

## **Written evidence submitted by the Independent Monitoring Boards (PRI0012)**

### **Justice Select Committee inquiry into the prison operational workforce**

*What implications do difficulties in recruiting and retaining OSGs and prison officers have for the ability to provide effective regimes for prisoners?*

### **Written evidence from Independent Monitoring Boards**

#### *About Independent Monitoring Boards*

Appointed by Ministers under the Prison Act 1952, Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) are an integral part of the independent oversight of prisons. IMB members are a regular presence, visiting the establishment, monitoring the treatment and conditions of prisoners, reporting what they find to those running the prison, and dealing with queries and concerns from individual prisoners. They are unpaid but have statutory powers, granting them unrestricted access. IMBs are part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism set up under the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture (OPCAT).

#### *Introduction*

For a number of years, Boards have raised serious concerns about the impact of staffing shortages, which in some prisons are acute, on the ability of prisons to provide a safe, humane and rehabilitative regime for prisoners. The situation has deteriorated further since the Covid-19 pandemic, with high staff turnover leading to a deficit in experience and low staff numbers and morale. There are significant gaps in support, and prisoners are spending prolonged periods locked in cell. This, in turn, has had a detrimental impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many prisoners.

The most recent HMPPS workforce statistics paint a worrying picture: there was a leaving rate of 15.7% among band 3-5 prison officers in the year ending 30 September 2022. In the same year, 9,377 staff joined the prison service while there were 8,409 leavers.<sup>1</sup>

It is hoped that, in the medium to long term, the new pay settlement will aid recruitment and retention, however in the immediate future there are ongoing staffing challenges that mean many prisoners cannot access purposeful activity or address offending behaviour. This is also in the context of a significantly rising prison population and therefore increasing pressure and risk.

#### *Boards' findings*

Boards continued to report significant staff shortages, particularly at weekends. The Board at Norwich found that, towards the end of 2021, there was limited access to work and education. The Board at Thameside reported that, in February 2022, there were 48 vacancies for prison officers, which meant that prisoners were unable to access the gym or spend increased time

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<sup>1</sup> HM Prison and Probation Service, Workforce Quarterly Statistics, September 2022: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-september-2022/hm-prison-and-probation-service-workforce-quarterly-september-2022--2>

out of cell despite the easing of Covid restrictions. However, the prison introduced a substantial pay boost and retention bonuses for some staff which subsequently reduced the attrition rate and stabilised staffing levels by the end of June 2022.

On the whole, prisons have struggled to embed the key work scheme as the foundation of individual care and offender management. A number of Boards reported that key work sessions, which had been abandoned as such during Covid, had then essentially been deprioritised due to understaffing. The Board at Birmingham reported that, even by June 2022, just over a quarter of target sessions were delivered. At Wealstun training and resettlement prison, between 1 June 2021 and 31 May 2022, staffing levels were so low that staff who had been allocated to conduct key work sessions were redeployed to other duties.

Many Boards found that key work sessions were not always delivered by the same officer, as set out in the policy. This lack of continuity hindered the impact of the scheme, which centres around weekly meaningful conversations with the same trained prison officer in order to develop a better understanding of a particular prisoner's individual needs.

### *High staff turnover*

Boards have repeatedly raised concerns about the relentless attrition rate in prisons. At Birmingham, where 60 officers left between July 2021 and June 2022, the Board found that 'low staffing levels pose the greatest challenge for SLT [senior leadership team] and stability'. Operational prison offender managers who support prisoners to complete goals on their sentence plans were frequently redeployed to other areas in the prison due to staffing shortages.

A number of Boards reported that there was a high proportion of inexperienced prison staff who had not experienced pre-Covid regimes. Boards pointed to the fact that the more experienced staff members who were able to skilfully de-escalate volatile situations had left. At both Coldingley and Erlestoke, for example, around 40% of staff had less than two years' service. The Board at Wymott reported that almost a quarter of band 3 officers only had up to two years' experience.

In the long-term high security estate, Boards raised serious concerns about the impact of staffing issues on safety and prisoner wellbeing. At Whitemoor, as at the end of May 2022, nearly 17% of band 3-5 staff had less than two years' experience and over 40% had less than five years. The Board at Woodhill highlighted the impact on prisoners who experienced 'tensions because of the perception of "broken promises", short notice of "lock up", and too few officers to answer cell bells and on some occasions to unlock a cell in an emergency'. In October 2022, the Board escalated major concerns to the Minister as staffing levels dropped to 51%, with several resignations a week and a high number of staff on sick leave or suspension. On some occasions, this meant that staff were not allowed to take annual leave to cover the shortfall. Remaining staff were exhausted, 'unable to cope with the day-to-day pressures' and at risk of burnout. There were serious consequences for prisoners: all group education was cancelled along with weekly key work sessions, leaving prisoners 'vulnerable and frustrated'. Weekend visits had not resumed since the easing of lockdown restrictions, which impeded the prisoners' ability to maintain family ties. The Board at Swaleside also expressed concern about the 'future security' of the prison, with additional pressures 'landing on the backs of fewer and fewer officers'.

At Long Lartin, the Board was so concerned about the impact of the 25% staff shortfall and retention challenges on outcomes for prisoners that the Chair wrote to the Secretary of State in July 2022. Prisoners were locked in cell for up to 23 hours a day, unable to exercise or shower. There was only short notice of regime changes which led to frustration among prisoners. There were no functioning workshops. The Board partly attributed the 65% increase in levels of self-harm between the first and second quarter of 2022 to prolonged cellular confinement and lack of purposeful activity.

### *Women's prisons*

More recently, in November 2022, Boards in the women's estate raised concerns about the impact of staffing issues on the overall regime. The prevalence of mental illness and high levels of self-harm in women's prisons are already well-known. At Styal, the high level of demand and complexity of mental health issues among some women prisoners have exacerbated existing staffing shortages, resulting in curtailed regimes as staff are cross deployed to care for and supervise mentally unwell prisoners. This meant that other prisoners had limited access to the library and were unable to shower due to insufficient staff on the wings.

The Board at Foston Hall continued to report acute staffing pressures, with only 84 band 3 prison officers in post out of a complement of 107. This had a knock-on effect on prisoners, who were kept locked in cell for excessive periods, often at short notice and especially on weekends, and with only limited access to activities. This led to heightened anxiety and stress among prisoners.

### *Conclusions*

It is clear that the prison service's struggle to recruit and retain prison officers is now the most significant barrier to providing safe and humane regimes, which can reduce the risk of reoffending by providing opportunities for progression and rehabilitation. It also places a considerable burden on new and inexperienced staff, at a time of acute population pressure. They may not be able to take time out for non-essential but important training, and may lack support from line managers who are also new in post and themselves under pressure. This can create a vicious circle of staff turnover, which exacerbates the problem.

With plans to provide 20,000 additional prison places, the Government must recruit more qualified officers to support and rehabilitate prisoners, ensuring there are adequate pay packages and conditions to attract and retain talent.

Dame Anne Owers, National Chair, Independent Monitoring Boards

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