



Justice and Home Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 1 April 2025

10.30 am

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

Evidence Session No. 13

Heard in Public

Questions 161 - 179

Witnesses

[I](#): Lord Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, Ministry of Justice; Phil Cople, Director General of Operations, HMPPS.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witnesses

Lord Timpson and Phil Copple.

Q161 **The Chair:** Welcome, everybody, to our final oral evidence session of our inquiry into prison governance and culture. We are delighted to have Lord Timpson and Phil Copple with us. Before we kick off, I would be grateful if you could both, for the record, formally introduce yourselves and your roles.

Lord Timpson: I am the Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending.

Phil Copple: I am the interim CEO of the Prison and Probation Service.

The Chair: Before we kick off with the formal questions, I turn to you, Minister. You have been the Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending—the last bit was added, apparently, at your own request—for eight months. During that time, you have had to contend with quite a lot, including a huge amount of media coverage—not all of it very good—about what is going on in our prisons, from overcrowding right the way through to corrupt prison officers, drones bringing drugs into our prisons and so on. We thought it would be helpful, before we get into some more formal questions, if you gave us your reflections on your first eight months in post.

Lord Timpson: I still have friends coming up to me saying, “How are you?” For me, doing this job is a huge privilege. It is the biggest challenge that I have ever had in my career. I have been fortunate to know a lot about prisons and probation before I did the job. Also, I have run quite complex organisations where we needed to make lots of changes, there had been issues around culture and so on. I feel that, in some ways, I am relatively prepared for the job.

Also, one of the things that has really become clear to me is that the role is very much like an exec chair job. Other ministerial jobs are much more non-exec, but this is pretty operational. The prison capacity crisis has been the shadow over every day since I started, as it probably was for people who were doing the job before me. It is an organisation that has been used to operating on high anxiety and short-term fixes, so what I am trying to do, with the Lord Chancellor, is to go about significant reform calmly and to talk and do things calmly and sensitively. We also need to make sure that we address the significant problems that we have.

I have three focuses. The first is to deliver on the independent sentencing review. We will need to wait until David Gauke’s review is out in the spring.

The second is to reduce reoffending. You are quite right, Chair, that I managed to get that in my job title. When 80% of offending is reoffending, this is really where the focus is; it is what I spent 20 years before I did this job really focused on. We have already set up the Women’s Justice Board and employment councils. We have had the first meeting of my drug and alcohol expert advisory panel. There are lots of

issues that we need to focus on around serious organised crime, which I know members are aware of.

My third area of focus is HMPPS being a world-class organisation. From my experiences of running businesses over the years and being part of non-business organisations, culture is absolutely vital. That is why I am really pleased to be here today to talk about something that I am really passionate about.

There is a lot of really good work going on in the organisation, and a lot of fantastic people who are dedicated to public service, but we need to focus on leadership, culture and standards. I am a big believer in standards. I have never come across a great organisation with poor standards. We need to focus on training and to be an employer of choice.

This will take time. Culture change takes time—three to five years, in my view—which is why I have a real mission to be here for as long as I can, to try to develop change with the reform programme over a long time. We have to fix the capacity issue because, if you do not fix that, you cannot fix anything else. I am really enjoying it, but it is a big challenge.

The Chair: It is worth reflecting that, when we have had former Secretaries of State in front of us, they raised the whole issue of the length of time people were in post. We will perhaps come on to that in relation to governors, as well as the relevant Minister, being in post.

Q162 **Lord Bach:** My question is: how do the Government define the core purpose of prisons? Should there perhaps be a clearer hierarchy than there is at the moment of the statutory purposes of sentencing—set out, of course, in the Sentencing Act 2020—in order to ensure a more effective and focused prison system? There may be a clue in the fact you took the extra title to your job in the answer that you give, but that is the question.

Lord Timpson: The core purpose of prison is punishment and protecting the public, but we also need to make sure that we have a focus on rehabilitation because what we do not want is for people to leave prison then come back, which happens all too often. How it links in with the Probation Service is a real key to that as well. For me, the core purpose is punishment, protecting the public and rehabilitation. The sentencing review is under way. When that is done, as I said in my introduction, it will be really interesting to see the direction it sees things going in. For me, the core purpose of prisons is still to punish people, to protect the public and to make sure that people leave and do not come back.

Phil Cople: I would challenge the premise of the question slightly in terms of hierarchy. In the way James has just outlined, there is, in essence, a tension that the organisation has to balance. It is not helpful to overemphasise having a hierarchy as if some of what has to be held in balance is not as important as other things.

There is a fundamental thing around carrying out the orders of the court; that means we need to make sure that prisoners do not escape. Otherwise, the order of

the court is being subverted and another offence is being committed, so that is a fundamental thing. We always have to run establishments in a way that balances the protection of the public and the delivery of that sentence or order with the fact that we are trying to have a positive rehabilitative outcome as well. There will be a tension between those two things. Some prison systems around the world do not try to balance it, but the best ones do, and we do.

Lord Bach: We understand exactly what you mean by that tension. The reason for the question is that there have been experts and people involved in this area who criticise the fact that the Act did not make a “1, 2, 3, 4, 5”. Both of you say that that is not necessary and that you do not have to have a hierarchy. You have to have the five. Am I right in assuming that?

Lord Timpson: The core purpose of prison is clear. We need to make sure that we do that very well but also that we adapt to the changes we are seeing, for example with the sentencing review. For example, when we went to have a look at the prisons in Spain, although the purpose of their prisons was and felt similar, they had a far bigger proportion of, for example, open prisons compared to what we have. The way they do it is slightly different to the way we do it, but the core purpose of what they are trying to do is the same. As Phil says, it is about getting that balance right.

Q163 **Lord Henley:** I have one quick question. Minister, in your introductory remarks, you talked about HMPPS. Do you think that it should still include “PP”, or just be “HMPS” then “Probation Service”?

Lord Timpson: It works well. It needs to be together. There is a lot of overlap and a lot of probation staff who work in prisons. The prisoner journey needs to be far more fluid from when people leave prison and go into the Probation Service. They need to speak the same language. They need to have the same values and culture; that is why it is really important that they are together. One of the things that I have been quite struck by is how probation is the unseen, unheard part of the organisation but it is where the heavy lifting is, and needs to be, done. There are far more offenders on the books of probation than of prison.

Q164 **Baroness Hughes of Stretford:** Good morning, both of you. I get very troubled by what I think is a false dichotomy between punishment on the one hand and rehabilitation on the other. The punishment is the deprivation of liberty, which is also part of protecting the public from people who have committed a crime. If you just release those people without any attempt to reduce their offending in future, you are not protecting the public. Would you agree with that? Is that something you can subscribe to?

Lord Timpson: That is why I came into this job: to reduce reoffending. I have employed hundreds of people from prison who have become fantastic colleagues, although it has not always worked out. I believe in second chances. I do not believe that everybody is right for employment on release. It is difficult to rehabilitate some people when they are released, but that is our job. It is harder to do that when the

prisons are completely full and when there is not the stability in the organisation that we need. That is one of the things I am really focused on: calmly setting out a strategy and a reform programme so that we can really focus on people leaving and not coming back.

Q165 Baroness Prashar: Good morning. You have been very clear about the purpose of prisons, which is to punish, to protect and to rehabilitate. I agree with Phil that there is no hierarchy and that, in a way, these are all an integrated whole. Would you say that that accurately reflects what happens in practice? If not, is there a need for greater clarity—communicating better—in defining and getting across the purpose of the Prison Service?

Lord Timpson: Personally, I have never been a massive fan of mission statements when it comes to businesses, but I can see, in the Prison and Probation Service, which is a big organisation with more than 60,000 colleagues, how we need to be very clear about the purpose of what we are trying to do. As part of that, we need to think about what kind of organisation we are, how we look after our staff, how we work in safe environments and how we have a positive work culture. One of the problems with mission statements and their purpose is that you can end up drifting around and adding lots of things on.

Baroness Prashar: I did not use the word “mission” in my question. I know it is there, but I was using the words that you said are the purpose. I asked whether that reflects what happens in practice and, if not, whether there needs to be clarity across the organisation.

Lord Timpson: It is inconsistent. I can give you lots of examples of where I see world-class practice in prisons and in probation, and I see examples where we are way off. One of the things I am interested in is more consistency.

Phil Cople: Where, in practice, there is evidence that we fall short, that we are not striking a balance and that we are not delivering as well as we want to, I am not sure that I would draw a straight line from that problem back to a lack of clarity on purpose. It is much more the case that it can be a symptom of some of the challenges that are faced; of some of the weaknesses, either in key systems or key people; of resource constraints; or of the infrastructure, which is very difficult in a lot of prisons. Conditions are not what we would want them to be; that is why we hope to spend more money on maintenance to make sure that those conditions are better.

We also have a very varied estate. Prisons do not all have the same cohorts or exactly the same task in front of them. We have places that are managing people for a long time; places that are helping people who are about to be discharged to resettle; and places that are primarily serving the courts, with people on remand or newly sentenced. There are quite a lot of functions, which can then be reflected in local cultures and local priorities. There has to be space to allow that local focus and priority from local leaders as well.

Baroness Prashar: Let me move on to the Probation Service. How does its role differ from that of the prison officer? Are the two roles very clearly defined under the current structure?

Lord Timpson: They are clearly defined but there is quite a bit of overlap. Prison officers work in a custodial environment. Probation staff work predominantly in the community. They are managing risk. They meet offenders, and they provide information to the court. I would much prefer that they spent more time face to face with offenders rather than doing lots of administration; that is one of the things that we are working on.

Phil Cople: Some of the core purposes and outcomes that we are striving to achieve are the same between prison and probation, in the sense of delivering court orders and sentences as well as seeking to protect the public and reduce reoffending. That is fundamentally why, not just in England and Wales but in lots of jurisdictions, prison and probation are part of the same organisation and agency. It is also because a significant number of people will pass from one part of the system to the other.

One of the things that has been very evident over the past couple of years in dealing with capacity challenges, in probation as well as in prison, is that, if you pull a lever in one part of the system, it has an impact on the other, which you have to take into account. From a managerial point of view, there are advantages for the Government in having oversight of both of them, so that they can deal with those effects from one to the other.

Probation also has some distinct functions. They are unique in the sense of being the only part of the criminal justice system that operates in every single part of the system. They work very closely with the police. We have probation staff in court giving advice on sentences; there has been a lot about that in the news this week. That function is important, as well as working in prisons. The bulk of the work is dealing with people serving community sentences or post-release supervision, having come out of prison, and working very closely with lots of partners.

One of the key differences I would point out in terms of trying to achieve those outcomes is that probation is place-based in a way that prisons never can be, so they are much better-placed to work with a whole range of partners that look after the people in this borough of London or this part of Manchester. That is why we can work closely with other people, because their services will always make a big difference to reoffending outcomes. We want to be part of that effort.

Probation has a very natural leadership role in bringing those partners together to try to reduce reoffending because, although health, substance misuse, accommodation and employment services all make a difference in terms of reoffending, probation is the only organisation that has trying to reduce reoffending as its core purpose, so they can lead some of those efforts.

Baroness Prashar: In previous evidence, we have heard that there is a move

towards centralisation in terms of recruitment. Are these differences understood, or are they blurring the distinctions that you are making on the different requirements?

Phil Cople: No. The centralisation of recruitment is really just an administrative effort to try to reduce costs and to improve consistency, standards and our effectiveness in being able to recruit at the right volumes. There is evidence that that is being effective already on the probation side; historically, it has been so for us on the prison side as well. It is an administrative thing. It does not stop us targeting the right sort of work to local priorities for the people we hire.

Q166 **The Chair:** Before we move on, I am genuinely still confused, from the answers I have received, about the clarity on what prisons are for. Minister, you said that it is very clear that the key purpose of prison is punishment and protection. If you were a member of the public, would you believe that that gives a clear understanding of the purpose of prison to the public?

For example, what do we mean by “protection”? Do we mean locking people up so that they cannot commit further crime, or do we mean rehabilitation activities to ensure that there is less crime later? Do you not believe that it would be helpful, for both the public and the people who work in our prisons, to have greater clarity on these issues? All of the witnesses we have had evidence from believe that there is not that clarity at the moment.

Lord Timpson: It is to punish people, to protect the public and to reduce reoffending. That is the key role.

The Chair: You have now added one to it, so there are now three top priorities.

Lord Timpson: Those are my three.

The Chair: The point I am making is that, even in the answer you are giving, you are now giving a slightly different answer to the one you gave earlier to try to explain it. That lack of clarity is something we have heard from a number of witnesses during our many months of looking into this.

Lord Timpson: What is important is that, when people go to prison, they are there to be punished. The victims need to see that the punishment is done. We have an opportunity, when people are in prison, to work with them so that, when they come out, they stay out. For some people, that means they are there for a long time; others are in for a short period of time. It means that we often need to address, as I am sure you well know, alcohol, drug addiction, mental health issues and so on. From a victim’s point of view, it is very important that they see that justice is done.

The Chair: I am not sure I got the answer there that you believe that there is a need for greater clarity. Do you think that the public and the people who work in prisons have a clear understanding of the role of prison?

Lord Timpson: I do not think that it is 100% clear. There are lots of TV documentaries and stuff that often give, from my experience, an unrealistic view of

what goes on in prison, but there are big walls around a prison and those prevent lots of people really getting to see. I know that the committee has been to HMP Belmarsh and HMP Isis, as well as, I am sure, lots of other prisons in the past. When you go in there, you get a much better idea of the complex nature of both the organisation and the people with whom we are dealing.

The Chair: We will come on a bit more to the links between the public and the people who work in prison a bit later.

Q167 **Baroness Bertin:** Good morning. I want to talk a bit about accountability and oversight, particularly with regard to governors. How effectively do you think the MoJ oversees the performance of prison governors? We had some really compelling evidence around how important a good governor is, without stating the blindingly obvious; that certainly stayed with me. Are you happy with those mechanisms? I would also point to Penal Reform Solutions saying that “poor-performing governors are rotated without transparency”. Do you recognise that? What are your views on that?

Lord Timpson: I have been visiting prisons for many years. When I was opening up training academies in prisons, I followed the governor rather than the prison, because a governor in a prison has a huge impact on successful outcomes for prisoners and the happiness of staff—more so than in virtually any other organisation I have ever come across. Prisons often employ over 1,000 or 1,500 people, so it really is vital that you get the appointment right.

I am also aware that, when organisations are going through a difficult time, as the Prison Service has for the past 10 years, you get a lot of head office control and people wanting to make sure that things do not go wrong. Governors have been pressurised by having difficult prisons to run, because of the capacity issues and the increasingly complex nature of the prisoners we have, but also a lot of pressure from Ministers and senior civil servants around performance.

There is a pretty standard governance check to it. If I am a governing governor, I report to a prison group director, who reports to an area executive director, who reports to Phil, and there is a prison performance committee. One of the things that I am really keen on is accountability. One thing that I have seen and am working on at the moment is how we share good performance between governors.

Could I give you a small example? When I started the employment advisory boards about four years ago, I was really interested in how cat D prisons performed against other cat D prisons in terms of employment outcomes on release. There was an inbuilt resistance in the organisation to share the results between similar prisons. I managed to get through that. As soon as that was displayed, so that every governor could see how they were performing against similar prisons, performance rapidly went up. One of the things I am really interested in is how we share good practice, encourage governors to be more accountable for their performance and show them what “good” can look like.

Baroness Bertin: Can I come in on that? We had some evidence where one governor mentioned that there is not a great deal of good practice sharing, particularly between privately and publicly run prisons. Presumably, in terms of privately run prisons, there is competition there, so I wondered whether you thought that was a bit of a problem as well.

Lord Timpson: You are right. There are some examples. HMP Millsike is opening, and Mitie is the company that has the contract to run it. I know that the other private operators have been generous with their time and expertise on how to open a new prison from scratch. Although there are examples of shared practice, there is quite a siloed mentality between companies. Maybe I could hand over to Phil, who can give us more details.

Phil Cople: Good practice sharing is a perennial challenge for the organisation. I am more than 34 years into this, so this is not the first time I have heard it, but we have made quite a lot of effort over the years around having ways of disseminating good practice. We have gleaned that from our own monitoring of prisons, own audit reports and inspection reports, and we have tried to share that. We certainly encourage a lot of sharing within prison groups—most prisons are organised into a group; the governors are line managed by the same prison group director—and try to learn from each other, as well as groups learning from each other.

There is a lot of that that we seek to encourage. Like us, the inspectorate has available, on the internet for it and the intranet for us, resources about good practice. One of the things that the inspectorate does in every report is identify any examples of good practice, so the material is there for people to look at.

Often, we have taken forward national initiatives that have been based on good practice that has been identified and that we feel is replicable and should be something we do more widely for every prison of the same type for this particular initiative. There is a lot of activity that goes on in that respect, but I accept that there can be a risk that, locally, managers can look downwards a lot and not outwards enough; we are not picking that up. Governors can vary a great deal in how adept they are.

Baroness Bertin: I have one final question; I will be quick as I am conscious of time. Do you think that there is a big enough talent pool so that, if you have a problematic governor who has to be managed out, you have enough people coming up in the pipeline?

Lord Timpson: We may come on to this subject later on but I do not think that there are enough future governors coming through, which is a real challenge for us. Succession planning is something that I am addressing rapidly with the organisation.

Q168 **Lord Filkin:** Minister, as you said very clearly, the quality of leadership provided by a governor is a critical factor. It is a truism for any organisation but these are complex jobs; they are closed institutions. We have had an enormous amount of evidence from people that this matters enormously. We have also seen it ourselves. We have

met some outstanding prison governors who have impressed us. I will go no further. Given that we are all agreed that the quality of prison leadership is fundamental, what is the strategy for developing more outstanding governors for the future?

Lord Timpson: One of the things I was surprised about when I took on the role is the lack of depth in future governors coming through, because the organisation always recruits from within. If every governor won the EuroMillions this week, we would have a problem because we do not have enough talent coming through. From my experience of running organisations in the past, succession planning is probably one of the most important roles of leadership.

One of the things that we will do is launch a future leadership programme, which is a much smaller version of a completely different way of recruiting future governors into the organisation. It is a smaller, longer-term programme because we need to make sure that they have all the experiences, so that, when we ask them to take that big step up to governing a prison and being the governing governor, they do not fail. They need to get the depth of experience of running different organisations, working with really good governors and really learning their trade, rather than us spending a lot of time recruiting other grades. This is a real opportunity but, if we do not get it right, it is a risk.

Lord Filkin: Is it about attracting more leadership potential at the beginning of careers, or is it about developing through the career?

Lord Timpson: I have met lots of governors who joined as an officer and never dreamt that they would one day be leading a prison, so we need to give everybody in the organisation the opportunity to achieve their potential. We also need a specific programme. We are thinking of about 35 people a year being recruited into the future leadership programme, where they come in, often from outside the organisation, and really fast-track through to leadership positions.

Lord Filkin: It is very good to hear that. Should that make us less worried about what looks like the premature demise of Unlocked Graduates because, in a sense, this future programme should go some way to addressing that?

Lord Timpson: It is a different type of set-up that we are going to do. If I can address Unlocked Graduates at this point, we were really disappointed that the procurement process failed. We were ready to sign, then Unlocked Graduates decided not to sign.

Lord Filkin: So it was the procurement process that failed, rather than Unlocked Graduates?

Lord Timpson: Unlocked Graduates decided that it did not want to sign the contract that we were prepared to give it. This meant that there was a gap in the programme. We still have Unlocked graduates on the programme this year and next. In my office, I have Unlocked graduates with whom I work every day. They are fantastic. I have been to many Unlocked Graduates training programmes over the

years. As part of my training review, I saw a lot of the great work that it has done, but this is an unfortunate situation. I recognise that, for me, the biggest challenge in leadership is making sure that we have enough future leaders coming through; that is why, for me, the future leadership programme is the way to go.

Lord Filkin: If you look at the reform of secondary school education over the past 20 years, there has been a conscious effort to raise the status, the pay, the rewards and the recognition. If you compare prison governors' pay, status and gongs, these might be trivial things but they nevertheless reflect low respect for prison governors compared to, say, for very successful secondary school leadership figures. Should we be going much stronger in terms of recognising pay, status, reward and recognition?

Lord Timpson: They do an absolutely incredible job of running very complex organisations with very complex people in them. We are indebted to them for what they do—especially in Covid, when they managed to do an incredible job. On that point, I will hand over to Phil.

Phil Cople: On the pay side of it, they benefit from an independent Pay Review Body. It is fair to say that, particularly in recent years, the pay awards that prison governors have had have been better than the Civil Service's average and remit. That is helpful in terms of that issue.

There is a legitimate issue, then, in trying to compare with other sectors. How does the pay compare to that of the head teacher of a large, complicated secondary school? The comparisons will not always be favourable. The Pay Review Body is looking at the evidence of comparable sectors and occupations and trying to make sure that it is market-facing, in terms of what it recommends. They have done better than the Civil Service remit.

Quite a lot of governors, to one of your points, have some post-nominals, where we have managed to succeed in putting them forward for nominations. Sometimes their staff have nominated them as well, and they have received honours. That is certainly something that we encourage in terms of recognition. We also have internal recognition that we seek to take forward.

There is a broader point. It is even stronger for the Probation Service, because it is even more hidden than prisons, but there is something about the visibility and understanding in wider society, as well as the status that may come with that.

The Chair: We are very conscious that there are quite a number of current prison governors coming up to retirement age, so there is the potential of a real shortage of well-qualified people to take over. In terms of the timing of the introduction of the future leadership programme, the data you have on the number of governors likely to retire and so on, it would be very helpful if you could urgently write to us about those issues and the timing, with a bit more detail on the future leadership programme. We must now move on.

Q169 Baroness Hughes of Stretford: Before I get to my main question, I want to go back to the Unlocked Graduates contract. I understand what you are saying, and that is also what we heard, but we also heard that HMPPS changed the terms of the original contract with the new contract in ways that Unlocked Graduates felt very strongly would limit the freedoms and flexibilities it had in delivering that programme—elements that it felt had been essential to its success. What is your response to that?

Phil Cople: My headline response would be that I do not accept that characterisation of it. It would be unusual for an organisation to have contracted a service in for a number of years, even a successful one, then not to have reviewed things and identified any changes and improvements it wants to make. That is what we did.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: Did you review that with Unlocked Graduates as well, or did you just review it internally then try to impose changes?

Phil Cople: Unlocked Graduates was certainly engaged in that process; it had an opportunity to comment on things before they were finalised. It is fair to say that it expressed misgivings from the first engagement onwards. I am not pretending that it welcomed it, but it would not be correct to say that it had not been engaged at all. The changes we sought to make were genuinely not ones whereby we felt we should have ended up where we did and were of such import to their model that they would not be happy to continue if they won the next contract.

Some of them were fairly presentational. For example, we wanted to rebrand the scheme because we had to have a brand that any provider could deliver, rather than one that was synonymous with an organisation. We could not have a contract with just that one organisation for ever. There had to be a competitive process, as in the public procurement rules. That is not a significant thing. We wanted to change some of the key performance indicators and service level agreement elements. That is detail in the delivery and should not have been something that disabled the whole approach.

We wanted to have a different placement strategy to reflect our resourcing priorities, so we did not necessarily want Unlocked graduates only at the places where Unlocked found them easiest to recruit to and where there had been well-established routes put down in certain prisons. We also wanted to recruit in places where we struggled to get Unlocked graduates, because we had resourcing challenges and it was a helpful way of getting prison officers into those places. We wanted to tailor the master's degree a bit more as well, as well as to have pathways for people who graduated potentially to stay in the organisation and stay operational so that we had better retention levels.

I want to correct one thing that was touched on earlier, in terms of a future scheme for graduates, career changes, future leaders and Unlocked Graduates. Unlocked Graduates was not a management development scheme. Unlocked Graduates would be the first to say that it was not designed to bring in bright, young people to

have a career in the organisation for ever. It was designed to bring people in, where they could be a prison officer for two years; it was based on the original concept of a Teach First model. It exposed a lot of capable people, who might, in future, be leaders all over the country in different sectors, to that experience. They would be advocates and champions for a better prison system in future. Some of them might want to stay in the system or within the wider justice system, but it is just a two-year programme. They would potentially have the option of staying as prison officers, but they would be people who have potential to do other things. It was not a management programme.

We wanted to make some changes. Unlocked Graduates was fully aware of that. It was not the only bidder. All the bidders submitted bids. Unlocked Graduates was the successful one. We wanted to award the contract. We could not change the terms then, having gone through that process; that would be unlawful. It did not sign the contract so, unfortunately, we do not have one.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: It just seems very unfortunate.

Phil Copple: It is unfortunate, and it is disappointing, but I want to be clear that what we are doing with the recruitment for future leaders is quite a separate thing.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: I understand that. Thank you. Minister, I want to move on to the more general issue of the degree of centralised control that there is on governors and the degree of freedom and autonomy. It is something that we have heard a lot about from governors, academics and others researching and working with prisons, in terms of this being an issue that is constraining governors' ability to do the best for their prisons. We have heard a lot of frustration from governors themselves. Are you happy, first, with the current balance between centralised control, such as we have just heard about, and greater governor autonomy?

Lord Timpson: I do not think that the balance is right. There is a lack of operational freedom for governors. I come from an organisation where we ran it completely the other way around, so it has taken a bit of time to get used to that.

Going back to my previous point, when an organisation goes through a very difficult time or a crisis, you can see why head office takes more control, but one of the things that is really important to me is that we do not just recruit and train great governors but let them govern. It is also really important that their personality develops with the culture of that prison. They need to be trusted more, but we also need to make sure that, where we provide central support in terms of HR, health and safety and so on, that is a really positive way of supporting them and does not get in the way of them trying to do their job too much.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: The model of the Women's Justice Board might be a different and more effective one for generating an almost centralised approach to new ideas but then letting governors implement and develop them. Could that sort of model be applied more generally?

Lord Timpson: The Women’s Justice Board has been going for a few months. We are still at the stage of getting set up. We have a really clear intention for the Women’s Justice Board. On the board is Pia Sinha, who was a governor in a number of prisons and used to run the female prison estate. Women’s prisons are different, as are youth prisons; they require different skills. Some governors transfer well between the two but much of the role is very different in a women’s prison, with very different challenges.

Baroness Hughes of Stretford: I accept that. I could follow that up with recruitment and so on but other colleagues have questions on those later on, so I will leave it there.

The Chair: Before we leave this, it is very clear that you accept that there is a need for governors to be given more autonomy. What is not clear is in which areas of activity you believe they could be given more autonomy. What is HMPPS doing to make that happen? You might want to write to us about that rather than answering now, but, if you have a quick response, that would be helpful.

Lord Timpson: I do not have all the answers for you at this stage. When we talk about autonomy, I am also interested in the word “trust”. What are they trusted to do, and what are the areas where we need to support them? I like to think of the work that I am doing on HMPPS being a world-class organisation. Part of that work is about defining where the line is between what we want a governor to be able to get on with and where we need to support them.

Q170 **Lord Henley:** Can we move on to wider staffing issues? What are you doing to address staff retention, particularly among front-line prison officers? How do staff shortages impact prison safety and rehabilitation efforts? What immediate action is being taken to mitigate those risks?

Lord Timpson: We are up to 97% of the desired staffing levels at the moment, but that does not mean everyone is in the right prison and has the right experience. We have a lot more work to do. Resignation rates are improving. They are down to 8.4% in December, from 10.7% in December 2022. Those are figures that, as a retailer, you would only dream of, but we need to make sure that we get them even lower. As I am sure you have seen on your prison visits, we need staff on the wings who have real experience and know the jail craft. They build up relationships with staff and prisoners, because a number of our prisoners are there for many years. The longer they are in post, the more they can learn about the complexities and subtleties of their role.

It is really important that we keep driving that down, which is why we need to make sure that we are an employer of choice. Where we have problems when we have high sickness rates or our staffing levels are not high enough, that is when things do not happen in the prison. People do not go out to do purposeful activity. The basic functions of a prison do not happen because you need the right staffing levels to make that happen. That affects tension in the prison, violence and all the other ongoing problems.

Lord Henley: I am interested to hear you say that these are rates that, in retail, you would dream of. What are the retention rates in retail?

Lord Timpson: You are talking about double, triple or even quadruple those figures. In hospitality, it is even higher.

Lord Dubs: When people leave, do you interview them to see why they have left? What are the findings of that? Why are they leaving?

Lord Timpson: I will ask Phil to give you the answer. From my experience of doing exit interviews, you are much better off doing one six weeks or six months after they have left because, apparently, they are far more honest than on their final day, when they just tell you what you want to hear. We do enhanced exit interviews; I will ask Phil to update you.

Phil Cople: We routinely do exit interviews; we also collect the data from those and explore that. We typically tend to share that evidence every year to the Pay Review Body as well. Its remit is looking at recruitment and retention, so we share those insights.

It has shifted for prison officers quite significantly since 2022, when they had a very large pay rise. Before that, pay and reward were consistently in the top three reasons for people leaving. It has now moved down to the fifth most cited reason, or even lower. People often cite issues and frustrations around working conditions, local leadership or their career development when they are leaving the organisation. They are among the most prominent factors now.

The Chair: Given that the figures have been submitted to the Pay Review Body, are they public?

Phil Cople: Yes. Our evidence is published every year, and they tend to get cited by the Pay Review Body.

The Chair: Thank you. I should have known, but we will now dig them out.

Q171 **Baroness Bertin:** There has been a bit of a discrepancy with evidence that we have had so far. If you speak to front-line prison officers, they say that they have virtually no one-to-one time with a more senior manager because of shift work. How can you get them off the wings to go through that kind of process? I imagine that that is detrimental to career progression and trying to iron out any worries that they might have before they decide to throw in the towel. The bosses would say, "No, it is fine. We absolutely do find time to do that", but I am just not sure that that is the case. I would love to know your views on that.

Lord Timpson: So far as people's career development goes, one of my suggestions in the review I did into training before I came into this job was that we needed someone in each prison who was, essentially, head of training. They would look after the training and development of not only the new starters but of everybody who works in the prison. Not everybody wants to take on more experience, but, if

they do, they need the opportunity to do that. As Phil said, one of the reasons some people leave is because they do not get that career development. I will ask Phil to address your point on contact with senior managers.

Phil Copple: This is something that comes through in the exit interview evidence. People are sometimes not cut out for the role in the end, because they are more used to an environment in which it is a close-knit team, with a supervisor or line manager there all the time. In some workplaces, that is more the experience. It is not like that when you are a prison officer, for most of your shift. You carry an enormous amount of responsibility and you do not have a manager with you all the time, so that is relevant to some of that.

Baroness Bertin: I am sorry to interrupt, but surely there is a balance to be had. I am not suggesting for a second that it is a once-a-week meeting, but it should be at least once or twice a year, to have an opportunity to talk. It goes both ways; it is also an opportunity to give feedback to a prison officer who is not performing well enough.

Phil Copple: Yes, absolutely. There is one element of this, which is very senior managers, whether the governor or the deputy governor, having visibility and managing by walking around and having contact with people. Some of those people will say, "I talk to staff all the time". When I visit a prison, I talk to lots of staff, but if you are an individual member of staff, it is very easy to go weeks without seeing the deputy governor or the governor, because they just might not be there or might not go to your area of work.

There is an element of that engagement that takes place, and it is valued by a lot of staff. There are also areas where we want to be stronger about the line management relationship. Some of that comes down to resources, because our line managers have to carry quite a big span of command in terms of the number of people who they line manage, if they are a first-line manager, which does not help the closeness of the relationship and contact that you are describing.

One of the things that we are seeking to do, which we need money for, through the Enable programme, is investing in a form of professional supervision for prison officers. It tries to learn some lessons from the Probation Service, which has historically invested in that kind of supervision, doing a bit more of that for prison officers, and having supervisors who are trained up to do that. That has been one of the things that we have been piloting in the Enable pilot sites.

The Chair: While we are on the issue of staff training, just so that the committee is aware, I am going to wait for a little while before bringing in Baroness Buscombe on the appointment of staff initially, and stick, if I may, with training. I will move on, in a second, to Lord Filkin, but is there anything further you want to say on the last question?

Lord Timpson: One of the things I have heard a lot of is that, since Covid, a lot of new staff have come in. They joined during Covid, when there was a lot of lock-up,

and they have not adapted as quickly as others to much busier wings and prisons. That is having an impact and will take some time to work through.

Q172 Lord Filkin: As the Chair said, this is a question about improving staff training. It is probably as much a managerial as a political question. What are the priorities for improvement? What are the targets, and what progress are you making against those? The question that you have seen gave some illustrations, but you may want to address it more generally.

Lord Timpson: I was fortunate to do the review before I got this job, so one of the advantages of doing this job is that I am quite keen on the review being implemented. There are some clear differences in what I saw and what I would like to see.

If I could give you just a few examples, at the moment, it is basically a seven-week training programme. I would like it to last 12 months. I would like the curriculum to have an oversight board. We manage the curriculum and the changes in it in a way that is very similar to what I saw in the fire service.

I would like far more emphasis on some of the more subtle roles that they have to play, such as how we de-escalate. There was too much emphasis on restraint. We need to reward successful trainees with a graduation at the end, but when they do not make the grade, we need to have that difficult conversation and say, "Maybe it is not for you".

I am also interested in who does the training and, as I said before, in having someone in each prison who is responsible for training. There were a number of suggestions that I put in, and a number are starting to happen. It is what we call the Enable project.

Lord Filkin: Is it going to happen? Are you resourced to do that?

Lord Timpson: We are doing a pilot at the moment in Pentonville. It is in the early stages, but we are hearing good feedback so far. It is based on resources in the spending review. If you are going to invest in training, it costs money.

Lord Filkin: So it is subject to the spending review.

Lord Timpson: It is subject to the spending review, but there are some parts of it that are not dependent on the spending review—for example, the curriculum and how we do that. We are trying to work out how we do on the spending review and what that means for some of the elements of my review. So far as the statistics of what we want to see improved are concerned, it is retention rates and the wider implications of having a more stable and well-trained staffing body—for example, inspectors' results and so on.

Q173 Baroness Meacher: How effective is the current online recruitment process in finding really suitable prison officers and other staff?

Lord Timpson: It is very much a volume business.

Baroness Meacher: Do you think that it should be changed? Let us face it, it is not ideal, is it?

Lord Timpson: Looking at the evidence, for every 20 people who apply to become an officer, only one ends up becoming one, so you need to get through a lot of applications to end up with someone who is in post. There was a trial done at HMP Berwyn, where they took the recruitment in-house to see what would happen there. They have decided that they do not want to continue, because it took a lot of resources away from the prison to do the recruitment. From a cost perspective, online recruitment is significantly cheaper. The police do it. Border Force does it. Serco does it. I also agree that, as part of the onboarding process, face-to-face meetings and opinions of leaders are important.

Baroness Meacher: You cannot just have an online system, can you? You have to have a second phase or something that involves personal contact. Is that right?

Lord Timpson: Yes.

Baroness Buscombe: I want to talk about the effectiveness of the online recruitment process. The Prison Officers' Association is very clear in its belief that the process is not fit for purpose, as neither party to it can properly sense test what they are really letting themselves in for. Given also the important and very complex role of a prison officer—in your words, Minister, I add the “complex nature” of people working in prisons—there is a strong feeling, which we have heard time and again in evidence, that you cannot have an effective process when it is simply online.

I put to you both, if I may, that the process will be catastrophic, particularly given that recruits go live after seven or eight weeks, coupled with the Employment Rights Bill going through Parliament at the moment, whereby the employee will have rights from day one—for example, they can sue for hurt feelings.

Lord Timpson: As I mentioned before, we need to recruit in volume, which is why we do the online method, as other services do. There are prisons where they do not recruit online; they recruit locally. That is where the governors have the autonomy to recruit the people themselves and take responsibility for that. We are dealing with a very complex matrix of where we recruit people at what time, which is why, if you leave it to an individual prison, they will not get that balance right. Maybe Phil can fill the details in.

Phil Cople: I am fully aware of those opinions. We have had dialogue with our unions and, indeed, the Chief Inspector of Prisons has said similar things. There is a harsh reality about money, because trying to devolve and decentralise all of that recruitment, and to do it properly without detracting from the day-to-day running and operational delivery in prisons, would cost a great deal of money compared to having a centralised model.

We have tried different types of piloting with local recruitment processes. We recently did one more thoroughly at Berwyn, near Wrexham, and the results from

that were quite mixed. We were not able to give Berwyn a lot of money to hire a lot of people to be recruiters, so it was a significant drain on their management resource, because managers had to take part in the recruitment process instead. There were some advantages to it, undoubtedly, but there is a cost to it, and it is not a cost that we can afford, if I am going to be candid about it.

One of the things that we are doing is looking at ways in which we can combine some of the better elements of some local and face-to-face interaction with a centralisation of a lot of the more administrative aspects of the recruitment process. The centralised and online bits of the recruitment process have been very well designed by people with expertise, such as occupational psychologists, and are based on real-life scenarios in prison to try to test and familiarise people.

We also want to combine that much more with familiarisation visits and follow-up in the first part of somebody's career, as well as having time in the prison. We are going to try to introduce greater elements such as that, particularly because the volumes were not quite as great as they needed to be when we came out of the pandemic. When we came out of the pandemic, we had a huge staffing shortfall because we had not been able to recruit and train at the usual volumes.

Baroness Buscombe: The pandemic ended four years ago. With this Employment Rights Bill now, I put to you that, from day one, you are going to have a bigger expense, because we already know that governors have said that they sometimes spend eight days away from the prison attending employment tribunals. If people have rights from day one, this is going to be, I suggest, a real issue for you in terms of cost and loss of time on the part of governors from the prisons. Could I suggest that there should be more face-to-face and more experience pre-employment, before that person is taken on by the system? Otherwise, it is going to be, in my words again, catastrophic.

Phil Cople: I agree with that. Lots of prisons have offered that, and that has been seen as an example of good practice that we are going to try to roll out across the whole system. Lots of prisons have had familiarisation visits as part of the process of applications. There is no conclusive proof that that produces better results, but there is indicative evidence that it does, so that is one of the things that we are going to try to do more consistently across the whole system in the future.

The Chair: Just before the Minister comes in, one of the points that was being very clearly made by Baroness Buscombe was the benefit of face-to-face interaction. If that is difficult to do with the centralised system for financial reasons, the one bit of face-to-face that does take place, presumably, is during the familiarisation experience with, presumably, a prison officer who is accompanying somebody during that familiarisation process. Do you get information about the would-be officer from the existing officer as part of that process?

Phil Cople: What different prisons have done has varied a bit in that respect, but yes, they can, and that is the kind of model that we want. Going back to what the

Minister said, it is based on trying to have a new, dedicated post who is going to drive that work in terms of staff training in prisons.

The Chair: The experienced prison officer looking after the person on the familiarisation should, presumably, be giving feedback, which would help in the recruitment process. Minister, is there anything that you want to add?

Lord Timpson: No organisation will have 100% retention rates. When some new starters are put straight on the wings, it can be a real shock to them, which is why some immediately think that it is not for them, so there has been a big wasted cost in recruiting them. What I noticed when I did my review into training is that those officers who had spent a bit more time on the wings before they came away for their training were far more confident in terms of the language and the way that things happen. That is what influenced me in designing the training. We do not expect someone who has had seven weeks' training to know all the things that they need to do the job. It takes a lot longer.

Baroness Buscombe: I just think that that Bill needs to be looked at in light of the complexities around all of this, because that could be a massive additional expense if it is not dealt with, which is going to be very hard, given the extraordinary role of a prison in dealing with different emotions, de-escalations and so on. It is going to be tough.

Phil Copple: Let me just quickly say that the pandemic issue is not something that was four years ago for us. It has taken us more than two years to get back to the staffing numbers that we needed. The volumes of recruitment that we had to do then were in excess of 4,000 prison officers a year. We are now down to about 3,500. We are hoping that it will go down further with improved retention. That was very important in terms of trying to get the boots on the ground over the period coming out of the pandemic. We had a massive deficit of officers.

Baroness Buscombe: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Q174 **The Chair:** Minister, in a recent speech, you described the job of a governor as being somewhat like that of a business CEO; you talked about "a governor". The reality is that the business CEO equivalent in many prisons is either a number one governor, or a governing governor, rather than a governor—the language that the public and, indeed, prisoners would understand, but not the language now used. Do you have any thoughts about the names of the various categories of governors within prisons, and whether they should be changed so that the public and prisoners might understand them?

Lord Timpson: Having been around prisons for a long time, I understand it, because I have been immersed in it for some time, but I understand that it could be confusing when you have governing governors, security governors, heads of resettlement and so on. Internally, it is pretty well established and people know what those roles mean. From a business point of view, we have directors, managing directors and so on, but I can see why people, externally, would get confused.

Phil Copple: The fact that that title persists in that way is a really interesting reflection of culture. Before I joined the service in the 1980s, there was the governor, a deputy governor and assistant governors, which is similar to the constructions that different jurisdictions use as well. Strictly speaking, we have not had lots of governors in prison officially since about 1987. We sometimes use the phrase “operational managers”, but they would have different job titles, such as head of residence or head of security, but the use of the word “governor” has persisted culturally in the way that people describe themselves and other people describe them.

The Chair: None of that helps me remotely in knowing what we should do. The public do not understand it. Prisoners do not understand it. Many of the governors we have talked to are unhappy with it, yet you are simply saying, “That is in the culture and that is what is going to happen”. Given the overwhelming evidence that there is a need for clarity so that people can make comparisons with a business CEO and a deputy assistant or whatever, as we have in schools and in almost every other organisation, why am I just being told, “That is just what happens, mate”?

Phil Copple: I genuinely did not mean it that way. For an inquiry looking at culture, it is a really interesting example of culture in terms of the way that some titles and phrases persist, even when they do not officially exist anymore. As the Minister said, I am not particularly struck by lots of confusion from prisoners or staff. Staff understand the hierarchy in their institution. They understand that there is somebody in charge overall and that there are different managers.

We will look carefully at your report, but if we thought that there was evidence that this was causing significant confusion among lots of people inside and outside the prison, we would accept that we would need to address that. It does not strike me as a big priority at the current time, because I am not really seeing the evidence of that confusion, but I will look carefully at your evidence.

The Chair: With respect, Mr Copple, you have grown up in the sector and you have had all of those titles yourself, so perhaps an outside view looking at it might be helpful to persuade you that there is a degree of confusion.

One of the other issues that has been raised with us is the lack of real public understanding of what prisons are about, what they are for and what happens in them and so on. One of the things that would clearly be helpful would be for governors to be able to spend a bit more time working outside—that is actually in the job contract of governors. Yet at the same time, we know that there is very clear evidence that a governor—the governing governor, the number one governor or whatever the top person is called—being very visible within his or her prison is vital, so there is a huge difficulty, is there not? Is that a conflict? You must be aware of the conflict. What are your thoughts about how we might resolve that?

Lord Timpson: It is about the style of leadership that our governing governors have. For example, I was at HMP Highpoint, which is physically our biggest prison. Nigel, the governor, walks around the whole prison every day. He must get more steps in

than any other governor. You can tell that he knows his people. He knows his prisoners. He knows what is going on. He has a little notebook for when he needs to write down what needs to be sorted out and chased up. I am a big believer in leadership by walking around, but I also think that being involved with the local communities is important. It is more important for some prisons than others.

For example, Mick Mills, the governor at HMP Hatfield, an open prison which is a very successful ROTL prison, has great links with the local community, whether it is employers or third-sector organisations, whereas a category A prison, which is very much more enclosed, probably has fewer links, but they are employing people in the communities and it is important that they have connections. What does not help is when governors turn over quite a lot and it is harder for them to build up those connections.

The Chair: I want to come on to that point in just a second. Just sticking with the visibility of governors within prisons, your point is that it is more important in some prisons than in others, and we would accept that. Is it your clear understanding that the advice and support given to governors is such that it enables them to have that? You cite one governor going round every single day. We are also hearing of many cases where prisoners have never seen the governor.

Lord Timpson: If they are spending a huge amount of time in their office, either they are doing things that we are asking them to do from a head office perspective or they choose to be in their office because there are other things going on. I am also very conscious of the fact that governors have been managing a very difficult situation recently with a capacity problem, about how we fill and fix cells, but that does not get away from the fact that a leader's role is to know their people and their organisation. Phil, could you fill in the gaps?

Phil Cople: In terms of accountability and oversight, these are the sorts of issues that we expect prison group directors to be testing when they visit prisons. We expect them to speak to staff and prisoners, and to have a sense of whether there is sufficient visibility. That is something that you can normally pick up. I think that you are referring to picking that up yourself, being in a prison and hearing from people. If there is evidence that there is not that kind of visibility, I would expect the line manager or the governor to then challenge that and explore what is going on.

As the Minister says, we want a sufficient level of visibility. We accept that quite a lot of the tasks and functions that people have to perform will involve being in an office or in a meeting room with other colleagues. We also want them to be able to be out there, testing and feeling what is happening in their establishment, picking up on that mood and those issues, and helping to hold other people to account and encouraging other people as well.

The Chair: You must have seen lots of assessments of governors that have been conducted. Is the issue of visibility in the prison one that comes up in those assessments?

Phil Cople: Yes, it does. There is usually a correlation with the prison not necessarily performing highly but doing well, despite sometimes being in challenging circumstances. There tends to be a correlation between governor visibility, and management team visibility more generally, and prisons that are doing well with the hand that they have been dealt. This is why it is in our culture, managerially, to encourage that and to challenge it when there is evidence that it is not there.

Lord Timpson: When you go around a cat A prison, the governor seems to know virtually all the prisoners. When you go to a local cat B prison, where there is a massive turnover, it is much harder to build up those relationships.

The Chair: We do understand that. Are there now full records of all the reports that are done of the governors, and the assessments that are made of prison officers? The reason I ask is that we have been advised that, since Covid, there are very few records, particularly of assessments that are made of prison officers.

Phil Cople: We do not have a formal written appraisal annually for prison officers in the way that has happened in the past for all grades. That still applies in relation to management grades in our establishments.

The Chair: You now have reports for management grades, as was always the case. In the case of prison officers, there is not now an annual report.

Phil Cople: No, not in the same way, and nor for other areas of staff.

The Chair: Why is that not happening?

Phil Cople: We were trying at the time to reflect the challenges during the pandemic, and to take out all non-essential processes. We also then sought to respond to evidence from colleagues that having an emphasis more on catch-ups between line managers and the people they were managing, and recording work well done on our staffing systems, as well as any problems, was a more effective way, and that there should be a greater emphasis on having the right sorts of conversations rather than completing paperwork. The paperwork process had become onerous and not terribly helpful and effective. People were going through the motions and ticking the boxes, as it were. The conversations, the ongoing relationships being built and a degree of recording work well done and concerns is a better system going forward.

The Chair: Presumably, with the advent of the proposed training officer post within prisons, that training officer would be advised of the problems and, therefore, the suitable training to help. Is that the way forward that you are envisaging?

Phil Cople: Yes. We would want there to be an overall training needs assessment and a training programme that was tailored to that prison's needs. There could also be a referral route into corrective training for individuals as part of that programme, where we identified them as having weaknesses.

The Chair: You mentioned the turnover of governors within prisons, and you have talked about the fact that you would hope they would be in post for a number of years to enable them to carry through the work. Presumably, that applies in the generality of governors. There are obviously reasons why, sometimes, they would be moved more quickly, but could more be done to try to ensure that governors stay longer in post than is currently the case?

Lord Timpson: Yes, very much so. I am doing quite a lot of work on this with Phil and the team, because I am a big believer that our governors need to be there long enough to develop a culture and also be accountable for their performance. In my book, that takes three to five years.

I am also aware that some of our prisons are so challenging that asking someone to be there every week for years and years is unfair. They need time out. They need a month or three months out on career breaks or mentoring other future governors. We do not want to be in a position where we force our able governors to leave or to want to move because it is just too much, so a lot of work needs to be done on governor tenure. We also need to make sure that, when someone is in a position that is not right, they have the ability to move, or we have the ability to move them.

Q175 **Baroness Cash:** Good morning. You have touched on this a bit already, but I want you to be even more specific about how you are sharing best practice. If you take some of the high-performing prisons, what is the current system for sharing that best practice among others, and what else is proposed?

Phil Copple: There are resources that the inspectorate has on its website, to which we refer people to examine. We have resources for good practice that we put on our intranet, and that can be searched generally but also by subject matter, and people can go into that. We also seek to have fora where, in a group or as a whole service, an area of a prison or a functional type of prison, they will come together in a conference or a workshop, and we are sharing good practice in those kinds of events. We have a number of mechanisms in that way.

There is a lot of informal stuff that goes on as well, some of which is critical. For example, there is an observed phenomenon of cluster deaths in a prison or community. If you have a lot of self-inflicted deaths, or suicides, they can tend to create a cluster. It has an effect, and prisons can find themselves in that position. It is dreadful. We have examples of prisons that have been through that, such as Woodhill, near Milton Keynes, which we have often used as a resource, because it came through it and had a much better record sustained over a number of years. That is known among a lot of managers, so we would encourage other managers who find themselves in that situation to use that resource and learn from the good practice.

Lord Timpson: Can I give another example? I was at the governing governors' conference just before Christmas. Three governors who had been governing prisons during an urgent notification period stood up and talked to all the other governors about what they did, how they handled it, how it affected them emotionally and

how they led their team through. That was a really positive way of explaining to others how they have managed difficulties.

Baroness Cash: I should have said at the outset, for the purpose of declaring an interest, that I co-founded a business called Mind Gym, and we sometimes work with prisons through the charity Pact.

I know that it costs a lot of money to digitise and to use systems, but in terms of performance and consistency across different prisons, do you have any dashboards, performance indicators or what we would call nudges in the behavioural world? Are there plans to implement those?

Lord Timpson: This is another thing that I am really interested in, and I have another meeting this afternoon or tomorrow about this. It is about accountability and being open with the information, so that people can compare how they are performing against others.

I am not sure whether there has been natural resistance in the organisation, but I am pushing through, and what I would ideally like is a situation where, when the governor and all the senior managers switch on their computers in the morning, how they are performing against similar establishments comes up straightaway.

Phil Cople: We have a performance hub that pulls all that data together. You can do searches and compare yourself with the performance of prisons in the area, or similar prisons that have the same function all around England and Wales. That kind of thing is available. Also, in terms of what is readily available to anybody, if you were to do an open source search on the internet and put in “prison ratings”, you would see that we have been publishing prison ratings annually for more than 20 years.

In terms of a rating system against performance metrics, we have had a core of that since before I was a governor, when I was involved in a team that developed a range of key performance targets for prisons. We have had some of this, and we have had transparency about it for a very long time. It is not terribly well known—how many people Google “prison ratings”?—but it is there and available.

In the organisation, it carries a lot of weight with managers and governors. At the end of every year, a prison is put in one of four ratings in terms of its overall performance. Although prisons have some different measures to reflect the type of prison, we have tried to weight it all, so that you can compare prisons on a like-for-like basis, regardless of what type of prison it is. You can see the best and worst-performing prisons, and that has been published and is available every year. It is usually published every July.

Lord Timpson: When I go on prison visits, I like to see either the ones that are performing exceptionally well or the ones that are struggling. That is where I feel I learn the most.

Q176 **Lord Tope:** We have heard quite a lot through all of this about the loss of, and the

difficulties with, meaningful activity. What have been the main contributors to that decline? I suspect that you are going to say the effects of Covid, first of all.

Lord Timpson: The capacity crisis is the biggest issue. We have prisons with 1,500 people in them and workshop spaces for only 500, so it is harder to get a bigger proportion of prisoners in purposeful activity.

Lord Tope: One of the points made to us on our visit to Belmarsh, when we were talking about the emphasis on education for GCSE English and maths, was that it is relatively easy to get people to come in and teach English and maths, but not plumbing, for instance, or any other skill that will better enable people to get a job when they come out. What I still call O-level English and maths is probably not going to be very helpful to a person coming out of prison and looking for a job. Minister, you are probably particularly well-placed to answer this. What more can we do within the constraints, financial and otherwise, to provide purposeful activity, both looking towards employment but also for meaningful leisure?

Lord Timpson: One of the issues is vetting, which may sound like a procedural issue. Every day, I go around prisons and meet probation staff, and the topic of vetting comes up, so that is another one that I have added to my list to understand. Having done this myself in open workshops, when you want to put a shoe repairer or a photo processor in, they go through a very long vetting process, which often takes far too long, and then sometimes do not complete the vetting process. Vetting is an issue.

Lord Tope: Do you mean vetting of the people providing the skills?

Lord Timpson: Yes. There is also an issue around dilapidated buildings. A number of workshops cannot be used because the roofs have collapsed or there is no heating and so on, which is another issue that we inherited. The other issue is around how we focus the regime to enable it to happen. That is about getting people out of the cells for a lot longer, how we look towards having a working week, and how they are not just learning skills in workshops but doing some of the jobs of the prison.

At Oakwood prison, a lot of the prisoners do a lot of the work. They do all the gardening. They get people to medical appointments. There are a lot of people in prison who already have the skills of plumbers and electricians. They are sometimes probably even more skilled than the people who we are bringing in to teach them, so we should also look inside to see who can help teach the skills.

Phil Copple: I would like to candidly acknowledge that we need to do more and do better in the area that the Minister is talking about. That challenge to do better has been set by me and the chief operating officer of prisons to all of our managers in the system. Some prisons have problems of significant staffing shortfalls, and it will mean that they cannot run everything. Large parts of the system had that as we came out of Covid, in the way that I touched on before. Some prisons still have problems now, because they have high sickness levels. That needs to be worked on to make sure that we can run the place properly and not have staffing shortfalls. A

lot of prisons are in a much better staffing position than they were a few years ago and we need to challenge ourselves to deliver better.

We need to orientate our efforts and give due priority to the delivery of these purposeful activity areas. At the moment, in too many cases it is not good enough. We are not allocating prisoners to education and work as efficiently as we could. We have unused places. We have plenty of prisons that do not have enough work, but, in too many cases, they are not even using the work that they have well enough at the moment. In the way that the Minister touched on, we are not getting enough people allocated to a place of work and to activity every day and reliably. That is about management focus and grip, and it is a priority among all the other priorities, but we need to do better.

Lord Timpson: I have walked past too many classrooms and workshops with no one in them. When we were at HMP Millsike last week, which is a state-of-the-art prison that has 25 workshops, I was talking to the leadership team there, saying, “These need to be filled. We need to get different skills”, and that is their challenge.

Lord Tope: We have heard that. If I recall correctly, one of the reasons most often given for that is a shortage of staff to supervise. They cannot manage people being out of their cells for that long. Is that still a serious problem?

Lord Timpson: It is a problem in a number of prisons, yes.

Phil Cople: Increasingly, it is more about levels of sickness that are stopping availability on the day, rather than just not having enough people hired at a given point in time, given that we have 97% of our target staffing figure in place now.

Q177 **Lord Dubs:** When we were in Belmarsh, we talked to a group of prisoners. They were highly selected and not necessarily a typical sample, but their plea was that they wanted to learn skills so that they could do something when they are released. That is absolutely what they said. When we put that to the governors, in addition to the arguments that you have given about the lack of staff and so on and so forth, there is another problem. If they do not have much longer of their sentence to go, they cannot start anything because they cannot continue it. When I said to the governor, “Surely, they could start the training or whatever it is inside and then continue outside”, they said, “That is pretty difficult”. This is in London, which has 32 boroughs. Surely, that can be overcome.

Phil Cople: In practice, there can be challenges around the timing at which somebody is released back into the community and where that fits with a local college of FE’s programme and getting on to the next course. It is not easy to do those things seamlessly in a lot of cases, although it is not impossible. In terms of planning for releases, that is one of the areas where probation colleagues will work very hard to try to help people continue training activity that they may have started.

It is also relevant to the education programme as well as the training activity that we have in prisons. This is something that lots of governors are reviewing with their management teams and education providers at the moment, making sure that the

education provision is appropriate for the population that they have and not based on courses that are too lengthy to be useful to a lot of people because they are not going to be there for long enough to do them.

We have invested in a head of education, skills and work in every prison to do better in this area, and to try to drive the improvements that I was referring to earlier that need to be made.

Lord Timpson: The best workshops in prisons are those run by employers. When people leave prison, they have a job on release and they have that seamless journey. It works much better.

Phil Copple: A lot of those can gain qualifications as well while they are working. It is very good.

Q178 **Baroness Cash:** I want to circle back to something that you mentioned a couple of times, which is sickness as a challenge in terms of staffing and absence. The information may be that it is publicly available, in which case you can just direct us to it, but when you say “sickness”, is it mental health-related sickness, stress-related sickness or a selection? Can we look at how it correlates with the performance of a prison? Is that available?

Phil Copple: I think it is publicly available, but I will have that checked. If it is not, we will try to provide you some data. I am talking about absences for all sick-related reasons. There is a significant variation and that might reflect happier staff groups, morale, healthier cultures, leadership and so on. Some prisons have sickness levels that are below the level that we make provision for and try to resource for, but most are above that level, and some by quite a lot.

Prisons that struggle and have lots of problems can easily get into these vicious cycles, where it is not a nice place to be and there are lots of problems. That tends to increase the levels of sickness as well. In lots of prisons, that is one of the major factors that stops them delivering things well, because they just do not have enough people available day to day.

Lord Timpson: One of the knock-on implications of that is that some colleagues are asked to do more and more overtime. They get the money for it, but they do not have the rest outside of work.

Q179 **Lord Tope:** Can we go back to meaningful activity again? How can we make better use of, for want of a better term, third-sector organisations and local communities, where that is possible and appropriate? How can we do that and, in a sense, bring more people voluntarily into working with prisons?

Lord Timpson: The third sector is vital. Our prisons would not work without the support of third-sector organisations. A lot of the time, it is volunteers who quietly come in—prison visitors, or people helping with specific training needs—and they do an amazing job. When I set up the employment advisory boards, it was about getting businesses, local chambers of commerce and so on into the prison. Initially,

there was quite a lot of resistance, culturally, from the prison: “These businesspeople are going to come in, they do not talk our language”.

It has now been going for three or four years. I was delighted when I heard that one of the governors goes to the local business groups because he recognises that the leadership challenges that businesspeople have are, basically, very similar to his own. We need to get more people into the prison, but our leaders also need to experience more things outside the prison. What the employment advisory board has done is brought more people in. It is not just the leader of the business. They ended up bringing lots of their colleagues in to support prisoners, to do interviews, to do reading and so on. We need to do a lot more of that.

The Chair: Thank you very much. There are many other questions that we would love to go on with, but our time has come to an end. On behalf of the committee, thank you both for coming and spending time with us. Thank you in particular, Mr Copple, because no doubt it will land on your desk in terms of the various documents and things that you are going to send us following this session. We look forward to hearing your thoughts on our report when it is published in due course. On behalf of the entire committee, thank you very much indeed.