

Justice and Home Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 21 January 2025

10.35 am

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

Evidence Session No. 6

Heard in Public

Questions 77 - 92

Witness

I: Charlie Taylor, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Prisons.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witness

Charlie Taylor.

Q77 The Chair: Welcome to a further meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Committee, where we continue our investigation into the governance and culture of our prisons. We are delighted that we have, as our witness today, Charlie Taylor, the Chief Inspector of Prisons. Mr Taylor, for the record, could you give us a little bit of background to yourself?

Charlie Taylor: I began my career as a teacher specialising in children with behavioural difficulties and ran a special school in west London for children who had been kicked out of other sorts of education. Then, through a rather bizarre route, I ended up as His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons.

The Chair: So far during our investigation we have learned quite a lot of worrying things about the state of our prisons. The issue of overcrowding has been very well covered, but in addition to that we have heard stories about drones bringing drugs and potentially weapons into prisons. We have heard about corrupt prison officers bringing drugs and mobile phones into prisons. We have heard that some of our prisons are even now run by organised crime gangs. We have heard from prisoners themselves that they are being locked up for far too long each day, with inadequate training opportunities to help them get jobs when they eventually are released. We have heard about inadequate support for many of the prisoners with mental health problems. The list goes on; it is a deeply worrying picture of the state of our prisons. Is it a picture that you recognise?

Charlie Taylor: Yes. You have summarised some of the big concerns that we have. It is worth saying, though, that there are some establishments that manage to buck the trend. It is really important from our point of view as the inspectorate that we highlight those jails as well. It shows that, despite the difficulties and the financial constraints that the Prison Service will always have, there are jails that can be successful, decent places.

Off your list there, my biggest worry in the short term is the ingress of drones into prisons and the effect that that has on destabilising the environment, particularly where they are bringing in drugs, mobile phones and potentially weapons. We put out a report this week into Long Lartin, which is a category A prison for the most serious offenders, and Manchester prison, which is a category B prison with a category A function. Both jails were getting hit very hard by drones bringing in contraband and, now, weapons. The idea that the most dangerous men in the country are potentially able to get their hands on three or four kilos of contraband, which some of these drones can carry, is very alarming.

Q78 Lord Sandhurst: Charlie, your inspectorate reports always include a section on progress on key concerns and recommendations from the full inspection. They are used to assess progress made since the last inspection at that establishment. It is not uncommon to see little progress reported when checked against the previous

inspection. There are two big questions: what is the reason for this and what should be happening? What should you or the prisons be doing? Can this committee do anything to help you better things?

Charlie Taylor: Things are going well if 50% of our concerns get dealt with. That is better than we normally see, but it is not nearly as good as we would want to see. I would add the slight caveat, though, that some of the concerns that we have are more structural and longer-term issues that that prison will not be able to fix in a short time. When we go to a prison that we are concerned about, we will then have a review of progress. We will turn up at the prison again within a year and check how it is getting on. We will look at the priorities that we set the jail from before, but, inevitably, some of those priorities, such as dilapidated buildings and the fact that in-cell sanitation just does not work properly, are long-term fixes.

I will give you a case in point. Long Lartin prison still operates what is called a night sanitation system. There is no in-cell sanitation for the men there. If they need the loo when they are locked up, they have to press a buzzer and then their door will open when there is nobody else around. That works fine as long as there is not a queue at certain times of day, in which case prisoners then have to go back to using a bucket, equivalent to the old slopping-out days. Those issues are taking time to fix. We know that at Coldingley prison, for example, the night sanitation is finally and slowly being got rid of.

Some aspects that we are critical of are not always in the governor's hands—for example, the transfers of very mentally ill prisoners who should be in hospital. We put out a report last year called *The Long Wait*, which revealed some very depressing findings about the time it takes for people who should be in hospital to get from prison to hospital. When we inspect a prison, we do not feel we can ignore something like that. Even though we know that the prison will not be able to fix that in the next six months or the next year, and it is also a health service issue, we feel we have to draw attention to those issues. It would be negligent and seem odd if we did not mention things like that.

The big frustration is when we talk about basic decency, which is absolutely in the gift of governors. When you go to a prison that has a big workforce of people who can clean but it is not properly kept clean, that is a big concern. When prisoners cannot get the basics—loo paper, soap, towels, bedding, those sorts of things—that is a sign of a real malaise within the prison.

Lord Sandhurst: There is no excuse for not having soap.

Charlie Taylor: No, there is no excuse whatsoever. You cannot put the blame on the Prison Service, the taxpayer or external organisations; that is absolutely on that prison. It is a symptom of poor leadership as well.

Lord Sandhurst: Is there anything that this committee can do? Is there anything you would like us to say?

Charlie Taylor: The most important thing you can do is to draw attention to the fact that some prisons are able to do this stuff and some are not. The question has to be why on earth the others are not able to do it. It is worth saying that the frustration of my job and of everybody who has sat in this chair has been that you sometimes end up writing the same report about the same jail almost word for word a second time.

I remember the late Lord Ramsbotham. I saw him in 2019 and I said, "There's a terrible report on Feltham that's just come out". He said, "Don't bother to read it. Read my report from 2001 before you read the Feltham report". Quite honestly, apart from one or two things, you could have cut and paste between the two of them without even noticing which one you were reading.

The Chair: Your only advice to us that would be helpful to you is to just continue to publicise all the things that are going wrong in our prisons at the moment.

Charlie Taylor: Holding Ministers and the Prison Service to account is the critical role here.

The Chair: Can I turn to Baroness Hughes and pick that up in a bit more detail?

Q79 **Baroness Hughes of Stretford:** I will in just a moment. Can I ask one question to follow on, Mr Taylor? Do you make a point of doing unannounced visits? If you do them, what proportion of visits are unannounced, as opposed to being announced in advance?

Charlie Taylor: All our main inspections are unannounced.¹ We drive into the car park of the prison, we ring the prison and we say, "It is the inspectorate here. Can you give us some keys, please?" One of the inspection team will then arrive with our research team. That inspector will go round the jail taking photographs, so that they do not have a chance to start painting things, and then our research team will go round the prisoners doing a survey of prisoners, so that we have lots of information and a snapshot view of the prison. The main inspection team then turns up the following Monday, but we certainly get an initial view of the prison within an hour of arriving in the jail.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: By the following Monday, though, they will have had a chance to clean up, put the loo rolls in place and all that stuff.

Charlie Taylor: Yes, but, first of all, our inspector will have seen it all and, secondly, the prisoners will tell us.

Lord Tope: In your opening remarks, Mr Taylor, you mentioned a number of prisons that you said were exceptional. What makes them exceptional? Are there any common factors between them?

¹ HM Inspectorate of Prisons explain that they operate an almost entirely unannounced inspection programme (other than in exceptional circumstances).

Charlie Taylor: One of the common factors would be leadership and the quality of leadership. I do not just mean leadership at the governor level; I mean leadership all the way down the food chain, so middle leadership and then particularly the senior uniformed staff, who are the people who translate what the boss, the director, the governor wants to happen on the wing.

The other thing is trust. It is prisons where leaders trust staff; they hold them to account, but they trust them to get on with the job. There is also an element of trust of the prisoners. Where prisoners are able to earn trust, they are incentivised to behave. I had a prison officer who came to visit me from a London prison the other day, and she said to me, "In the jail I work in, there are no incentives to do the right thing. There are no consequences for doing the right thing or doing the wrong thing in our prison". Prisoners are just kept in a state of limbo while they plod their way through their sentence without making any progress.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: You have talked about the failure of Governments across the years to act on the basis of your findings, including the Feltham example. Some of our earlier witnesses described the inspectorate as relatively toothless, because you can make recommendations and they are not acted upon. Can you tell us about how you see your relationship with the MoJ, whether it is constructive and whether you feel it supports you? How does that compare with your relationship with the Home Office, which has responsibility for immigration detention?

Charlie Taylor: We get on very well with the MoJ and the Prison Service, and all the Ministers I have ever dealt with as well. People have been incredibly gracious about us sometimes putting Ministers and the Prison Service in a very difficult situation. We are seen as a necessary irritant and there is value put in the work that we do. Because of the work of my predecessors over many years, my organisation has a reputation for integrity and independence, which people value.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: Why do you think it is, then, that your recommendations are so frequently not acted upon?

Charlie Taylor: It is also worth saying that we have plenty of examples of prisons we have gone back to after a poor report where things have really been turned round. Off the top of my head, in the last few years Isle of Wight improved significantly; Wayland prison improved significantly; Norwich jail improved significantly; Chelmsford prison was almost transformed; Woodhill prison improved a lot when we went back for a review. I would not say it is a counsel of despair.

At times it is very frustrating doing this job, because we do go back to places and they have not made progress, but there are lots of places we go back to where we have been really clear about what should happen and we actually see those changes enacted and coming into place. Very often it is off the back of a high-quality leader being in that jail.

Q80 **The Chair:** Just so I am clear, as you have indicated already in response to Lord Tope, some of the issues are about leadership within the individual prisons and

things that the leader or leadership team can do to resolve the issues you have drawn attention to, but there are some wider structural issues within the Prison Service overall that you have also referred to. Can you talk about examples of where your report has led to Government taking action to resolve issues you have drawn attention to?

Charlie Taylor: A case in point will be drones. We will wait and see, but we have at least helped create some momentum about the risk that drones pose to prisons at the moment. At Manchester prison, we are being told that the number of drone incursions has recently reduced, to some extent, from its high point. That was a structural issue about the windows at the prison, the netting and the CCTV at the prison not working properly.

The Chair: Remind me when your report first drew attention to the problem created by drones.

Charlie Taylor: Drones have been an issue, and we have been talking about them, ever since I have been chief inspector. What has become more complicated from a Prison Service point of view is that the sophistication of drones has got better, partly as a result of recent wars. The tech has just moved up a gear. They are more accurate; they can be hacked so that they are harder to trace; there are more sophisticated piloting arrangements; and the payload that they can carry has got bigger.

The Chair: But there are sophisticated, relatively available solutions. There is a prison in Guernsey that actually has an electronic shield.

Charlie Taylor: Ministers announced last week that they are sending people to look at that. Guernsey perhaps does not have the sort of organised crime problems that somewhere like Manchester has, so it may be that the level of threat is not quite the same there. Any technology that is applicable absolutely should be applied where possible.

I suspect the solution to drones is on a spectrum: at one end it is about whizzy technological solutions, but it is also about physical security, having netting and having windows that are unbreachable. It is also about having staff who are trained and know what to do if there is a drone incursion. It is also about doing the basics right. At Long Lartin, we found that rubbish bags were not being cleared away and were left lying around. The drone dropped a package disguised as a bag of rubbish and then, when the prisoner party came to clear it up, the package could be found and then dispersed around the prison.

The Chair: While I can absolutely understand the argument that says drones have got more sophisticated and addressing the problems they create is more difficult, the issues that you have just raised—netting, windows, staff training and litter—are things you specifically referred to in earlier reports. Who is responsible for not having done something? The Government are now talking about doing something. This is after four or five years.

Charlie Taylor: There is a hierarchy. The prison itself is responsible for those things that are within its gift; the Prison Service is responsible for some of the more structural stuff; and ultimately Ministers are accountable for the decisions that they make about funding and the use of resources within government.

Q81 **Baroness Buscombe:** I wanted to add something in relation to drones. If you have not already done so, it might be helpful if you were to have some conversations with people in charge of mental health facilities, because they have a similar problem. It is time that more of the truth was told about this. The reality is that it might help you encourage Ministers and others to speed things up.

I want to ask a question about the metrics that you use for determining an effective governor. I have a couple of supplementaries as well, but, if we could start with that, what is it that makes an effective governor?

Charlie Taylor: It is a very good question. I will take it in two ways, if I may. First, our job is about treatment and conditions of prisoners and outcomes for prisoners, and leadership is technically not an outcome. We want to trace back outcomes in the prison to what that governor has done. If things are going well in the prison, we want to understand what leaders have done in order to enable that stuff to have worked effectively. For example, have the staff been well trained? Are different bits of the prison working very closely together? If that is happening, we can trace that back to what the leadership has done. At one level, we look at it in those terms.

In terms of those we see as the most effective leaders, they are leaders who are clear about the vision for the prison. They are clear about what they are there for; they are rigorous about selecting and training staff; and they deal with poor performance as and when it arrives. They are very clear with people about what their mission is individually, but also how people will be held to account for what they have done.

They are present around the place, rather than just sitting in their offices sadly. The amount of times I have been asked in prisons whether I am the governor is incredibly depressing. At times I have asked prisoners, "Do you know whether the governor is a man or a woman?" and sometimes they are not able to answer that question.

A governor who gets round the prison is absolutely essential, as is the ability within a jail to reflect on what you have done and then to go through a cycle of deciding whether you need to keep doing it or whether you need to tweak it and do things differently. We come across governors who are really transformative in the way that they operate and they tend to have many or most of those characteristics.

Baroness Buscombe: Do they have the freedom to do that? I have read written evidence from people who have a huge amount of experience in the Prison Service, but may have retired, saying, "The issue, though, is the report to the line manager". Who is their line manager? Are they allowed that freedom? Maybe you could also explain about these self-assessment reports. Do they really make a difference or is it

ticking boxes?

Charlie Taylor: In terms of the line management arrangements, there is a regional lead, called the prison group director, and then on top of them there is another lead.² It is not entirely clear specifically what people's roles are within that. We have been critical and have tried to understand what those different bits of the system are supposed to do, who is accountable to whom, in what ways and in what terms. It is fair to say that the jury is out when it comes to whether that structure is actually effective. Sorry, what was the second bit of your question?

Baroness Buscombe: It was about the self-assessment report.

Charlie Taylor: When I came in as chief inspector, we wanted to start inspecting leadership, because we used not to inspect leadership as part of our inspection. I thought it was incredibly important that we did this. In a way, question number one is this: "How well does this person know their prison? Do they actually understand what is going on in their jail? Does that marry with what we think ourselves when we go round the place and do our inspection?"

We ask that the prison does a self-assessment form in advance of us coming in. Ideally they should do it as part of their performance management anyway, so that it is not an additional burden on top of them. Many prisons and prison group directors do them. When we go and visit the jail, we can then see whether this prison really understands what its challenges are or whether the governor has actually been running a virtual prison from his or her office. It really helps us to do that.

The other thing it sets out is the priorities that the prison has and, most critically, how it is going to measure progress towards those priorities. It is fair to say that that is probably the thing that the Prison Service finds hardest to do. It does lots of stuff, but it is not very good at measuring which bit of stuff actually made the difference.

Baroness Buscombe: Thank you. This is incredibly helpful. Does HMIP generally have a positive relationship with governors? Do you feel you have a positive relationship with governors? Are you feared or are you just seen as another box that is being ticked in your presence? Sorry to put it as crudely as that.

Charlie Taylor: Governors are worried about the inspectorate coming. Our reports are taken very seriously, which is a good thing. I am overwhelmed by how impressive governors are in the way in which they engage with the inspection process. It is very uncomfortable for them. It is often incredibly personal and difficult for them, and yet they are incredibly professional and supportive of the process. Even if they do not like the results, they are themselves supportive of the idea of an independent inspectorate, so I absolutely take my hat off to them. They

² The area executive director.

deal with us with real dignity and determination to make the inspection go as well as possible and to support us in getting to the right conclusions.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: As you say, you now routinely inspect leadership in the normal run of inspections. If and when you identify significant weaknesses in leadership in a prison that you feel accounts for some of the problems you identify in the prison itself, what action do you see the Prison Service or MoJ taking? Do you feel they have a robust response to that?

Charlie Taylor: If you ask people who work in prisons, at times there has been a sense that people get promoted upwards if they have not been successful somewhere—there are examples of that—or they get moved sideways to a job in HQ. That is a source of frustration among colleagues as well. I will also have off-the-record conversations with the Prison Service to say, “Look, I really think this person is struggling. You might want to think about what support they’re going to need in the future”. Generally, yes, I would say the Prison Service is responsive to what we say about leadership.

Q82 Lord Tope: We have not left leadership, rightly, but you said in answer to my earlier question that that was the factor that made them exceptional. The question I was going to ask was what leadership means and how HMIP defines it. You have largely answered that, but you might want to add to it.

Can I add to this, though? In your 2024 annual report, you refer to a number of prisons with effective leaders driving improvement. Then you said, “They operated, however, within a system that often appeared to work against them. Many described the long hours they spent plodding through labyrinthine HR processes, while frequent demands from the centre for information were another drag on their time”. Are you particularly referring there to the ministry and is the relationship between the two a serious issue?

Charlie Taylor: There is a problem with the way that governors spend their time. There is a gap between how we would want governors to spend their time—being out and about, talking to their staff, modelling behaviour, setting an example, talking to prisoners, understanding what is going on in the place—and the amount of time that they are chained to their desk doing mundane HR tasks, often by a system that does not appear to support them in being able to do that.

For example, the other day I was in a prison in Lancashire where the governor told me that his HR business partner was actually based in Devon and they had never met face to face. That was a jail that had one of the highest sickness levels of any prison in the country and therefore you would want real timely support for something like that.

At times they feel like they are wrestling with a bureaucracy that is not geared up, really, to be able to support them. They spend a huge amount of time bogged down in contractual issues when it comes to things such as building work, which take huge amounts of time and often feel like they are making little progress. They get tied up

in sending returns back to the ministry about whatever the latest area of interest might happen to be. That can often be a huge amount of work, but they do not feel they always get anything back for that. Governors sometimes feel like they are spending their time servicing the beast, rather than the beast servicing them.

I will just say one more thing about this. Every week the governors get a bulletin letter. One governor recorded how many pages the bulletin letter was week by week. The highest it ever got was about 27 pages long and the lowest was about 10 pages. You arrive at work on a Monday morning; you are in theory a trusted professional; you sit down at your desk enthusiastic about the week ahead; and the first thing you have to do is plod through 10 or 15 pages of various missives.

As a former head teacher—you alluded to this, Baroness Buscombe, but I did not answer it—the amount of autonomy that I had, when compared to a prison governor at times, was really extraordinary. I could recruit my own staff. I could set my own timetable. I could buy in my own external services. I could tender with my governing body for building contracts. None of those things is in the gift of prison governors. There was a tightening of the reins during Covid, for some understandable reasons, but what governors now say to me is that since Covid the reins have never been loosened.

It is probably worth saying that governors within private sector and contracted prisons will say that they have more freedom to operate and to use the flexibilities they have, but certainly in the public sector there are some frustrated governors who feel very constrained by the system in which they operate.

Lord Tope: In summary, they should be trusted with more autonomy.

Charlie Taylor: Autonomy and trust can be earned. If they have showed themselves to be good, competent and capable, why would you not push more trust down to that level? As I said, that is an issue across the Prison Service.

The Chair: Is it realistic to have a system where some governors have these freedoms—appointing staff, having building contracts, dealing with their own HR issues and so on—and others do not? Is that realistic, from your understanding of the system?

Charlie Taylor: I have now taught myself not to see prisons entirely through the prism of a former head teacher. I therefore recognise that some functions need to be kept centrally within a prison, but there are other areas where, without doubt, governors could be given more freedoms and they would thrive.

The Chair: Just so we have it on the record, what would be in your list?

Charlie Taylor: For example, governors have talked about contracting of education, which is done centrally through giant Whitehall contracts. Some of them have said to me, “We could do a much better job if we were able to contract locally. We have some good providers around us; we would be able to do that and make it successful”. That would be a case in point.

On building work in prisons, again, I understand the security, but that seems to take a very long time to go through very clunky, centralised processes.

The most critical one of all is about the recruitment of prison officers. Governors have no say on who turns up in their jail and the first time they meet new people is when they walk on to the wing for the first time.

If I may just give one example, which sums this up very well, this is an anecdote I have heard on a number of occasions. Governors have said to me that they are responsible for recruiting the lowest grade of officer, called an operational support grade. Those are the people who operate the gate and that sort of thing. They are not prisoner-focused. Governors have said that they have had someone apply for that lowest-grade job, and they have turned that person down because they did not have the aptitudes to do it, only to find that six months later that person has gone through central Prison Service recruitment and has come in as a fully qualified prison officer. For governors, it is just a huge source of frustration that often they find, within five minutes of someone walking on to the wing, that they are simply not going to be up to the job.

The Chair: Just so we are absolutely clear, from your many years of experience in the Prison Service, do you think it is realistic to introduce a system whereby all governors are responsible for recruitment of staff in their prisons?

Charlie Taylor: Yes, certainly. If you could not do it locally, you could at least do it regionally with far more governor or at least senior team involvement in the process. At the moment there is a remoteness that is a huge source of frustration.

Q83 Lord Dubs: What are your views on the cumulative impact of poor support services and training provision on prison staff? How do some prisons overcome this in supporting their staff?

Charlie Taylor: That is a very good question and very pertinent, because levels of experience within prison staff have never been lower. There are some very inexperienced staff in many prisons that we visit, often being managed by almost equally inexperienced staff. What we see is the turnover. Over 30% of staff leave within a year, and then quite another big tranche leave within three years.

First, the initial training programme does not equip prison officers to walk on to the wing with the confidence that they need, but, secondly, we would like to see much more in-service training for officers who are working in the jail. Just because you have qualified as a prison officer, you are by no means the finished article. It is a difficult, sophisticated, complicated job where you are balancing all kinds of different situations at the same time, and yet in many places officers say to us that they get very little support. In some cases they have not seen their line manager for over a year; they often say they have never met their line manager at all.

Where you have people put in such an exposed position, often with some very difficult and sophisticated prisoners, the danger is that those people decide that it is not for them and they leave. Unfortunately, as a result of it, they lose some very

good people. Initial training needs to be better at prison officer level. There needs to be more support for in-service training. For middle leadership and the senior uniformed rank, the custodial managers, there is no training.

I spent a day with the Army, looking at the way in which it trains non-commissioned officers, and it is completely different. Sergeants and corporals in the Army get a huge amount of input, because the Army recognises the importance of these people in delivering objectives, but in the Prison Service those people get a very big workload and no training at all in how to fulfil that. As a consequence, prisons are not able to be run, in a way. Even if you have a good governor, if you are up against a cadre of those officers who are just not well trained, you cannot put what you want into action.

Lord Dubs: In the past, you have spoken about your concerns in regard to retaining promising officers who could go on to be leaders in the future. We have also heard that a lack of clear opportunities for career progression was a key factor in why junior staff chose to leave. From your experience, is the prison officer role viewed as a sustainable career?

Charlie Taylor: Things have changed since the days when you could expect someone to give you 35 years of reliable service on the wing. People work in different ways from that. There is no longer the reliable pipeline of ex-service men and women who come out, join the Prison Service and then give you 20 years or so, having done 10 years in the Marines or whatever it might be. That pipeline is diminished, partly because of pay differentials and partly because our military is just smaller than it used to be.

We see a high drop-out rate. Given that the way people work has changed, it is incumbent on the Prison Service to think about how it is going to maintain that workforce, particularly when it comes to talent management. The Prison Service has a huge challenge on its hands to identify the most talented, to tap them up, to offer them a career that has the variety that will keep them interested and involved within the service, and that grows them towards being middle, senior or governors of the future.

The Chair: You have already talked about the issue of training. We would like to explore that a little further.

Q84 **Lord Filkin:** You made very clear that leadership of a prison is not just from governors; it is critical down the chain. You have just spoken about how important it is to have good, able leaders at custodial manager level. You signalled that there is a significant lack of training there at present. Given that you have partly covered that, perhaps you could address this question: what would you specify as what a good programme should be? For example, should modules from Unlocked Graduates be used as a way of rapidly developing that?

Charlie Taylor: I am a great fan of Unlocked Graduates and I am disappointed that at the moment it looks like the programme will close in the future. It has been doing

lots of work on developing a middle leadership programme for custodial managers and supervising officers, so we look forward to seeing the results of that. Its first cohort has recently begun.

What would make me more nervous is a centrally ordained leadership programme that does not sit in the hands of governors as well. Having involvement from people who are working on the ground is critical here in designing leadership programmes. Otherwise you end up with some very esoteric stuff about leadership, which has its place, but it does not give any of the practical support that people really need to be able to get the job done.

Lord Filkin: You mentioned Unlocked Graduates and we had a session with witnesses from there. You will know about Teach First and how significant that was in strengthening leadership talent in the teaching profession. Unlocked Graduates was largely modelled on that in its philosophy and approach, and it looked very impressive to us. Why do you think, then, that the MoJ has not worked harder to sustain it? You put enormous investment into building a function like that.

Charlie Taylor: I will not go into the details of the contracting, because that is an issue between the Ministry of Justice and Unlocked Graduates, but, from our point of view, the governors we inspect say to us that Unlocked Graduates has produced some terrific people who have gone into prisons and who never would have thought about prisons as a career had it not been for Unlocked Graduates. We hope that whatever complications are in place get resolved and that what has been an outstanding graduate scheme is able to continue.

Lord Filkin: It effectively says that one has the wrong procurement process if it leads to a result that you think is pretty disastrous.

Charlie Taylor: We would like to see the programme continue because we recognise the quality of the people it has got into jails.

Q85 Lord Henley: In your various reports from 2024, you talked about seven open prisons that you reckon were performing pretty well. Is this something inherent in the fact that they were open prisons or was it that they benefited from greater leadership than others?

Charlie Taylor: Open prisons have some inherent advantages in that, generally, the prisoners who get there are ones who have proved that they can be reasonably well behaved. They are also most effective when you have prisoners coming to the end of a longish sentence who need to be reintegrated into the community. I talked to a prisoner who did not really know how to use a smartphone in any practical way. He had obviously seen them in prison, because sadly they get smuggled in, but in terms of how important smartphones now are in our lives he was quite nervous about that, because he was coming to the end of a very long stretch. They are very helpful for prisoners who have been very institutionalised to begin to deinstitutionalise themselves and to go out to work in the community.

We also see with open prisons that their success rate is far better when it comes to employment on release. A far higher proportion of prisoners who have gone through open prisons are likely to be employed six months on, because they got into the habits of work while they have been within an open prison. It makes a big difference from that point of view.

They are also able to reconnect with family and friends. Once they have proved they can behave well, they can have weekends away, meet family in town and those sorts of things. Again, that is a way of gradually integrating them back into society and helping them find their feet again when they come out from custody.

In general, we find that open prisons operate pretty effectively. We have been critical of a number over the years. For example, we were highly critical of Leyhill in Gloucestershire. The level of purposeful activity in that jail was not nearly good enough. There was not enough enrichment. Education was not good enough in that prison.

Similarly, Kirkham up in Lancashire was a prison that we were worried about because of the amount of drugs that were getting into it. The prison was not fulfilling its function in terms of getting people out. Drugs were coming in, and prisoners were bored and were taking drugs. They are not perfect, but we come across some really outstanding prisons such as Hatfield or Kirklevington Grange, where some really impressive stuff is going on.

Lord Henley: Could they then be affected by the TPRS—the temporary presumptive recategorisation scheme? Could that be damaging to them?

Charlie Taylor: Yes, that has been an issue. This was an expedient scheme in order to reduce the prison population in category C prisons, so that a load of prisoners who were coming to the end of a relatively short sentence were shipped out of category B or category C prisons into open conditions.

Where there have been only a few prisoners coming into each jail, they have been able to absorb that reasonably well, but many of those prisoners are not particularly happy about being moved, because if they had only six months to go they were quite happy to be in Liverpool prison where their girlfriend could come and visit. To be shipped out miles away from home for the last six months, knowing that they will not get the opportunity to be assessed or to do work outside the prison because they do not have time, means that they just spend their time not doing much within prisons. That was the cause of many of the difficulties that we saw at Kirkham prison, but we have seen prisons be able to absorb TPRS prisoners very well where there are a smaller proportion them.

Lord Henley: From your report, even the most overcrowded, old-fashioned Victorian prisons such as Preston, Swansea and Leicester can be safe and decent. In the end—back to this leadership question—does this come down to leadership?

Charlie Taylor: It often does come down to leadership. There are some inherent advantages in some of those prisons, because where they are located in the country may mean that it is easier to find staff, so recruitment may be easier and there is less competition.

One of the other hallmarks of good prisons is that they do not have a turnover of staff. In weaker prisons, you tend to get into this vicious cycle where, if a prison becomes dangerous, violent and drug-infested, staff are more likely to get assaulted and more likely to vote with their feet, so more people leave, you get more sickness and people are more exposed.

We see that the good prisons are able to hang on to their staff. I recently talked to the governor of an inner-London prison, who told me that the recruitment situation was actually okay and that they were able to hang on to people there because it was seen as a good and decent place to work. If the prison is running effectively, the staff do stick around, but, if not, it becomes a difficulty. Places such as Swansea and Preston, which have not always been good prisons in the past, have made it a better place to work for staff, who are therefore more inclined to stay.

Lord Bach: The one you left out was HMP Leicester, which you praised last time and this time. Coming from that part of the country, I know it is under good managership. In two different times of my life, I have been to Leicester prison a lot, once as a barrister meeting clients and more recently as a police and crime commissioner talking to the governor.

My point is not about leadership, but about the building. Is it not obvious to you that that building is such a disgrace, so awful for people to be serving sentences in, giving them very little chance—even with good leadership—that it is incumbent on you and your team to make the point that this is a prison that should not exist in today's world? Is that fair or am I over the top?

Charlie Taylor: I absolutely agree. Leicester is an absolutely magnificent building. The gatehouse looks like a castle and you see tourists standing outside it taking photographs.

Lord Bach: It would make a great hotel, I am sure.

Charlie Taylor: It would make a great hotel or a museum, as would many of these large, listed Victorian prisons around the country. There is a difficulty in that, because they are listed buildings, you could not pull them down and build something that is fit for purpose. They are near the courts and they are also near where prisoners are from, so it does make life easier from that point of view.

If they were not so overcrowded, they could be made to work. Pentonville was built for about 600 prisoners and now has more than double that.³ Wandsworth was built for around 1,200 prisoners and had nearly 1,500 when we last inspected it.⁴ If

³ The witness has clarified that this should read 500.

⁴ Wandsworth was built for around 1000 prisoners and had over 1500 at the last inspection.

these prisons had the population for which they were originally designed, with men in single cells in most circumstances, there would be enough space for education, there would be enough staff to give prisoners the attention that they needed and people would be able to get into training for those sorts of skills. Then the prisons would be able to operate more efficiently and there would not be the constant strain on infrastructure that we see in these jails. It is very rare that we go to one of those Victorian prisons where there is not a generator set or where there are not temporary kitchen arrangements, for example. It feels like many of them survive by being a bodge-up on top of a bodge-up.

Lord Dubs: Can I ask you more about Wandsworth? It seems to have been a particular problem for a long time. Is it simply overcrowding or are there other factors?

Charlie Taylor: It is a combination, as ever with these things. Wandsworth is a very overcrowded prison on a very small site, so overcrowded that it is a struggle to get prisoners access to fresh air every day. We flagged that up in the last two inspections we have done. It has a relatively small education block and the opportunities for work are pretty limited, so the prison already suffers. When you then increase the population it makes things more difficult. It is also incredibly busy, because you are trying to get men in and out of court every day, but you are also trying to ship them off to other jails once they have been sentenced. The amount of throughput through the gate at Wandsworth is absolutely enormous.

We have also flagged issues with leadership over the years. I think there have been more than 10 governors at the jail since the turn of the century. The idea that you can really turn a jail such as Wandsworth round in a year or 18 months is simply fanciful. For some reason there has not been the consistency of leadership within the prison. As a result of that, they have struggled with things such as recruitment. The sickness levels of staff are very high. The place just has a feeling of chaos that we rarely see in other prisons. I have never been anywhere worse than Wandsworth at our last inspection.

Lord Dubs: What can be done about it?

Charlie Taylor: Well, we will be back at the jail within the year and we will expect to see change. There is a new governor who has gone in there. We are told that £100 million of resource has been spent on the prison and the population has been reduced. The Government's recent early release scheme has meant that there is slightly less pressure on the system. They have reduced the population of Wandsworth by I think 200 or 300, so that at least helps to take the pressure off. We hope the combination of those things will begin to make a difference, but Wandsworth is not a jail that is going to be turned round quickly. There are lots of really good, dedicated staff in the prison, but there are also a lot of staff who are just very inexperienced and need support and guidance to be able to do the job.

Q86 **Baroness Meacher:** In your report into the quality of work done with women, you noted that women serving short sentences are often not in custody long enough to

address the underlying causes of their offending. Is there some way they could be worked with, even after they leave custody, or is that out of the question? Is it just too difficult?

Charlie Taylor: There are some organisations that do that. For example, the Nelson Trust, which I know operates in Eastwood Park prison in Gloucestershire, and elsewhere, offers support to women who are coming out from prison. For riskier cases the Probation Service will also have input.

It is fair to say there are a substantial portion of women prisoners, and men as well, actually, who are stuck in this revolving door of drug abuse, mental health difficulties, homelessness, criminality and prison. At times—and prisoners have said this to me—being in prison is the most stable bit of their life. For many of them it is very complicated, because if they revert back to drug taking, if they do not take whatever medication they should be taking, and if they are living homeless, then almost inevitably they breach the conditions of their release and are therefore often pulled back in. In a deeply depressing way, we sometimes talk to prisoners who are being released on the Monday and they say, “I’ll be back before the end of the week”. Sure enough, we see them again back in the jail on the Wednesday.

Baroness Meacher: Yes, it is a pretty depressing picture altogether. What is the effect of this revolving door situation on prisons and staff?

Charlie Taylor: One of the most depressing things I have seen in my time as chief inspector was when I was in the property room at HMP Styal. A woman was leaving the prison and they said, “Do you want to take your stuff with you?” She said, “No, just leave it here. It’s fine”. I said, “Is that common?” and they said, “Yes, loads of the women just leave their stuff there because it is the only safe place they have to stick things”. The idea that your life is so chaotic and unstable that prison becomes an anchor for you shows the depth of the challenge that we are facing with some of the women who end up in prison.

Baroness Meacher: Thanks very much. That is helpful.

The Chair: On that particular point about post release, do you have any comments you want to make about whether the Probation Service should be doing more, for example in the case you have just talked about?

Charlie Taylor: We do not inspect the Probation Service, so I would not want to say too much about that. We know that the Probation Service is very stretched, much of the workforce is very inexperienced and they often have very big caseloads. They are also often dealing with some very complex cases and some very serious offenders. In places such as London, the Probation Service really struggles, simply because it does not have enough staff to deal with the volume of people who are leaving prison. There is a big strain on the Probation Service at the moment.

The Chair: We have had informal sessions with both you and the Chief Inspector of Probation, but is the point that you are illustrating the need for more joined-up arrangements between you and the Chief Inspector of Probation, so you could have

joint recommendations that might help address these issues?

Charlie Taylor: Yes, certainly. We produced a thematic report the year before last, looking at what was known as offender management in custody, which were new arrangements the Government had brought in, whereby they were better connected with services on the outside and there was a more seamless process between leaving prison and going back into the community. The findings of that report were pretty depressing and many of the things that the Government had set out to do were failing to be achieved.

We are also looking at some potential joint working on drugs with the Chief Inspector of Probation. Martin Jones and I work very closely and we talk regularly. At the moment, we are looking at developing another piece of thematic work, so that that connection between community and prison is properly monitored by us.

Q87 Baroness Prashar: Mr Taylor, can we talk a little bit about private and public prisons? You have written that cash is not everything when it comes to well-run prisons and you have made reference to Oakwood. Do you feel that public prisons can learn from private prisons when it comes to financial management and effective use of resources?

Charlie Taylor: There are things they can learn. At times it feels like there is an unnecessary distinction between the two types of prison. There could be more cross-fertilisation from both sides. Sometimes it is cultural that those habits are not in place. Contract management, which is part of a prison governor's job, is something that some of the private providers, probably because they are used to being in this world, appear to be able to do more effectively than some of the public sector prisons.

The other thing is the flexibility that directors in private sector prisons tell me that they have to make changes without having to go through more complicated discussions with HQ.

Baroness Prashar: You have already made reference to the lack of autonomy of governors. Do those in private prisons have greater autonomy?

Charlie Taylor: Yes, they would say that they do. They have to operate within the parameters of the contract, but some of the most innovative practice that we see is in prisons such as Oakwood, where they are doing things and using the autonomy in a way that we do not see often in public sector prisons.

Baroness Prashar: Is there a distinction because they have to look at PFIs and autonomy? There is a different structure. Does that make a difference? You think there is cross-fertilisation and learning, but is there something structural that is different between private and public?

Charlie Taylor: You are right to make that distinction. There are some structural differences, not least that the private sector is often in newer buildings as well, so

there are some inherent advantages. Because of the way that they are set up and the accountability framework, there is more flexibility for private sector governors.

In some of the areas where we would want to see the innovation being learned from, there is nothing to stop public sector prisons doing more of that or private sector prisons learning from the more effective public sector prisons.

Baroness Prashar: When it comes to independent scrutiny or the financial management of prisons, do you think currently there is a suitable framework for that?

Charlie Taylor: We do not go into that level of detail when we look at inspections. It probably takes us further away from the treatment and conditions of prisoners on D-wing, as it were.

Prisons cost around £50,000 per prisoner per year on average. The correlation between the “best-funded” prisons and their effectiveness is not always there. Oakwood in Wolverhampton, which I talked about before, has certain economies of scale, but nevertheless it is one of the least well-funded category C prison per prisoner in the country. It is also the best.

Baroness Prashar: Is there a difference in terms of the rehabilitation work that goes on, because you look at cost? What happens in Oakwood in terms of rehabilitation? Is it good at that as well?

Charlie Taylor: Yes, we thought it was outstanding at that; it was really, really impressive. I will give you one example. When I last visited, informally, about three months after our inspection, it happened to be having a dog day, which was where well-behaved prisoners who had earned the right were able to allow their dog, provided it was well behaved, to come and visit them.

I was talking to a prisoner who was ex-services, who had not seen his dog for months and had a chance to reconnect with the dog. For dog lovers, that is an enormous incentive for prisoners to behave well, to engage with work programmes and to engage with the work of the prison.

At Oakwood they are really good at being able to offer incentives that really matter to prisoners, in order that they can really see the advantages of behaving well, doing the right thing and engaging in the sort of things that will get them employment when they leave.

Baroness Prashar: Is what you are really saying that it is more a question of an imaginative approach and not just money?

Charlie Taylor: Yes, it is about creativity. Money is always important, of course, but it is also about creativity. It is also about being bold, because all this stuff is potentially risky. Oakwood, as a jail, and the Director, Sean Oliver, recognise that they carry an element of risk by doing that, but he is prepared to do it and, because the prison has a track record, it can do that.

We are not suggesting people get to Oakwood overnight, but there are things that every prison could do in order to be able to at least move in some areas in that direction.

Q88 **Baroness Buscombe:** Just very quickly, thinking about your opening statement and some of the extreme situations with regard to not having proper lavatories and so on, you just said that there is more chance that the private sector is going to have buildings that are fit for purpose. Do you think the Victorians looking down on us would think we are completely nuts that we list buildings like our Victorian prisons? Listing gets in the way, making the lives of people today so much harder, and is more expensive. Should we not put pressure on to de-list some of these buildings?

Charlie Taylor: I understand the question. It is impossible to stand in the central atrium of Manchester prison with the soaring architecture above you and to imagine that something like that would be pulled down.

We have to find a way to make these prisons work, either by building new prisons, converting existing prisons into museums, visitor attractions, flats or whatever it might be, and creating new prisons elsewhere, or by reducing the prison population.

We do have some absolutely stunning buildings, such as the chapel at Wormwood Scrubs.

Baroness Buscombe: I have been there. I understand that, but do you get my point of why I am asking the question?

Charlie Taylor: Absolutely, yes. It is an inevitable tension, but take Leicester prison. Again, one would not want to see that gatehouse being pulled down.

Lord Bach: Not the gatehouse, but behind the gatehouse, surely.

Charlie Taylor: There are bits of that that certainly are not fit for purpose when it comes to prisoners.

The Chair: I am sure there is a Select Committee on planning we could address these matters with.

Q89 **Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** Good morning, Mr Taylor. I wanted to explore this issue of retention in the context of the public and private prisons.

Last week we had very contrasting evidence from the Prison Officers' Association and Community, the union. When the witness from Community spoke, who are mostly in the private sector, they gave us a pretty rosy picture of much tougher vetting, much better appraisal and much better collaborative management of the prisons. Then we asked about retention rate and it was exactly the same. It was very poor.

First of all, do you think that is a fair reflection in terms of vetting, appraisal and the collaborative feel of the prisons? Secondly, beyond life, work and career choices, which, as you already said, mitigate against a 30-year stretch as a prison officer, are

there other things at play in private prisons, such as perhaps salary levels, that mean, despite a better feel and career HR element, they are not providing better retention rates?

Charlie Taylor: Across both public and private sector, retention rates vary a lot between different jails in the country. Partly that is regional, in that the pay of a prison officer might feel like better pay in some parts of the country than in others, and there is lots of competition for those sorts of good people.

Private sector prisons are not all good. There are plenty that we have been very critical about, but, if the environment is a good place to work and people feel fulfilled, enjoy their job and feel they are making progress in their career, they are more likely to stay.

There is some poaching between the private and public sectors. That is a healthy competition when it comes to things such as pay and conditions, which is probably quite useful, but it is a real challenge, because being a prison officer is a really tough job. It requires an enormous amount of skill. Very often, people come into the workforce when they are very young and just do not have the life skills, let alone the attributes, to go on and be a successful prison officer.

It is absolutely a challenge across the board, but the more that prisons can do to look after the people in their care and to make sure they are recruiting the right people in the first place, the better they can do.

The Chair: On that very last point about life skills, when we had the head of POA with us last week, he was very firmly of the view that nobody should enter the Prison Service until they had reached the age of 21. His argument was that you needed the life skills that you would get in the intervening period from 18 before you could join. Do you share his view?

Charlie Taylor: There is a strong case for that. Having said that, we are interested in the quality of people, and we would not necessarily have a view on what the right cut-off should be. Certainly, people who are more experienced from life are better able to adapt to what it is like being in a prison, but we do come across some very young officers who are outstanding. I would not want to dump on the younger staff, because some of them are absolutely brilliant and are brilliant almost from day one.

The Chair: Something that really has resonated in what you have been saying and what lots of other witnesses have said is that what we are not getting right at the moment is the recruitment, the selection and the early training programme. Can you just give more general thoughts on that?

Charlie Taylor: In some ways, it feels to me that there is such a desire to fill the pipeline that the bar is set quite low in terms of who gets through. That means that, when people arrive, they do not have the attributes. They do not get a very big training programme. With the best will in the world, they are people who are never going to settle. The job is not going to be for them, and yet they can then be a drain

on the prison's resource. They can be a drain on their colleagues, as they cannot be trusted. That puts a strain on the rest of the prison. The prisoners get very frustrated because they are unable to do some of the basic things that they would want them to do.

Making sure that the right people are walking through the door in the first place is critical. Sometimes governors say that prison officers have been given a slightly Pollyanna-ish view about what being in a prison will be and about what the realities of being in a prison are. Some people, when the rubber hits the road, very quickly decide that the job is not for them. A lot of money, time and effort has gone into recruiting them, which then simply goes to waste as a result of it.

The Chair: Is there really a lot of time and effort put into recruiting that person? What is the current recruitment campaign that is going on to recruit more staff with the right qualifications?

Charlie Taylor: There is advertising going round. There is then the process of vetting new staff, which is expensive.

The Chair: When you say there is advertising going round, how much recruitment have you seen personally for the Prison Service in recent times?

Charlie Taylor: Funnily enough, I was on the Tube yesterday and there was an advert there on the platform. There has been a wave of adverts, which have been quite controversial. Some have been on television as well. They show a prison wing in quite a fizzy state, I would say, and various prison officers doing their job. Then it says, "Is this for you?", or something like that. There is an attempt to at least be realistic about what some aspects of the job might be.

When it comes to the cost of training, expenses and sending people to Newbold Revel to be trained, all that adds up. If that person gives you three weeks' service, that is not money well spent.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Something we did pick up last week was that disparity between the expectation of the Ministry of Justice in terms of the appraisal of individual prison officers and the reality, with, for example, no rooms available for those appraisals to be carried out, officers needing to leave to undertake duties and other officers entering the room. First of all, is that fair reflection of what is happening inside the prisons?

The second concerning thing was the idea that officers who were capable of being custodial managers, for example, did not feel motivated to because there was a very limited increase in salary to take on that extra responsibility without the training that you mentioned earlier.

First of all, is the appraisal picture within state prisons as I described it? Secondly, do you find when speaking to prison officers a reluctance of people to take on more responsibility for more pay, but not significantly increased pay?

Charlie Taylor: I absolutely agree. We survey the level of support that prison officers get from their line managers. In each prison we inspect, we also send a survey round to the prison officers in the prison. Very often, they say they have never seen or they rarely see their line manager and they do not feel they get that sort of support.

It does feel at times that it is very much sink or swim for new staff. If you are lucky enough to have a few good, experienced colleagues around you, or to be put on a wing that is reasonably stable and working well, you might be able to build up some skills in order to feel confident doing the job. For other people that simply is not their experience at all.

When it comes to promotion and custodial manager roles, it is about making sure that they actually recruit the right people for those jobs. Sometimes it feels like it is now a certain person's turn to get into a role. Sometimes we see people who are very inexperienced, but they are not getting any training at all. Only in the private sector is there really any training for that custodial manager role, which is so critical and complex.

We had a group of custodial managers who came to see us in London to talk about the responsibilities and the roles. The two big frustrations were training and that the performance of some of their colleagues was not being managed properly. They said the worst bit of the job was doing their colleague's job because their colleague could not be bothered or was not up to scratch. The best are absolutely outstanding, but there is a tail of some who are really not fulfilling their job and are a burden on the rest of the prison.

Lord Filkin: It is tempting to think that the overcrowding problem has such an effect on prisons and their effective management that we will have to wait until we have seen the benefits of increases in capacity and reduction in supply through the sentencing review. I hope that is wrong. I hope that there are a string of systemic changes and operational changes that ought to be prioritised even at a time of acute overcrowding. Is that right and, if it is, what would your priorities be?

Charlie Taylor: There is plenty that can be done in the meantime. Neither Long Lartin prison nor Manchester prison, which I talked about earlier, are overcrowded at all. There is plenty of space. Every prisoner has their own cell. Yet we found that, in Manchester prison, 35%⁵ of prisoners were locked up during the working day. These prisoners were not getting to do any purposeful activity. They were not getting to work. They were not getting education or training, or the sorts of things that we would want them to get in order that, when they come out, they do not just go back into offending.

There should be a particular focus on how prisoners spend their time. In many places, we find prisoners locked in their cells for up to 22 hours a day. We then go into workshops and we find that they are empty or half empty, or that people have

⁵ This should read 38%.

not turned up or been made to turn up, and that is an enormous source of frustration from our point of view. The idea that you have these facilities and are employing teachers, and yet for whatever reason prisoners do not turn up, is just not acceptable.

My very strong view is that the Prison Service needs to reorient towards purposeful activity and thinking about how prisoners spend their time, and the skills, attributes and habits that they need in order that, when they leave jail, they can go on to get work and be successful.

Q90 Lord Bach: Last but very much not least, you wrote to this committee about your analysis of children in custody in what was a fairly hard-hitting report. Really, it is about what you have heard has been done since by the MoJ in addressing the very serious concerns that you had last year. What challenges are children in custody still facing today? Could you comment on that?

Charlie Taylor: The first thing to say is that there is some good news when it comes to children in custody, which is that we lock up far, far fewer children than we used to. In about 2000 to 2003, we locked up over 3000 children. The number now is fewer than 400.

There has been a big reduction in the number of children we lock up. Many of those who do get locked up are often on remand for or sentenced for very serious offences. Therefore, that can lead to a level of complexity that perhaps would have been watered down a little more in the past.

However, we are very concerned about the conditions and the way in which the youth estate operates generally. Cookham Wood prison, where we inspected in April 2023, was in an absolutely shocking state. There were many children being held in what was in effect solitary confinement. Despite having only 77 boys, there were 23 senior managers, and yet they did not seem to be able to have any effect on the place. There were not enough front-line staff, but the prison as a whole had 350 staff members.⁶

The prison was in a complete mess; levels of violence were very high; and everybody had in effect gone into a defensive crouch. We also see that, less so, but still with concern, in Feltham, Wetherby and Werrington, the three other public sector YOIs. Cookham Wood has now been closed.

Particularly with regard to what they call “keep apart” lists, sometimes there is a very legitimate reason why you do not want two prisoners to mix, because someone has committed a serious offence against a family member or something, but we find that they have got into these labyrinthine spider’s webs of “keep apart” lists where A cannot be with B, and B is associated with C, so C cannot be with B or A. It means that it is impossible to run the regime. You have all these kids who cannot be unlocked at the same time. If you have 30 boys on a wing, you can take only some

⁶ At the time of the inspection of 2023, there were 24 senior managers and around 360 staff members.

of them out at any one time, which means they spend most of the time locked in their cells.

Of course, what do bored teenage boys locked in their cells do? They start yelling at each other through the window. Then what happens when they are let out later on? It is a source of more conflict, but also standards of education, training and work are nowhere near what we would want to see.

I would just say the exception is HMP Parc in south Wales, which is a small children's YOI inside a much bigger prison, which actually we are inspecting this week. That is a far more effective provision. Children are out of their cells there for around 10 to 12 hours a day, including at weekends. They go to education. There is a very strong expectation there. The place is safer, better run, better organised than we see elsewhere in the public sector. There is a stability of the staffing in that jail, which certainly helps.

Lord Bach: Is the MoJ responding, though, to your call?

Charlie Taylor: The youth estate is probably one of the most frustrating bits of my job. We have seen some progress made but, for example, I talked about Feltham and the conversation I had with the late Lord Ramsbotham. We went back to Feltham and we saw some really good progress. A strong governor was in there. She had done an excellent job. She had a really good team in there, but in a subsequent inspection of that jail we went back and things had relapsed again.

These are tough places to run and I would not want to underestimate that in any way. Even when they are running well, it is fragile because you have a very volatile group of children within them. Nevertheless, there is a long way to go before we have children's prisons that we can be proud of.

Q91 **The Chair:** We must come to an end. Just before we do, we have been receiving evidence from a number of prisoners themselves. One thing that has appeared in very many of the letters we have from prisoners is the issue of mental health, mental health support provision and so on.

Many prisoners point out that there is a lot of evidence of mental illness in prison, self-harm and so on, and yet there is, they claim, inadequate support and prison staff have inadequate knowledge of issues around mental health. Is there anything you would like to comment on?

Charlie Taylor: We go to quite a lot of prisons where mental health services are not where we would want them to be by any means. We often find that it is the lower-level interventions that are not available. If people are very unwell, they will get to see a psychiatrist and, even if it takes a very long time, they will ultimately be able to make the transfer to hospital, but it is the lower-level poor mental health that many prisoners have where there is not support in place. Of course, the risk is that those people then get worse and have treatment only when things have got much worse and they require far more intervention. It is absolutely a challenge.

There is also the combination of mental health and drug taking. People are in habits of self-medicating, which is a big source of difficulties within prisons.

Broadening it out slightly, there are neurodiverse prisoners as well. The former Lord Chancellor Robert Buckland commissioned us to do a report into neurodiversity. One of the main findings of that was that we do not know which prisoners, for example, have learning difficulties. We do not routinely screen prisoners for learning difficulties or traumatic brain injuries, the sorts of factors that very often affect their behaviour. Staff have had very little training in terms of being able to effect change there, but there are now neurodiversity managers in place in prisons, and some of them certainly seem to be doing some good work.

The Chair: That early screening of prisoners was an important part of the report and there is no evidence, as I understand it, of that taking place.

Charlie Taylor: No, nothing like the level we would want to. They do it much better in the youth estate, in fact, but when it comes to adults we do not see the level of screening, which would help prisoners, but it would also help staff in the way that they deal with some of the prisoners.⁷

Q92 Baroness Prashar: On the back of that, it was suggested to us last week that on-site professional help in terms of psychologists and counsellors would actually help both the prisoners and the prison staff. It may be costly in the short term, but in the long term it would save money, because it would mean less stress, even on prison governors. Do you think that is a good suggestion?

Charlie Taylor: Yes, and one of the other neglected areas in prisons is the support that can be offered by prisoners themselves. This is partly because of the overcrowding crisis, but there are a group of prisoners, known as listeners, who are trained by the Samaritans and offer some incredibly valuable support to their peers. They are almost the first tier of support for prisoners' mental health and prisoners acquire outstanding skills from having been involved with the programme.

This is not necessarily an issue of cost either. If you have a category B prison, a local prison, which has a very high churn, in the past governors would have been able to hang on to some of those prisoners. If they were doing a really good job and they were settled, you would want to hang on to a proportion of them, but, because of the population pressures, you train someone up as a listener, they do a great job for two weeks, and then they are shipped off somewhere else. To some extent, some of those peer-led schemes have fallen victim to the pressures of population.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We must draw it to a close and, in doing so, give huge thanks to you for being with us today, for the answers you have given and for the help you gave us in a previous session. Thank you very much indeed.

⁷ The Inspectorate notes that while there is some screening by the Basic Custody Screening Tool (conducted within 72 hours of arrival into custody) sometimes needs can be missed at this early stage in custody, especially if the prisoner themselves is unaware that they have additional needs.

Quite clearly, we could have gone on asking questions for a very long time, and that would have been unfair on you, but if there are further things you think would be helpful please feel free to write to us.

As I warn everyone who has been in front of us, I hope you will not mind if we write to you with further questions that inevitably we will have. On behalf of the entire committee, thank you very much indeed. It has been a very helpful session indeed.