



Justice Committee

Edward Argar MP
Minister for Prisons, Parole and Probation

By email only

23 May 2024

Dear Edward,

With the announcement of the General Election and the Prorogation of Parliament today, the Committee will not be able to produce its planned report into the prison operational workforce, which we had intended to publish soon after the Whitsun recess. We would nevertheless like to place on the record some of the findings from our work, which we hope will be picked up by our successor committee in the new Parliament. We are extremely grateful to all those who submitted evidence to the inquiry, and also to the more than 6,000 prison officers who responded to our survey. The role of prison officer is one of the toughest and perhaps most under-appreciated of public sector professions, and we pay tribute to those who work everyday to ensure the safety of our prisons, particularly given the current pressures the system faces.

We launched our inquiry against the backdrop of prison officers leaving the Service at an unprecedented rate. And whilst the leaving rate has reduced slightly in recent months, it still remains close to a historic high. Our inquiry considered a number of the drivers of attrition within the Prison Service, and steps we believe the Government should take to improve retention.

Support for new joiners

A Prison Officer's role is uniquely challenging, so it is not surprising that around a third of new recruits leave the Prison Service within their first year. However, throughout our inquiry we heard about problems with the lack of support given to new joiners, which suggests that the attrition rate for new recruits is higher than it should be. We welcome HMPPS's initiatives to support new joiners, however, they need to be adequately resourced, with existing experienced staff supported in their delivery. This is particularly important in ensuring the success of HMPPS's recent recruitment drive, which will increase the number and proportion of inexperienced staff in the short term. We would also welcome an update from the MoJ on the outcome of its evaluation of the New Colleague Mentors and Buddying schemes.

Ongoing welfare support for staff

Access to high-quality welfare support for Prison Service staff is vital, not just for their own wellbeing, but also to provide them with the tools, skills and strategies to effectively support the prisoners under their supervision. Yet, the evidence we received indicates that most staff



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do not feel they receive the support they need. We welcome the range of initiatives HMPPS has recently put in place to support staff wellbeing. In response to this letter, HMPPS should provide our successor committee with an update on the level of take-up of each of these to date across the estate, and on the outcome of the trialled implementation of structured supervision for Band 3 staff.

Staff safety

Prison officers work in environments where they are routinely subject to verbal, mental and emotional abuse from prisoners, and are also at significant risk of physical abuse to the extent that half do not feel safe in the prison they work in. It is, therefore, unsurprising that staff safety is a significant contributor to attrition. The MoJ's 2021 Prisons Strategy White Paper promised action on prison officer safety; yet, there is little evidence to date of any tangible progress in this regard. There needs to be a clear plan for improving the safety of HMPPS's operational staff. The Department should provide our successor committee with an update on the actions set out in the MoJ's White Paper, as well as what further steps HMPPS plans to take to improve staff safety.

Bullying, abuse and harassment

It is deeply concerning, and indicative of a failing organisation, that a third of respondents to our workforce survey said they had experienced some form of bullying, abuse or harassment from a colleague in the previous three months. HMPPS needs to take a zero-tolerance approach to such behaviours. Whilst we welcomed the 2020 establishment of the Tackling Unacceptable Behaviours Unit, it is clear that there is some way to go before it has the confidence of staff. HMPPS should evaluate the work of the Unit to date, including whether it is adequately resourced, and in consultation with the unions, determine what further measures are required.

Pay and reward

We note the Government's assertion that the recent pay awards for prison officers may have had a positive effect on attrition in the short term, although the extent to which this is the case will vary considerably across England and Wales. However, in the medium and long term, HMPPS needs to ensure that the pay and reward offer for operational staff is competitive against similar public sector roles such as the police and border control to encourage staff to remain in post. This is particularly important given the current state of crisis within the Prison Service.

We also recognise the concerns that many prison officers have regarding their pension age, particularly in comparison to other frontline uniformed roles, such as the police and firefighters. We recommend that the Ministry of Justice commissions and publishes independent analysis of whether there is a disparity in the overall pension entitlement for prison officers versus similar frontline professions, taking account of schemes' different employee contribution rates and retirement ages. If the pension age is to stay at 68 for



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prison officers, the proportion of staff who are over 60 will inevitably increase over time, and so HMPPS will need to develop a strategy for how aging staff are deployed within the Service, which acknowledges the physical demands of the role, and supports them through to retirement age.

Morale

Staff morale affects how well people perform in their role and whether they wish to remain at their workplace. For all the reasons set out above, it is arguably the case that morale within the Prison Service has reached an all-time low. The current situation can only be exacerbated by the ongoing capacity crisis within the prison estate. HMPPS needs to develop and deliver a comprehensive action plan to address the various drivers of attrition within the prison workforce in order to place it on a more sustainable footing.

The recruitment process

It costs £13,000 to recruit and train a prison officer, and so it is important that the process for doing so is fit for purpose. We are concerned that the current recruitment process for prison officers, whilst delivering bulk recruitment, does not command the confidence of either the inspectorate or the bodies which represent prison officers and governors. HMPPS should review the recruitment process for prison officers, including an assessment of whether it could achieve better outcomes by conducting more of the process in person. HMPPS should also investigate ways in which governors can participate in the external recruitment of Band 3 officers in their prisons.

Recruiting a diverse workforce

Across different protected characteristics, it is encouraging that HMPPS has made progress in recent years in achieving a more diverse workforce. However, we note that it has not yet met its target for 14% ethnic minority representation, seven years on from publication of the Lammy Review, which recommended this. Moreover, the lived experience of staff once recruited also needs attention if the Prison Service is to meet its ambition to be an inclusive environment for all staff. In particular, the inspectorate's findings regarding the experience of black staff are concerning. We recommend that HMPPS sets out the steps it is taking to reach 14% ethnic minority representation, and that it should aim to achieve this target within the next two years. We would also welcome an update on the delivery of the action plan it committed to put in place in response to the inspectorate's findings regarding the experience of black staff in the Prison Service.

Unlocked Graduates

We support the work of Unlocked Graduates in encouraging people to become prison officers who would not otherwise have considered a career in the Prison Service. The annual intake through the scheme is relatively small in comparison to the overall workforce, and so we would encourage HMPPS to work with the charity to grow the number of new prison



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officers entering through this route. At the same time, it should take steps to address any perceptions that those on the scheme have access to opportunities for career development that are not afforded to Band 3 officers who have entered the Prison Service through the traditional route.

Line management

Good line management in the Prison Service is essential for managing performance, and ensuring more junior officers can learn the 'jailcraft' that forms a vital part of being an effective prison officer. We are concerned that many Band 5 officers do not receive the support and training they need to be good line managers, and that their ability to provide effective line management is often hampered by the number of staff who report to them. It cannot be possible for Custodial Managers to provide effective line management when they have up to 26 direct reports.

Working with the POA and the PGA, HMPPS needs to look at ways to reduce the number of staff Band 5 Custodial Managers are expected to manage, for example, by making greater use of Band 4 supervising officers. HMPPS should also ensure mandatory line management training and mentoring is in place for Band 5 Custodial Managers in their first 6 months of taking up the role, and monitor compliance. HMPPS should also take steps to ensure that regular line management meetings take place for every member of staff.

Leadership and the role of the governor

Leadership, and in particular the role of the governor, is crucial in setting the culture in prisons, and has a knock-on effect in terms of staff morale, retention and the overall regime. Visibility and stability are two of the key attributes of effective prison leadership. HMPPS needs to do more both to encourage and make it easier for senior leaders in prisons to be more visible to both staff and prisoners in their prisons, including sharing best practice from prisons where this is already the case. We further recommend that HMPPS conduct research into the extent to which instability in senior leadership is an issue across the Prison Service; and the steps it can take to encourage senior leaders to remain in post.



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We hope these are issues that the next government, whatever form it takes, will be able to get to grips with. In the meantime, I would like to express my sincere thanks to you and your officials for your engagement with the Committee's work, and to wish you all the very best for the future.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Neill', written in a cursive style.

Sir Robert Neill KC (Hon) MP
Chair
Justice Committee