

Stakeholder Hearing 17

Prison Officers' Association

Represented by Steve Gillan

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Background

The Prison Officers Association (POA) is the professional Trades Union for prison officers, including governors, correctional and secure psychiatric workers. It has over 35,000 members working in both the public and private sectors.

The POA believes that training for officers has been eroded and is inadequate for the work required of them. The website states that *'in the last twenty years the role of a prison officer has changed from that of a supervisor or guard to that of a multi skilled manager of offenders. Officers have to fulfill the role of teacher, trainer, welfare officer, agony aunt, listener, enforcer and supervisor'*.

The POA provided a submission to the Review and there have been a number of newspaper articles in which the POA has highlighted their concerns over the rising numbers of attacks upon their officers, the level of staff reductions and the level of self-inflicted deaths.

Steve Gillan is the General Secretary of the POA since May 2010.

STAFF AND CULTURE IN PRISONS

Prison officers have become significantly more over-burdened with work over the last four years. There are fewer staff now to look after the current population of 85,000 prisoners than there was when the population was 45,000. Staff used to spend more time with prisoners and could notice when things were wrong. Now prisoners are coming out of their cells less there is not enough time to 'observe' them.

The Prison Service are struggling to recruit staff; there are 1,700 vacancies, with the starting salary at £19,000 rising to £23,000 at the top of the scale. This salary is not sufficient to attract people to the job as a career.

The Personal Officer Scheme is a product of the 1990s and never really got off the ground. To make the scheme work, Prison Officers would need to understand what they are supposed to do. The scheme can work better when the prisoner is sentenced, but the needs of a prisoner on remand can be very different. The resource to operate a personal officer scheme effectively would need to be fairly substantial in order to avoid caseloads becoming too high.

The POA feels that in general most staff engage well with prisoners; a large jail runs on good will between staff and prisoners. HMCIP has said that if it were not for the good relationships between staff and prisoners, things would be far worse.

Good practice means showing care and compassion. Staff have a 6th sense that someone is vulnerable and spend extra time with a prisoner talking, documenting and referring them on as necessary.

SG said that he believed that all prison officers care. Some want to make the difference in someone's life, some staff are more security focussed and others are welfare focussed. Some staff have innate skills that mean they can diffuse a situation.

The High Security Estate has not been benchmarked yet, but the Prison Service will have to be very wary of cutting staff numbers in these prisons. Good staffing levels make the prisoners and staff feel safer and staff can do their job. Steve said *"prisoners feel more secure when they can see a white shirt that when they can't"*.

The POA believes that the political approach to be 'tough on crime' has failed, because it has not focussed on why people commit crime. The reasons are likely to be related to mental health, drug use, alcohol use, unemployment or lack of education.

There is a lack of joined up thinking in the way prisoners are looked after. When they are released they go back to the same environment that caused the issues in the first place. The POA feel that there is a role for prison officers in the community pre and post release; after all, they are experts and this could be used to provide continuity of care.

STAFF TRAINING

There is no mandatory training anymore, except Control and Restraint (C&R). Training decisions are made at establishment level, with the Governor deciding what training to run. Training will only go ahead only if there are sufficient staff.

The POA has just negotiated an increase in the time for Basic training. It went from 9 weeks to 7 weeks and it will now increase to 10 weeks. New officers complete an NVQ over two years, which is done on the job and mostly in their own time. There is no probationary or shadowing period. The NVQ is assessed by assessors from Sunderland College.

The POA don't feel that every Prison Officer needs a degree but they would like the training to be more like it is in Norway, where the training is two years to be a professional Prison Officer.

There is no Continuing Professional Development for Prison Officers and the POA would like to see the role much more professionalised. Prison Officers role should be a professional one but there is no qualification. Additionally, the public perception is not a good stereotype, often because of messages that people get from television programmes. Staff come from all different backgrounds and the HM Prison Service is the best in the world. The POA feels that it is used as a political football.

SELF-INFLICTED DEATHS

Mandatory training on self-harm and self-inflicted deaths stopped in 2008.

The organisation has not sorted out how to manage the incredibly complex reasons behind a self-inflicted death.

CHARACTERISTICS OF 18-24 YEAR OLDS

SG said that it was difficult to determine whether or not 18-24 year olds should be held separately from older adults. Looking at the current arrangements with 18-20 year olds, it is very difficult to know what is best. Sometimes when they are mixed in with adult prisoners they can get on each other's nerves and this can lead to bullying, but it is also true that adults can be a calming influence on the younger prisoners.

ACCT

Performance on ACCT paperwork has improved. In the beginning, staff were suspicious of it and reluctant to put their name on the document. The POA is cautious about member's input to ACCT and this is being reviewed between the trade union and NOMS.

PSI 64/2011 tells staff what has to be done to manage safety but there is not enough time to do all that is required by the instruction. Also, training levels for ACCT varies between prisons; in some there may be no training on self-inflicted deaths and self-harm.

ACCT reviews may be rushed. It can often be difficult to get everyone together to meet the multi-disciplinary approach, so sometimes you have to make do with who you have. Work used to be profiled so that time would be allowed to get the jobs done, now it is just about fitting into the resources available.

The ACCT process needs to deal with the prisoner's individual problems. It isn't just about filling in the paperwork or a document to provide legal protection. The key thing in the training is to be able to look at and assess the situation properly. The situation will involve a complex, vulnerable individual and the officer has to recognise the underlying problems. There needs to be the time and money available to deal with these, instead of just warehousing prisoners.

HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

The majority of prisoners have mental health illnesses, and although prison officers do their best, they need better training in mental health issues. Prisoner officers believe that there are far too many people in prison with mental health issues and that some of them should be diverted from prison custody.

There should be more joined up health services for prisoners and cross-over training with Ashworth, Rampton or Broadmoor for example should be considered – this could lead to a qualification at the end.

The female estate spent more money on self-harm issues and their approaches have worked – these should be rolled out across the whole estate.

FOLLOWING A SELF-INFLICTED DEATH

It is traumatic for everybody when a death in custody occurs: for the prisoners, families, friends and also for the prison officers who often take it personally. Prison officers may feel responsible even where there was nothing they could do to prevent the death.

It is frustrating for staff and families when the PPO and HMCIP make recommendations that are then ignored.

Where there was a conflict of interest following a death, TSols may not have represented the member of staff, instead the Trade Union protects and represented them. The POA felt that the Prison Service has a duty of care to their employees and now, unless there is malfeasance in office, TSols will also represent them.

There was an improvement and lessons were being learnt from best practice following a death in custody but now there are no resources to look at the recommendations and reflect on practice.

SG said that he would let the panel know of any prisons where the POA felt that there was a good anti-bullying scheme operating.