



HOUSE OF LORDS

Justice and Home Affairs Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Prison culture: governance, leadership and staffing

Tuesday 14 January 2025

10.30 am

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Members present: Lord Foster of Bath (Chair); Lord Bach; Baroness Buscombe; Lord Dubs; Lord Filkin; Lord Henley; Baroness Hughes of Stretford; Lord McInnes of Kilwinning; Baroness Meacher; Baroness Prashar; Lord Tope.

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Public

Questions 62 - 69

Witness

I: Mark Fairhurst, National Chair, Prison Officers' Association

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witness

Mark Fairhurst.

Q62 **The Chair:** Welcome everybody, and to Mr Fairhurst in particular. This is another of our evidence sessions on the Justice and Home Affairs Committee's inquiry into the governance of prisons. We are delighted to have with us from the POA Mr Mark Fairhurst. Could you just give us a brief background to yourself and then we will get under way?

Mark Fairhurst: Yes, sure. I joined the Prison Service as a prison officer in 1992. I was posted to HMP Frankland in County Durham. From there I specialised as a PE officer—physical education—and moved to Lancaster Farms in 1996, which at the time was a young offender institution. And then I managed to get back home at HMP Liverpool in 1999, where I have served since. I joined the POA national executive committee in 2015, served as vice-chair, then national chair in 2017 and I am currently national chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. You will have been concerned, as everybody has been, about some of the recent reports of problems going on in our prison estate. We have heard only today about drones delivering drugs and weapons, but there have also been quite a number of stories about prison officers who have behaved inappropriately in a variety of ways. I wonder if you want to just comment on that and reflect on recent media coverage.

Mark Fairhurst: Yes. It always surprises me when the media get excited, particularly with today's breaking story about drones. We have been telling our employer for at least the past five years that drones are a major security risk and will destabilise our prisons. They need to invest in technology to block the drones from delivering to prison cell windows. We consistently get ignored. It falls on deaf ears. It seems to be the case that if it costs money, it will not happen. We know that there is technology out there to block drone signals. If you look at a prison in Guernsey—they have what they call a sky wall whereby a drone approaches the prison wall but is diverted and returns to sender. Why cannot we invest in our prisons in such technology to prevent drone deliveries? It is only a matter of time—I will state it publicly—before a firearm makes its way into a prison.

We know there are drones out there that have a capability to lift a 75-kilogram load. That is somebody off the exercise yard. So it is only a matter of time and only by the skin of our teeth that my members have not faced a real threat to life because of drone deliveries. We want urgent action taken to rid the threat of drones.

There has always been staff corruption. I would have been naive to sit here and say that there was none. But we are seeing more staff corruption. It is being highlighted more, I think, because we are getting better at catching staff who are corrupt. But this goes back to the entire recruitment and vetting procedures. The recruitment procedure is simply not fit for purpose. How can you recruit people into such an important role without a face-to-face interview? Everything is done remotely via

Zoom. I have witnessed the recruitment procedure. It is not good enough. We want it back face to face.

The Chair: Just to interrupt you for a second because we are very keen to hear more about that, so we will come on to it in a few minutes, but can you speak more generally about the corruption among staff?

Mark Fairhurst: Is it any surprise that staff are getting corrupted if they only adhere to six weeks' training? Six weeks at a training college—then you are a fully qualified prison officer with very little support on the landings to nurture you because we have a severe lack of experienced staff. We do not get enough training on how you get conditioned by prisoners. Do not forget that you have very inexperienced staff now dealing with very experienced prisoners. The wages are too low. That is another restriction on the type of people we can recruit.

Unfortunately, when you catch corrupt staff, there is always a massive headline that the press are all over and they forget about the good work and the good people who are in the service who are not corrupt. We do not want corrupt staff in the service but the vetting has to get better. When I joined in 1992, if you had a family member with a sniff of a criminal record, you got nowhere near the job. We know that we are getting people now because of the lack of vetting, and it is not robust enough, who have been half way through their training course, and then it has been discovered that they have a criminal record and they have been dismissed.

We know people are joining the job, although we have not got the evidence at the moment, who are getting recruited by criminal gangs because they have got a clean record, specifically to traffic into prisons. We are simply not robust enough with vetting procedures. We should have the same stringent conditions and vetting as the police, because that is the type of role we are in. But we do not have enough people vetting in HQ to go through everybody's social media posts. You can pick up a lot in that way. So the only people who get social media vetting are those who are going to work in a high-security estate or with young offenders under the age of 18. We want severe and stringent vetting for everybody who joins that role, and if it takes a matter of months to do that then let us get it right. Let us start recruiting people who have been thoroughly vetted.

The Chair: You referred to recruitment concerns and vetting concerns and you have talked about the lack of training generally. Is there currently any change to the amount of support that staff are getting once in post in the light of the problems that come from overcrowding, increased violence and so on?

Mark Fairhurst: There is, in theory. HMPPS directors will tell you about the massive support we have in place for staff, but in reality there is virtually nothing. For example, you get recruited, you do your six weeks' training, then you go back and you are supposed to do an induction and get mentored by experienced staff. The employer will mention, "We've got bodies, new colleague mentors and a standards coaching team". That does not make a blind bit of difference. If it did, why do 50%

of new recruits leave within two years of joining the service and 34% of them leave within the first 12 months? Just think about the cost to the taxpayer.

There is virtually no support. I visit prisons regularly. I remember walking on to a wing and there were three staff there. One had nine months in the job, one six months and one was in their second week live after training. I asked where the management were and they did not know who the managers were. The management were invisible. Custodial managers have too great a span of control, looking after 2,630 staff and attending meetings all day. They need to be on the wings leading by example, but we have very inexperienced managers.

By the way, when you get promoted, you do not get any training. You can be a prison officer today and a custodial manager next Monday, but you do not get any training. There is no development. It is a complete mess.

Lord Dubs: You mentioned young offenders. What are the challenges associated with housing young adult offenders or youth offenders on the adult estate?

Mark Fairhurst: It is really not a good idea because it destabilises the prison. You could have a settled prison, and then all of a sudden you have an influx of 18 to 21 year-olds who are mixed with more experienced prisoners, and they just disrupt things. We used to have young offender institutions that dealt with 16 to 21 year-olds and were working perfectly but now we are going to integrate them into the adult estate, which unsettles the prison because they are not mature enough. They are prone to violence against staff and prisoners. So it destabilises prisons quite a lot.

Lord Dubs: Has that happened because of the pressure on prison places generally?

Mark Fairhurst: I think so. There is a desire to house 18 to 21 year-olds in the adult estate. In the past they have always been housed in young offender institutions, but there are not enough young offender institutions to house the demand for 16 to 21 year-olds.

Q63 **Lord Henley:** I note what you said just now about problems with recruitment, and you touched on that in the written evidence that you kindly submitted to us. There is obviously a serious problem with recruitment and retention. Again, you touched on this, but I was given a figure, although I am not sure I have it here, for those resigning with under three years' service, and you will know that it is fairly bad.

Mark Fairhurst: On average the figure for resignations from the service is hovering at around 13%, but look at the recruits—it is not their fault. When you come into the service as a new recruit, it is not your fault that you get only six weeks' training. It is not your fault that that training does not prepare you for the reality of life on the landings, and it is not your fault that you do not have support services in place to nurture you through those early months because there is a severe lack of experienced staff to nurture you. It is not their fault. They do not have the same opportunities, experience and training that I did. And look at the people we are

recruiting. You can join the service at age 18, so you have 18 year-old kids looking after 18 year-old prisoners in young offender institutions. That is not a good mix.

We have now recruited from overseas, which is not a problem, but I am hearing some horror stories. We have heard about recruits from overseas turning up at the gate with suitcases and family in tow asking, "Where's my accommodation?" We do not supply accommodation. We have had examples of overseas recruits sleeping in their cars because they have no accommodation. Apparently a bunch of overseas recruits, because they have no accommodation, have set up camp in a wooded area opposite the prison where they are working.

I have an example of this. Last week we recruited a person before Christmas who got sent back to their establishment from the training college because they were not capable of locking or unlocking cell doors, they were incapable of controlling restraint training and they were incapable of conducting a rub-down search. That governor has had to dismiss that member of staff who had been recruited because he discovered that they had cerebral palsy. We are setting people up to fail. Where are the stringent standards and vetting procedures to prevent that? We are recruiting people who have mental health conditions and making them sicker. We are exposing them to more trauma, which makes them more ill than they have ever been, and they are leaving the service. That is not the recruits' fault but the system's fault, and that needs to change.

Lord Henley: So we need to improve the recruitment process, and presumably we need to make sure that we retain people once they are properly recruited. Are there enough decent opportunities for career progression and that sort of thing that encourage people to stay on rather than leave after a short period?

Mark Fairhurst: Not really. If you wanted to transfer to another Civil Service department then you have that option, but you have to go through their recruitment process. Within the job, most people now who are promoted are temporarily promoted, and most of those people on temporary promotion have very little experience. We have examples of some people getting promoted after only 14 months in the job. The Prison Service is rife with temporary promotions.

For the likes of experienced staff like myself, it is not really worth taking a promotion because the money is not good enough. Why should I accept a promotion for £2,000 or £3,000 more than I am getting when I can work overtime and make my wages up that way? The responsibility is not worth the risk. Do not forget, if I am a custodial manager then I will be responsible for anything between 20 and 30 staff and responsible for every incident in the jail. If I am on nights, I am looking after the jail on my own. That is a massive responsibility—for, what, an extra £2,000 or £3,000 a year? It is not worth it. That is why you are getting young, inexperienced staff being temporarily promoted: they are the only ones who want it.

There is no training whatsoever. There is no staff development. You do not get any training to be a manager in the Prison Service. At every band, there is absolutely no support.

The Chair: You said earlier, though, that the Government or the department would respond by saying there is massive support, and you listed a number of things that they are doing. I am still in slight difficulty between those two.

Mark Fairhurst: HMPPS will sit in front of you and say, “We have occupational health services, counselling services, TRiM trauma teams and staff support teams”—all run by prison officers, by the way, volunteers—“along with staff development programmes, an Enable programme and management qualifications you can go to”. It is all rubbish. You ask any custodial manager who has just been promoted what training they have had, and they will tell you: none.

Q64 **Baroness Prashar:** You are treated as part of the Civil Service structure. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being part of the Civil Service?

Mark Fairhurst: We do not mind being part of the Civil Service because we are happy to serve king and country, and we have good terms and conditions and a decent pension so we are happy with that. What we are not happy with is being part of the MoJ. HMPPS does not work. His Majesty’s Prison Service needs to be a separate entity. We need to be a stand-alone service like we were back in the 1990s when we were under the Home Office. We do not need the MoJ interfering because, first, it cannot get anything right and, secondly, it is full of bureaucrats and non-operational staff. We have got non-operational staff with no experience of prisons writing prison policy telling us how we can do our job. That does not work. We are a law enforcement agency. We need to stand alone on our own two feet with our own budget, without restrictions from the MoJ.

It is the same with probation. Probation needs to be a separate entity so it can be successful again. It needs to be under local governance. Leave the MoJ to serve justice via the courts and leave the Prison Service to enforce the law in our prisons as a separate entity.

Baroness Prashar: Do you think prison officers have enough autonomy within the current management structure?

Mark Fairhurst: Governors are very restricted when it comes to autonomy. I think if you wanted to give governors more autonomy, you would give them the right to interview new recruits so they could see for themselves who they are getting through the door. They do not know who they are getting through the door until they turn up after training. What other occupation does not interview people face to face? They need more power over how they spend their budgets because they are restricted by the procurement system. So if they want a simple repair done or some new initiative undertaken, why cannot they just go to the builder down the road, get a quote, give them money and get the work done? They have to go through a lengthy process through approved procurement systems and providers

who overcharge them ridiculously. And it takes an age. So if you were going to give them two bits of autonomy, I think they would welcome those two bits.

Baroness Prashar: What about working between the operational and non-operational staff? Do you work cohesively together? Is enough training given to both parties?

Mark Fairhurst: I do not know what training civilian staff get, but they should be a separate entity to us when it comes to pay. They are part of our pay review body. Why? They have the right to strike. We do not. That is our compensatory measure. So when we are asking for a pay rise, it includes non-operational staff as well. There is a bit of conflict because we get an unsocial hours allowance because we work bank holidays, weekends and nights. They do not. There is a bit of conflict there because we get more money and they see operational staff as being more protected than them. I will say that without civilian support, without on/off staff in prisons, we could not run the service, and there are not enough of them. I know they are overworked and underpaid—and they struggle to recruit.

Baroness Prashar: Would you like the right to strike?

Mark Fairhurst: Of course we would but the Labour Government have already told us, despite in opposition saying otherwise, that they are not going to give us back the right to strike. That ties our hands, does it not? We have no human rights at work. We have got no basic trade union rights. Why? They restored the right to strike in Scotland in 2015. The sky has not fallen in there. In fact, industrial relations have improved. I do not even have the right to tell my members to work to rule, to refuse to work overtime, or to stop volunteering for tasks for which they receive no monetary benefit. I do not even have the right to do that. So we have no rights. It does not stop us and it will not stop me in the future from doing the right thing by my members to protect their health and safety if people do not listen and act. But why would you not give us our right to strike back? It is ridiculous.

Q65 **Lord Bach:** Morning, Mr Fairhurst. I want to ask about the appraisal system. You might say: “What appraisals?”

Mark Fairhurst: I was about to say, “What appraisal system?”

Lord Bach: I thought I would get in first on that, if I could. We know that it was suspended during Covid, not just once but twice during that period. Speaking for myself—I do not know about the committee—we are not quite sure what the appraisal system is at the moment and how it works. Can you help us and what kind of appraisal system would you like to see?

Mark Fairhurst: The appraisal system worked perfectly well when it was suspended. It worked great then because it actually worked. I do not even know what it is called. I think it is called performance monitoring or performance management. I could not tell you what it was called now. It is supposed to work in this way. I am a line manager, a custodial manager, and I am supposed to sit down with my hierarchy every eight weeks and have a meaningful conversation. “How are you

getting on? Do you need any development? Are you hitting the targets that are set? What can I do for you?” That is because we have aligned policies with the good old Ministry of Justice. They sit in an air-conditioned office down the road with comfortable staff facilities, and are line-managing about six staff. They can sit down with them every eight weeks and go through performance monitoring. Our line managers have between 20 and 30 staff to look after. There are no staff facilities in prisons. The staff office is a converted cell. So when you are sitting down with someone trying to appraise them, you have the phone going off. You have people going in and out of the office. You have alarm bells going off and incidents to deal with. It is an impossible task. It does not work.

What would I like to see? If someone is temporarily promoted for a period of 12 months, that tells me that they are capable of doing the job. So why not permanently promote them? They can do the job, because if they could not do the job, they would not have been doing it for 12 months or more.

Why do we need to sit interviews and assessments? Let us just give them the job if they are capable of doing it. When it comes to staff performance, I have 33 years in the job. Why do I need a line manager to sit down with me and say, “How is it going? What do you need?” If I need anything, I will ask them. The system needs to focus more on the people who are new to the service. For the first four years of your service, you need that nurturing and help in order for you to develop yourself. Why do we not just apply it to people who need it? The experienced ones among us, if we need help, will ask for it. If we need anything, we will ask for it. If we want to go on a development course, we will ask for it.

The new kids on the block are the ones who need all the support. Instead of saying to someone, “Policy says you must sit down with the 26 staff that you are line-managing every eight weeks”, why do not we change it to say: “Right, you have four new recruits on your wing; look after them and have as many conversations as you can throughout the year with them to support them and do that for the next three or four years”? In that way, we might retain more staff.

Q66 **Baroness Hughes of Stretford:** On the appraisal system, you mentioned the eight weeks. To be clear, are you saying that that is written down somewhere as regards what needs to be done in implementing an appraisal system? Is it just the case that it is not done?

Mark Fairhurst: When we were consulted about the change in how we were going to appraise people, we read in policy, “You must have a meaningful conversation”. That is how it is worded—a meaningful conversation every eight weeks with the staff you line-manage. We said, “That is all well and good if you are sitting in the office in the MoJ and you are only line-managing six people”, but when you are a custodial manager and you are managing 26, you have leave to take, you have mandatory training, you are on nights, and then you have a week of rest days. What happens if you go sick? What happens if you are looking after the jail as Oscar 1, dealing with incident after incident? Where are you going to hold these meaningful conversations on a busy wing—in a converted cell while everything is going off? We

warned them not to do it and warned them it was not practical. We warned them that it would not work and we have been proved right. But yet again, non-operational staff with no experience of prisons, who were writing prison service policy, have not got a clue what to do and ignored us.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: So you are saying that it does not happen routinely?

Mark Fairhurst: I do not know of a single prison where a custodial manager sits down with their hierarchy every eight weeks and has a meaningful conversation.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: Thank you very much. Secondly, are you saying that you cannot see any point in any sort of appraisal system for experienced staff?

Mark Fairhurst: What is the point? It does not get used when you want promotion. You do not go through your appraisals from the last 20 years and say, "Oh yeah, you exceeded there. You got a good day. Oh, you were below standard there—what happened?" You do not even come into the equation. What is the point of appraisals if you are not going to use them? What is the incentive? If I work well throughout the year and get an "exceeded" on my staff appraisal, do I get a bonus? Do I get an extra day's leave? Is it going to stand me in good stead for promotion? No, because I have got a voice and will challenge poor decisions from people above me. What they want now is nodding dogs—people who will not offer an opinion, people who will not challenge poor decisions. They just want people who accede to their requests. They do not want experienced staff promoted.

Q67 **Baroness Buscombe:** Mr Fairhurst, I am going to talk about the support that you as a union give prison officers through performance reviews, sickness reviews, grievances and disciplinary investigations. Again, I feel that I might know the answer already. In general, do your members feel that these interactions, meetings and processes are meaningful such that they feel properly supported and understood by management?

Mark Fairhurst: No, not at all. Let me give you some examples and expand. When it comes to sickness, I will give you two examples. We had a female member of staff who attempted suicide. She was obviously absent from work. When she returned to work, the governor decided to give her a sickness warning. Tell me how that is going to help her. We had a female member of staff who was caring for her terminally ill partner, who requested from the governor of her establishment, "I wish to reduce my working hours by eight hours per week, so that I can have a day off per week on a temporary basis to take my terminally ill partner to hospital for treatment so we can support him". That request was denied.

We have examples of people recruited because the advert says "You can have flexible working, a work-life balance, reduced hours, part-time working". They joined the job, they are denied all of those things and then quickly leave. We have got examples of people who get approved for ill-health retirement, and we are currently dealing with one case where the governor has decided that they are not going to approve the ill-health retirement despite the scheme's medical advisers

saying that they meet the criteria for it. Why are you playing God with people's lives? It is ridiculous.

We have the ridiculous situation at Dartmoor, which is temporarily closed because of radon. Those staff at Dartmoor have been treated absolutely appallingly. Their lives have been turned upside down. They only have one of two prisons to go to in the vicinity: Exeter or Channings Wood. There are examples of people who have lost their appeal because they are settled and working at Channings Wood and are being told they have got to work at Exeter, which is further away from their home and is costing the public purse an excessive amount of money. How is that good value for the taxpayer?

There is no empathy or sympathy whatsoever from senior managers in the majority of cases I deal with. Do not get me wrong: there are a lot of good senior managers out there who are fantastic leaders who do a good job, but they are very few and far between.

They never, ever adhere to timescales for the disciplinary process. They interpret policy to suit their narrative. We know of one particular prison group director—I am not going to name the area—with whom we will never win an appeal, and we never have. Despite the mitigations and the evidence we provide which prove that they should not have been dismissed—and this was an excessive award—we never, ever win an appeal with this certain individual.

Baroness Buscombe: This is very disturbing, Mr Fairhurst. Could you suggest what are the key factors that would encourage prison officers to have a good, solid relationship with management? What are the key things that would give your people the confidence that they are being supported?

Mark Fairhurst: Listen to the front line. The best prison governors are those with loads of experience, who have worked their way through the ranks, who have probably been POA members in the past and who sit down with their committees, listen to them and act upon the concerns that are raised, instead of ignoring them and ploughing on regardless despite the risks.

I have an example of a prison governor whose committee went into his office with a dispute. He read the dispute and said, “No, I’ll scrap that idea—let’s sit down and sort it out, don’t submit a dispute”. Listening to their concerns is great leadership.

But what about the concerns of staff who are telling their senior management team that there has been a lot of violence on their wing this week, they know the wing is full of weapons, drugs and mobile phones, and that they want to lock down the wing to search every cell and get rid of those items? Then the senior management say, “No. Get them unlocked. Provide a regime”. That is not safe; that is ignoring the concerns of front-line staff. A bit of sympathy, empathy, common sense and listening to the troops on the front line is needed. We need to respect what they say and the concerns they raise.

Baroness Buscombe: Is there not an external oversight on this that could make a difference, from the inspector of prisons, for example?

Mark Fairhurst: The inspector of prisons has got no power whatsoever; he just makes recommendations. Look at the urgent notifications he has issued. Several jails have had two urgent notifications and are supposed to get support from the centre. Well, look at how that has worked out for them. There is nothing legally binding that forces anybody to change anything with any recommendation within the service. Maybe you should start holding people to account.

We find that, in the service, we reward failure. Those failed governors get promoted and moved sideways. That we reward failure is a sad thing to say, but it is true.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: I have a question in a minute about the women's estate but, before we finally leave the topic that Baroness Buscombe started with, I understand that last year, you announced that the POA would no longer co-operate with the Chief Inspector of Prisons. Does that still stand?

Mark Fairhurst: It does. That is because Mr Taylor wrote a scathing remark about staff at Wetherby who had saved a young girl's life. He was not happy with the actions they took. The actions they took were the right thing to do at the right time because of the circumstances they faced, but he criticised them for that. I asked him to apologise because he admitted to me in private that they did the right thing. That is not what he wrote in public, but I asked him to apologise, and he refused.

If he wants to apologise to my members at Wetherby for his scathing comments, which were bang out of order, I will happily re-engage with him. As far as I am concerned, he is not fit for purpose, he needs to be replaced and we need an overhaul of the Chief Inspector of Prisons.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: And you think that is a reasonable professional response from an organisation?

Mark Fairhurst: Yes, I do. I am here to back my members; I am not having them criticised for saving a young girl's life by someone who is so out of touch that they do not know the reality of life in our prisons.

Q68 **Baroness Hughes of Stretford:** Okay. Turning to the women's estate, are there any specific issues that your members report to you about different or additional challenges of working in the women's estate?

Mark Fairhurst: Yes, the women's estate is full of people with very complex needs who are victims of traumatic incidents against them. I do not know if you are aware of the key worker scheme, which was brought in years ago to increase staffing levels. Every prison officer in the closed adult male estate has a caseload of six prisoners to look after and help through their sentence.

We asked for key work to be introduced in the female estate and they denied it; they would not listen to any of our arguments. We wanted it because it would

probably work better in the female estate than anywhere else because of such complex needs there.

There is now an influx of seriously mentally ill women prisoners who are getting looked after by prison officers who get zero training in mental health—nothing at all. That is a drain on resources. There are women there who should not be in a prison but in a secure mental health institution in our communities. A lot of female prisoners are serving relatively short sentences for relatively minor crimes such as shoplifting—though these are not minor crimes if you are the victim of them—who have been the victims of domestic violence. Maybe we could do something better with female offenders.

Why can we not just house the most serious offenders? Why do we have to house people who are in for petty crimes, who have been victims themselves and suffered trauma all their lives? Why can we not do something better for them in our communities? Prison officers could even go out in communities and support them in secure settings, dealing with their trauma and their addictions. Unfortunately, the female estate is seeing increasing levels of self-harm because we are dealing with more and more complex people without the resources or training.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: Are all the things that you have already said about the prison estate in general—the lack of specific training, support and mentoring for officers—also the situation in the women’s estate, where these issues facing officers are so much more acute?

Mark Fairhurst: It is. It is a problem throughout the entire prison estate. We keep getting ignored when we highlight concerns, and nothing seems to change—they just plough on regardless.

Reading the inspector’s report into Eastwood Park, how on earth you are supposed to run any type of regime there with the complex women that you have got to look after is beyond me. You are consistently fighting fires every day.

Do not forget that when a prison officer deals with trauma, who deals with our trauma? What support do we get when we are cutting people down, covering up cuts or trying to resuscitate someone who has tried to take their life? Who looks after us? Who do we offload to? There is nobody.

There are volunteer prison officers to deal with trauma who are TRiM trained and there are staff care teams. Who do they offload to when I offload to them? We have asked year after year for professional support on site in every prison. During the core day, Monday to Friday, there needs to be a psychologist, a trained mental health nurse and a counsellor.

I do not care who they are. Employ someone so that when I have just dealt with a traumatic incident, I can go off the landing and offload in private to a professional. They can signpost me to additional support in my community if I need it. This might

stop me from going off sick, leaving the service or getting PTSD, which more and more members are being diagnosed with because there is no support in place.

Do not hit me with the argument that we cannot afford it, because long term it would be cost effective. It would probably save billions in staff sickness and getting rid of people on capability payments. If everything comes down to cost, we will get nowhere. It is time to invest in the service and it is time to invest in people, who are the biggest asset.

Q69 The Chair: Mr Fairhurst, I want to look back through one or two of the things you said in your written evidence that we have not picked up on. One struck me in particular. You have a clear view that prison officers should only be appointed from the age of 21 upwards. I hear what you said earlier about 18 year-olds looking after 18 year-olds in young offender institutions but, given the shortages of staff that we currently have and the difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, is it not totally unrealistic to be arguing for 21 year-olds?

Mark Fairhurst: It always used to be the case. I could not join the job until I was 21. There was an age restriction because you need life skills and life experience to deal with people who, in some cases, are very experienced criminals. At a young age, not at full maturity, probably entering your first job or just having got your university degree or whatever, you are very susceptible to conditioning. We know the training is not fit for purpose, and that is no fault of the people who recruit. There are some very good 18 year-old recruits, but I feel there needs to be a level of maturity and life experience to deal with the people who inhabit our environment, and the sensible approach is to say you cannot join until you are 21. You can still join at an operational support grade and maybe spend three years doing that so you are used to the environment and get an idea of what the job is about, and then maybe you think, "That is right for me" or "I don't really fancy it". But at 21 you get more mature people, and you might get a better quality of recruit.

The Chair: There are many other professions where you could argue the same case you are making but where 18 year-olds are often capable of doing the job. As you yourself have said, there are some 18 year-olds in the service who are doing a very good job. Is it not more that we need to get both the recruitment procedure and the support and training procedures right rather than looking at the age?

Mark Fairhurst: I would not disagree with that, but until we put that right we are stuck in a quandary where we are getting more and more younger staff, inexperienced in life and social skills, joining the job and getting exploited, being traumatised and leaving within the first two years. They are doing that because the training is not fit for purpose and, in a job they thought they could enjoy, they suddenly realise the reality of life on the landings. With a bit more maturity, that may not happen.

The Chair: All that could or could not be true, but I am anxious to be clear about this. I think you have said that if we can get the recruitment system improved—no longer using Zoom interviews, for example—and if we can get the support and

training procedures right then you would be less concerned about the argument about 18 year-olds versus 21 year-olds.

Mark Fairhurst: It is not right to expect 18 to 21 year-olds to look after other 18, 19 and 20 year-olds as an authority figure in a confined environment. Maybe we could just tweak it a bit and say, “If you’re going into the YCS estate, the young offender estate, then you have to be a minimum of 21”—but having 18 year-olds looking after other 18 year-olds means there will always be conflict and a challenge to their authority because they are the same age.

The Chair: Lastly, I am sure you appreciate that we as a committee have a difficulty in coming forward with recommendations that are likely to be taken up by the current Government, which is what we all want to achieve. We are pretty confident that, were we to go forward with a series of proposals that required a lot of money being directed at the problem, we would not get them immediately accepted. Among all the things that you have been arguing to us, in the speech you made in the middle of last year and so on, what are the quick wins that you would like a committee like ours to recommend to the Government that you think are possible to achieve?

Mark Fairhurst: You could improve prison officer training. You could employ full-time staff at prison officer training colleges instead of sending them on secondment for two or three years. You could recommend that a person does not get promoted in the job until they have a minimum of four years as a prison officer—that would definitely help. And you need to recommend that the culture at the very top changes so they have sympathy and empathy for staff and start to listen to the concerns that those on the front line are highlighting, instead of the attitude that, “I know best. You will do what I say and I don’t care what your opinion is”. We need to change that culture because, if it carries on the way it is, there will be more and more resignations and more cases of PTSD as people are forced to work in an unsafe environment because the people in charge of our prisons refuse to listen.

Lord Dubs: What you have said is pretty devastating. Is there anything you have told us today that would surprise the MoJ?

Mark Fairhurst: Not at all. They know what is going on but will never admit it in public. Listen, you get it warts and all from me. This is life on the landings. It is the reality of prison officer life. Whether people like it or not, now it is on record. They need to sort it out. They need to start listening to what we are saying and acting.

They very rarely discipline governors. They know what is going on. They know who the rogues are, but they never replace them. They know who they are. We had an example of a dozen staff whistleblowing using the whistleblowing policy, all putting in the same complaints about a senior leader bullying, intimidating and targeting staff. In fact, they targeted one branch official to such an extent that he had to leave the job because he knew that if he did not then he would get sacked because they would pin something on him. So 12 staff were all saying the same thing under the whistleblowing policy, but what did the directors do? They gave it to another

director to investigate, and guess what? There was no case to answer—surprise, surprise. That is the culture we are faced with. Everyone knows what is going on but no one wants to tackle it.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr Fairhurst. As you will appreciate, we had to be relatively brief at the beginning. We are enormously grateful for the evidence you have given today and that you have given in writing. You have drawn our attention, and I am grateful for it, to the evidence you have given to previous inquiries by committees both in this House and in the House of Commons. Thank you for all that, and be assured that we will be going through it. If there is anything further following this session that you felt you did not have the opportunity to say, please feel free to write to us. Equally, I suspect we may come back to you with one or two specific questions that I hope you will not mind responding to. On behalf of the entire committee, thank you.