ago.

Q171 **James Daly:** They are perhaps more robust in terms of the things they have seen in life.

We keep repeating my final point, but it is important in looking at different avenues. High staff turnover and staff shortages can mean that people miss important signs of deterioration in prisoners' mental health and in self-harming. With the best will in the world and being able to

have the most brilliant 18-year-old come into the service, who is fabulous at the job and tries extremely hard, some of their insights into people may be a struggle. What do we do about mental health provision and self-harm?

Charlie Taylor: To some extent, we have a 1950s recruitment model in which we expect people to give us 30 years of service as prison officers. There is generally a change in the workforce whereby young people do not tend to stick around in jobs so long.

We are seeing a much bigger proportion of staff who are female. There is a challenge for the Prison Service in thinking about how to run a service that does not rely on former service people but will rely on a different group of people coming through.

Some prisons—HMP Onley, Portland and Featherstone—have been thinking quite hard about what new recruits need. Rather than give them what they have already had, they are thinking about how to support them, look after them and give them more bespoke training. As Dame Anne said, training is not just a vaccine shot; it is about learning on the job over long periods.

Lots of governors recognise that, but the difficulty sometimes is just having enough resources to do it. We often find that prisons shut on a Friday afternoon so that they can catch up with the mandatory training that they have not been able to do because of covid.

Dame Anne Owers: The scale and complexity of mental health needs in prisons are extraordinarily difficult to deal with, even if you had what is needed—better training. In every prison that they monitor, our prison boards report people who should not be in prison at all but should be in a mental health environment.

Q172 **James Daly:** Learning difficulties, special educational needs.

Dame Anne Owers: Exactly. You can see the trajectory from early years through to prisons.

Q173 **James Daly:** What about addiction services linked to mental health issues in prisons? Where are we with them?

Charlie Taylor: It is probably fair to say that healthcare services generally in prison are better than they were in the past. If you go back 10 or 12 years, it was probably the biggest concern being consistently raised by the inspectorates.

With the aim to provide a similar service to what is provided in the community, the levels of healthcare in prisons have improved over recent years. However, we are seeing pressures on staffing in a number of prisons where we are beginning to see things slip back a bit.

I think it is a better picture than it was in the past, but the level of need has gone up as well. An awful lot of prisoners are caught in the cycle of

homelessness, mental health difficulties, self-medication with substance misuse, crime and then back into prison. It requires not just good healthcare staff but good prison officers able to provide the right support.

I shall give one more example that was impressive. Prison officers working in the segregation unit at HMP Thameside, south-east London, where they are often dealing with some extremely unwell people, were getting some really good, supervision-type mental health support from the Psychology Service. They said it was making a big difference to their day-to-day life.

I often come across people working in extremely stressful environments with some extremely distressed people who have not had the training or support to do the job. My worry is that they will, at some stage, just fall over.

Q174 **Chair:** You, Mr Taylor, mentioned your concern about recruitment for the key grades. Mr Fairhurst from the Prison Officers Association said he feels the recruitment process is not fit for purpose. Would you go that far, or what are your concerns about recruitment to the key grades, or generally?

Charlie Taylor: May I flag one thing that astonished me? I came from an education background; I was originally a head teacher. One of the things that astonishes me is that governors don't play any part in interviewing new staff at band 3. The first time they meet their new officers is when they turn up for work on the first day.

Governors tell me that they would love to have more involvement in that process. They often find that people have been recruited who simply aren't appropriate for the job. An enormous amount of resource goes into that person. They have an extremely unpleasant time working in prisons because the job is not for them and they end up leaving quite quickly, with all the resource having been poured into them.

One of the things that I would suggest is involving prison leadership more in recruitment. If we want to make people responsible and accountable for the quality of their jail, we have to give them the tools to be able to do the job.

Q175 **Chair:** Are there other things that you would suggest?

Charlie Taylor: Again, thinking about the way in which you mentor and support people after they have been recruited, expecting too much of 18-year-olds is a great mistake. We come across some really outstanding people who have huge potential as prison officers but inevitably will be quite green and need to be looked after and supported. Where that happens, they are much more likely to stick around. The danger is that if they are in a prison where they don't feel they are making progress and they feel completely out of their depth, where you have prisoners who in some cases are 10 times more experienced than they are, sometimes they just feel that the job is not for them.

Some of the people recruited probably should not be in the job in the first place, but what is sad is where you see good and competent people leave for other employment. Being a prison officer is a really difficult job. They do remarkable work in incredibly difficult circumstances, but thinking about the process by which you look after these younger officers and make sure that they stick around longer is critical for me.

Q176 **Chair:** Online assessment, or Zoom assessment, really does not cut it, does it?

Charlie Taylor: One governor told me that a young woman had been recruited as a result of her mother filling out the application form because she was fed up with her daughter lying around on the sofa all day. Unsurprisingly, that officer did not stay in place very long.

Q177 **Chair:** What about the Unlocked programme, which tries to bring in graduates and move them swiftly up to band 3s, for example? Does that work effectively, or do the same concerns apply?

Dame Anne Owers: I do not have any statistical evidence on it, but anecdotally—I am not sure whether any evaluation has been done—it seems that a lot of those people are passing through the Prison Service rather than staying in it. They are using it to gain really valuable life experience, which will undoubtedly be valuable in whatever they do next, but I would like to see an evaluation of how many are still there three or five years on.

Q178 **Chair:** Do you have any statistics?

Charlie Taylor: I come across a lot of graduates in a number of prisons. Some outstanding people have come through under that scheme. I think the challenge for the Prison Service is how to make sure you hang on to those good people and what pathway you put them on in order that they are the prison governors in 10 or 15 years' time.

Q179 **Edward Timpson:** Staying briefly with the bucket analogy and another driver of poor retention, a few weeks ago we heard from Peter Dawson, director of the Prison Reform Trust. I should declare that my brother is the chair of that trust. He told us that there was 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 of the job isolates them if they try to do the job in a positive way. Is that something you have come across?

Dame Anne Owers: I cannot think of any exact examples, but the culture in prisons is very important. That was why I talked about the culture carriers.

I came across it when I was at the IPPC investigating police. If you train bright-eyed and bushy-tailed people in what they ought to be doing and how they ought to be behaving and then they go into an environment

that says, "Well, that's not how we do it round here when you have been in the job as long as I have...", they will feel that the job they have been trained for is not the job they are required to do. That is why I think, as we said earlier, that training should not stop at early training; otherwise, you will lose people at that stage.

Charlie Taylor: Things like the Unlocked scheme are a way of opening the door to getting a wider variety of people in, but to change the culture of a prison is a hard job.

What worries me is that governors turn over so quickly. It takes a good five years to get under the skin of a prison. We see too many governors moving on after 18 months. You can do a heroic rescue job on a prison and get the show back on the road so that it is functioning reasonably well, but in getting under the skin of a prison and changing the culture bear it in mind that it is not just the staff who are part of the culture; it is also the prisoners themselves: "We behave like this in this jail; this is what we do here." It is a long piece of work.

We must find ways to keep prison governors in place longer and look after them. It is an incredibly difficult and stressful job, and running one of our big Victorian reception prisons is really critical, but if you get only 18 months or two years out of people you will not get the best out of them and you will never be able to change the culture in prisons.

Q180 **Edward Timpson:** Do you think that if prison governors, assuming they are doing a good job, stay in position longer it will help with retention of staff? Is there any evidence of that in prisons where there have been governors with decent longevity in their posts?

Charlie Taylor: The governor of HMP Parc in south Wales, Janet Wallsgrove, has probably been there for 15 years. That is very much her jail. She is accountable for everything that goes on there. She has been through a number of prison inspections. It has some inherent advantages. It is a relatively modern site and it is in a part of the country where recruitment is relatively good. Nevertheless, that is an example of a jail in a healthy state with a governor who has been there for a long time.

What we often see in some of the London prisons, particularly local prisons, is that turnover is so fast, particularly where sometimes there is a temporarily promoted governor. The prison in effect treads water between different governors. You may get some momentum with one governor, but that quickly unravels as the culture of the jail reasserts self quite quickly.

Dame Anne Owers: If you know that your governor is likely to be there for only a year or two, you fold your arms and wait for the next one to come along; there will be another one along in a minute, and the inherent culture of the prison does not change because people will just wait it out, will they not?

Charlie Taylor: Absolutely.

Q181 **Edward Timpson:** I may be delving too far into your detailed knowledge, or maybe not; you may surprise us because you seem to know a huge amount about each of the prisons that you inspect and monitor. Do you know whether HMP Parc, for instance, has a higher retention rate of Unlocked graduates or those moving through bands?

Charlie Taylor: It is not part of the Unlocked scheme. The Unlocked scheme targets only prisons which have particularly poor staffing, so Parc is not part of the scheme.

It would be interesting to know whether there is better data on whether, for example, prisons that get better scores from HMIP have a better retention rate for, say, Unlocked graduates. I could not point to any evidence on that.

Dame Anne Owers: But it would be good for someone to do a study of the length of time of governors and whether that impacts on staff retention. I do not know that anyone ever has.

Charlie Taylor: I think that in this year's annual report around 70% of governors in the reporting period were not governors the last time we inspected their prisons, so currently only 30% have the same governor between two inspections. There is an awful lot of change.

Q182 **Edward Timpson:** I go back to the original statement by Peter Dawson about staff interaction within a prison. To help us to understand that more, we carried out a survey of prison officers. A quarter of those who replied reported being bullied by a colleague in the previous three months. Are you surprised by that? Clearly, you would be worried by it. What is your response?

Charlie Taylor: It crops up in our surveys as well. When we survey officers, quite often we get references to bullying. I think it is born partly from the fact that, if people are under stress and if the Prison Service itself is distressed, unfortunately people do not give the time and support they should give to their colleagues.

It may be a symptom of the fact that some prisons in particular are struggling with staffing, but it also says something about the level of oversight. If you look at custody managers and the amount of investment in their equivalents—a sister in a hospital or a sergeant or corporal in the Army—and the relative lack of investment in those leaders, you see that they need more support to be able to do that job well. If not, unfortunately they default into unfortunate ways of trying to go about their business.

Q183 **James Daly:** I have been looking at my phone and an advertisement for a job as a prison officer. I will not say which prison it is, but I will say that the starting salary is £30,880 for a 37-hour week and £34,523 for a 41-hour week. As you outlined earlier, it is quite clear that you do not

have to have a degree or any type of qualification to do that. To step back, are you saying that the major issue in staff shortages is salary? Obviously, we want everybody to be paid as much as we can afford to pay them, but are you saying that it is the amount of money people are paid, or is it more the environment in which they are working that is causing the problem?

Dame Anne Owers: I would say it is both. The increased pay that the Prison Service was able to get last year seems to have had an effect on recruitment in the north. It does not have much effect on recruitment in the south, because basically all that did was consolidate the additional hours pay officers were getting anyway. Staff in the north are doing what is called detached duty. You have to do detached duty now, so governors in the north could be fully staffed, and not because staff are moving around. That is very bad for running a prison where you have people who are not familiar with the prison, its staff and prisoners. I think pay did have an impact in some places.

What looks to be happening now in the public sector is that that is likely to be leapfrogged by other people who poach prison officers, including Border Force, police and so on, so as other public sector workers get pay increases that will have an impact.

I do not think it is just salary; it is some of the other things we were talking about: the feeling of doing a valuable job; being able to give time to be more than just a guard; to feel you are making a difference; and feel you are supported in what you do because there are people around who will help you and mind your back. I think it is a mixture of all those things.

Q184 **James Daly:** Mr Taylor, perhaps you can comment on this. One example of where things are not working, on which you produced a report, seems to be in the experiences of adult black male prisoners and black prison staff. Tell me if I am wrong, but from that it appears that black members of staff raised concerns about racism and career progression. Are there any links between these concerns and the retention of staff?

Charlie Taylor: Yes. It was an unexpected aspect of that report. Initially, we were going to focus on just the experiences of black prisoners, but once we started talking to black staff members we realised that some of the things prisoners were raising were also things that staff members were raising.

Ultimately, if it is not an environment in which you feel welcome and supported and that feels positive, inevitably people will vote with their feet. In a prison like Pentonville, the staffing profile begins to look more similar to the people who are locked up in the jail, but if you go to other parts of the country—for example, the Isle of Sheppey where you have a lot of prisoners who come from London—with the best will in the world you will not increase the diversity of staff on that island simply because of the nature of the local population. That is one aspect.

Mr Timpson referred to staff talking about bullying. If you do not make prisons a good place to work, with a staff culture that is supportive and the leadership to make sure people get the care, attention, support and challenge they need, the risk is that they will vote with their feet.

Q185 **James Daly:** I am not making any direct link between this and the Casey review that came out today, which is a very serious report, but it is linked to the criminal justice system and how staff, officers, are treated and the apparent culture. We are talking about an arm of the criminal justice system. It would be extremely concerning if some of these things and the general culture that we see within the Metropolitan police were seeping into the Prison Service. Do we not need to have those concerns, or are there some very real concerns in respect of that?

Charlie Taylor: No. Those are concerns that we do hear. We made a specific investigation into black staff and black officers, but without doubt people who work in prisons often tell us that the culture is not good. In a way, it goes back to the point that both I and Dame Anne have made that, if you do not have consistent leadership in place for longer periods, you will not be able to change that culture.

Q186 **James Daly:** The problem is that if you do not confront the culture, which is one thing that has been identified in the Met, it goes on and on and people who are perhaps not in management positions have nowhere to turn, hence they have no option but to leave.

Charlie Taylor: I have been to a few prisons recently where there has been a strong attempt. We inspected Portland last summer. There was a pretty difficult culture in that jail. The governor has done an enormous amount of work in improving the culture. He was being told that it was a horrible place to work for female officers. He has done an enormous amount of work in changing the culture in that prison.

Q187 **James Daly:** Realistically, it is not just one prison, is it? I know it is one that you have done, but it is structural; it is throughout the system.

Charlie Taylor: But it shows that where you have strong leadership in place you can begin to chip away at the problem.

Q188 **James Daly:** What was HMPPS's response to your report on the issues we have been talking about?

Charlie Taylor: Its report came out just a couple of days ago; it sent it over to us. We were pleasantly surprised. Real thought had gone into the response. There is a real recognition from it. We also talked to the trade unions. I think that on the part of both parties and the Prison Governors Association there is a real recognition that they need to do more; they need to think of ways to engage staff, but also to consider the experiences we flagged up for black prisoners and black staff and think about how they can address that in a more meaningful way.

Q189 **James Daly:** I have a question here about how you encourage a more

diverse workforce given these issues. It probably gets back to a similar question, although from a different angle, that I was asking. How do we make this a career people want to go into so they can feel assured they are valued and respected within it? I suspect that, no matter what we say here and now, they will not be if they apply now.

Charlie Taylor: I give another example. The governor of HMP Isis in south-east London has put in a huge amount of work on matters of equality in trying to improve the experiences of black and other minority prisoners, but also of staff. When we surveyed that prison we found that the experiences of black prisoners were far more positive than we see in other jails. What it shows is that where people really put in the time and effort they can make a difference.

Ultimately, one of the main reasons people will be prison officers is that their friends or relatives recommend the job to them. If you have black staff who go to work and experience some of the stuff that we highlighted in that report, they will not be encouraging their friends to join them.

Q190 **James Daly:** One of the reasons I am saying this, in all seriousness, is that when we sit on the Justice Committee, or anything else, witnesses come and tell us about staff shortages and money for this and that. It is all completely true, but we have some practical examples that show that you could spend a load of money on the system, but unless the fundamentals are correct you are wasting money; it is a complete waste of time. My fear from looking at some of the information I have here and what you have been talking about is that there are staff shortages and we can try to recruit more people, but if we put them into a toxic environment it is not exactly serving the purpose we want.

Dame Anne Owers: Exactly. One of the things we have been saying is that it is not just about pay but the environment you go into, and whether you are valued and feel you can do a decent job in it. If not, you will not stay because people do not stay in jobs all the time.

As for the disproportionality you were talking about, that is certainly the case we come across over and over again in terms of the prisoner population. One of the things that is a bit frustrating is that the Prison Service is very good at recording that it is happening, but the "So what?" question is rarely asked. For example, if you look at the use of PAVA, which I know the Committee has looked at, you see that over and over again every month there is disproportionality in the number of particularly black prisoners and mixed-race prisoners on whom PAVA is used. It is reported month after month. "Yes. And?" That is the question one wants to ask. I am sure that it is the same about staff, too.

Charlie Taylor: One of the frequent complaints that we hear from black prisoners is that the allocation of jobs is not done fairly. Prisons often have data on this and they are able to say that they are doing a reasonable job on that, but if they do not communicate it to prisoners and do not think about ways to engage prisoners from black and other

minority backgrounds that will continue as an assumption made by prisoners.

Q191 **Chair:** Mr Taylor, in your interactions with prison officers—by surveys and other things—does the issue of the retirement age come up?

Charlie Taylor: It has not come up often in prisons and among prison officers. Occasionally, it does, but I would not say it gets brought to my attention very often; it tends to be more the day-to-day issues that concern officers.

Q192 **Chair:** Dame Anne, it does not feature with you, either?

Dame Anne Owers: It has not crossed my desk.

Q193 **Chair:** Do you find difficulties with prison officers working up to 68 and being able to do the job? Does that ever feature in any areas of concern raised with you?

Charlie Taylor: It has not. Ultimately, if people are good enough to do the job that is absolutely fine. Obviously, people need to be physically healthy and that sort of thing, but it is not an issue that crops up on our inspections.

Q194 **Chair:** And it is much the same from the IMB point of view.

Dame Anne Owers: Yes.

Q195 **Edward Timpson:** Dame Anne, you mentioned PAVA in the context of race and disproportionality. More generally, from your visits and inspections, do operational prison staff have the equipment they need to keep themselves safe and carry out their roles effectively? We are looking here at all different aspects of the prison estate.

Dame Anne Owers: I would say that safety is not just about equipment; it is about confidence, being able to de-escalate situations, spotting when things happen before they happen, trust between officers and prisoners and being able to sort out the problems that prisoners raise, including the absence of their property. For me, it is not so much about equipment but the confidence to be able to do the job properly. I have not come across any particular deficits in equipment.

Charlie Taylor: Having the right kit is useful in extremis, but the most important kit that a prison officer has is their ability to build relationships in an environment that is safe and well ordered.

Dame Anne Owers: It is quite interesting in terms of the use of the equipment that is available. The Committee has talked about the use of PAVA, to which I referred earlier, but it is very patchy between prisons that look the same and have the same kinds of populations. Some prisons, even though they have been able to use it since 2020, have never done so; other prisons seem to resort to it very quickly—I think the Prison Service itself would say too quickly, because it does not solve the problem; it is a reaction to the problem. That illustrates that you cannot

rely on the physical if some prisons are able to operate by relying on other skills and the professionalism of staff.

Q196 **Edward Timpson:** It is quite similar to the use of exclusions in school, but I will not stray too far from the subject matter of this session.

The national chair of the Prison Officers Association recommended that PAVA be rolled out in women's prisons and the youth custody estate. Based on your response, I suspect that is not something that you think is a priority, but rather than make that assumption would you give your own view?

Dame Anne Owers: You are absolutely right in your assumption. In particular, in the women's estate one of the things that troubles us quite a lot about PAVA is when it is used to prevent self-harm. We know what levels of self-harm are like in the women's estate. If you are feeling so desperate that you want to cut or ligature yourself, being PAVA-ed will not help your mental state one little bit.

Charlie Taylor: I agree.

Q197 **James Daly:** You have talked already about training. In your inspection of women's prisons, do new staff have sufficient understanding of the needs and experiences of women in prison?

Dame Anne Owers: One of the things we would support and our boards have talked about is the need for trauma-informed training, because among women in prison, as well as some men—it is not exclusive to women—a very high proportion have experienced and are still experiencing significant trauma. That trauma-informed training is really necessary.

Q198 **James Daly:** It is very difficult for any prison officer who has not had psychiatric training or, say, medical training, if that is too much of a grand statement. Prison officers are doing the best they can with the training given to them, but can you give us an idea of how that trauma is dealt with by third-party services, and how a prison can commission whoever it may be to address a specific, bespoke need of one of the prisoners?

Charlie Taylor: One of the things that works well is when, for example, you have the psychology services supporting frontline staff and they are able to offer training and support so that when you have a prisoner who is behaving in a certain way, which may be very threatening or aggressive, if staff have been supported by someone with psychological expertise they can think about how they are going to respond to that prisoner in a way that will not end up in the inevitable confrontation or the prisoner becoming very distressed in the case of women's jails and potentially self-harming.

Q199 **James Daly:** If you look at most organisations, accountability tends to be related to results or outputs. It is very difficult for any of us to say to

a prison governor, "Shall we judge on the basis of whether 50% of the people who go through your prison reoffend?", or something like that. When you are looking at assessments and needs, what is it that you think we as politicians, apart from looking at your reports and agreeing with what you are doing, should look at as a mark of success within the Prison Service that the money that we are putting in is not simply just to have people locked in a cell for 24 hours a day and we are actually achieving something by doing this?

Charlie Taylor: The way I think of prisoners is that, for whatever reason, they have missed out on various experiences in life, whether that is because they had mental health difficulties, whether it is because they have substance misuse problems or whether it is because they missed out on school or have learning difficulties. In effect, you think of a prisoner as an unmade jigsaw.

The challenge for individual prisons is to think about what those individual prisoners need to prepare them to be successful. If they have mental health difficulties, we need to work with them. If prisoners cannot read, they need to be taught how to read. There is something about prisons that are able to offer bespoke services for individual prisoners to close some of those gaps and to begin to address some of that offending behaviour, which will help them to be more successful when they are let out.

Q200 **James Daly:** In each prison, is it the governor's responsibility to put in place their view, within the resources they have, the policies and the commissioning of services to achieve that?

Charlie Taylor: That is right, but governors often say to me—I speak as a former head teacher—that there are too many things that are often out of their control. For example, at times they have a huge frustration with education contracts, which are centrally let from the Ministry of Justice. Governors would love to be able to do something and flex the education offer in order for it to be a closer fit with the prisoners they have, but often they struggle to do that because giant contracts are being managed from the centre.

Dame Anne Owers: It also depends to an extent upon what kind of prison you are running, because you have to have people with you long enough to be able to do anything effective. If they are just passing through lots of lots of times, cumulatively they may have spent most of their adult life in prisons, but it is in periods of a year or so.

Q201 **James Daly:** It is a problem, is it not? A lot of the people in these prisons are serving three or four-month sentences. It is impossible to do anything in that time. You may tell me something different, but it is very difficult to do any meaningful work within that time, is it not?

Dame Anne Owers: I remember that in one prison I was inspecting someone was leaving. One of the staff said to them, "You can carry on

with the course you've started the next time you are with us," which in a way is a counsel of despair.

Charlie Taylor: We inspected HMP Styal. Some women left their property in the jail; they did not bother to take it home when they left because they knew they would be back in a few weeks.

Q202 **Chair:** That has been very helpful in relation to workforce issues. I want to touch on one other thing.

Dame Anne, this will probably be your last appearance before the Committee.

Dame Anne Owers: Yes, probably.

Q203 **Chair:** I think your term of office comes to an end at the end of May this year, after about five and a half years. We are very grateful to you for your engagement with us and the work you have done. I wonder whether you want to share with us any reflections as you come to the end of that time about the role and your tenure and the lessons we ought to be aware of.

Dame Anne Owers: I think that one of the key lessons is something we have been talking about all afternoon, which is the combination of staffing pressures and population rise. That is starting to affect prisons and it is very unclear how they will manage with the population rising as it is at the moment. That means where physically you put people. We have talked about the rapid deployment units. It talks crucially about being able to move prisoners to the right place they need to be to do the right course they need to change the way they behave, their lives and so on.

The whole system is running hot, and that has implications for safety, for self-harm and for rehabilitation. I think the prison system is in one of those moments where it is carrying a lot of risk and is unable to do a lot of the things it needs to do.

One of the things that is driving up the prison population is longer sentences. People are serving longer sentences in prison. Combine that with the problems about key work that we have been talking about and IPP prisoners, on which this Committee has done a report, and there are some real difficulties at the moment and in the future.

Staffing and population pressure on prison places are what I notice. When I went back to prisons at the back end of 2017, having not looked at prisons for seven years, there was a feeling of a much more fragile environment with many fewer and less confident staff around. Quite often, I would be in a prison surrounded by prisoners asking me what had happened to their property and what had happened to this or that. There was a feeling of fragility. I think that in many prisons it is getting back to that.

Another point, which relates to the question Mr Daley asked, is one of the things I said when I was chief inspector and have said since I came back to it: we need to think more broadly than investing in prisons. We need to be investing in not prison and to deal with the issues that brought people there—childhood experiences, substance misuse or mental health issues—and with what is going to happen to them afterwards, such as, can they get somewhere safe and secure to live, not a hostel that will be targeted by people who want to buy and sell drugs? If they cannot find employment and their mental health issues cannot be dealt with, we are just setting people up to fail.

When I first started there was talk about rehabilitation revolutions. The one revolution that keeps revolving is the prison door. It will keep doing that unless and until we invest outside prison, particularly in mental health. A number of times I get reports from boards and segregation units where the more ill you are the more extreme your prison experience will be, because the only safe place to keep you may be in the segregation unit. Then you are waiting for transfer to mental health services, which are overstretched—community mental health services, not just secure mental health services, so all of that.

In particular, we are collecting information, which we will pass to the Committee, about women's prisons where often over half the population is on a mental health case load and where women, more than men, are sent to prison as a place of safety or for their own protection. On a recent visit to Styal, we heard that one woman had been found on a railway line. It is a technical offence, but is not an imprisonable one, but she was sent to prison for her own protection. That should not be necessary. There should be places other than prison to deal with that.

There have been considerable gaps since the restructuring of HMPPS. The CRCs were not doing a very good job at the beginning. They were starting to, but the gaps in support for remand prisoners and short-term prisoners keep the door evolving.

There is a tendency to reinvent the wheel in the Prison Service. Charlie was kind enough to point to the amount of time that I have been involved with prisons, but I do remember NOMS, which joined together prison and probation. We now have one HMPPS. I remember when personal officers used to exist and now we allegedly have key workers, so if you stand still long enough it will come round again. I think there is a gap in resettlement services and a gap in where you can send people.

We mentioned disproportionality. That is something we are picking up in prison after prison in access to work, places in the incentive scheme, use of force and so on. As I said earlier, prisons are very good at recording. In particular, following the Lammy review, they keep the statistics, but you do need to do something about it.

Finally, the issue that comes up over and over again in our reports, which gets little attention but which I think is symptomatic of whether prisons

really care about prisoners, is the difficulty prisoners have in retaining and keeping access to their own property. It sounds like something small, but it is often more than a pair of trainers; it is that family photograph, the last letter you had from your mum and that kind of thing. I am afraid that the new property framework does not begin to hack it.

One of the things we have said is that, if an airline can normally manage to get my luggage from here to Australia using barcodes, why on earth can't the Prison Service do the same with prisoners' property? If it does not matter to the Prison Service, it is a signal that the prisoner does not matter.

When I started as chief inspector we did a report, "Through the Prison Gate". One of the things we said at that time is as true now as it was then: "Unless something is done to tackle the causes of offending behaviour, and the social and economic exclusion from which it commonly springs, and to which it contributes, prisons will continue to have revolving doors, and the public will not in the long term be protected." I do not think that 20 years later I have much changed my mind.

Q204 **Chair:** That is not cheering but it is accurate.

To wrap it together, what is the USP for the IMBs, you having been both chief inspector and national chair of IMBs? What do the IMBs bring to shedding light on those issues?

Dame Anne Owers: I think they complement the work that the inspectorate does. What the inspectorate does is make an occasional, sometimes quite frequent, deep dive into prisons with people who are professional educators, healthcare professionals and those who spend their lives inspecting.

What the IMBs bring to the table, being there every week, is currency. One of the things we are trying to do is change the way we report to Ministers and yourselves so that we use that currency.

You can spot things when they are starting to happen. I think the IMBs were the first to spot that PAVA had been rolled out without it being publicly announced; we were the first to notice that the new resettlement contracts were not serving remand prisoners.

Therefore, they complement what the inspections do and what the ombudsman can do, which is to look at investigations. I have done all three in my time. I think they are all necessary for oversight of a system that has total control over individuals.

Q205 **Chair:** Are there things that could be done to make the IMB system better and stronger?

Dame Anne Owers: Yes. One thing I have said to this Committee before is that we have been looking for legislation to create a single body or

structure. At the moment, as national chair and with the management board, as I said to this Committee when I gave evidence last time, we are sitting on fresh air. We are still in suspended animation. It is still a bit like a bumble bee; we are defying gravity, but only by flapping our wings lots and lots of times a second, thanks to the commitment of our members and our staff.

I think that would be enormously helpful. It would be able to add to the effectiveness and build on the strengths we now have with training and information for members, regional support structures and the support that volunteers necessarily need if we are going to be able to do a job. I think that would help.

Q206 **Chair:** Would that strengthen your ability to challenge where necessary?

Dame Anne Owers: I think so, yes. We are not slow in challenging both locally and nationally, but I think it would strengthen boards' ability to learn from one another and pull together what we are finding, because what we are finding locally brings in the national picture.

Q207 **Chair:** A statutory national organisation?

Dame Anne Owers: Absolutely, which I hope my successor will be able to achieve.

Q208 **Chair:** Dame Anne, thank you very much for those thoughts and for the huge amount of public service you have given across the board, to the Prison Service and the welfare of prisoners in particular. We are very grateful to you. I have always appreciated the personal engagement you have shown to this Committee and the massive commitment you have put in.

Dame Anne Owers: I have learnt a great deal in that time.

Chair: I think we will bump into each other at least socially in the future, not wearing professional hats. I wish you all the very best for what I doubt will be a quiet retirement. I am sure you have other plans—I will not ask—but thank you for all you have done; it is very much appreciated. I also thank all my colleagues on the Committee.