

January 2025

Written evidence submitted by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

1. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide comments on this inquiry into prison culture.

My role

2. The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) carries out investigations into deaths and complaints in custody in England and Wales. Our roles and responsibilities are set out in our Terms of Reference.¹ Our remit includes investigating:
 - complaints made by prisoners, young people in detention, offenders under probation supervision and individuals detained under immigration powers.
 - deaths of prisoners, young people in detention, residents in approved premises and individuals detained under immigration powers due to any cause.
 - deaths of recently released prisoners that occur within 14 days of release from prison (except homicide).
3. The purpose of these investigations is to understand what happened, to correct injustices and to identify learning for the organisations whose actions we oversee, so that we can achieve tangible benefits for the safety and confidence of those in custody and under community supervision.

My submission to the Inquiry

4. We have responded to four questions in the call for evidence. My main concern is the lack of training for both prison officers and governors (especially the lack of leadership training). I have explained the issues caused by governors being unable to recruit staff locally. Lastly, I have expressed the concerns I have with the declining level of experience in the service.

¹ [PPO Terms of Reference](#)

The role of a prison governor:

Question 1: Do governors have enough autonomy?

5. From conversations with prison governors, I have found that most believe they require more autonomy over how they manage their prison. They feel that processes are overly bureaucratic which means they are restricted in the actions they can take and feel unable to quickly respond to the issues their prison faces. They also feel they spend excessive amounts of time completing administrative tasks, rather than governing and talking to staff and prisoners. We have seen an example of a governor who spent 3 days trying to arrange for the replacement of a broken kitchen appliance. The process for replacing the appliance was centralised and difficult to arrange. We would suggest that a less centralised and bureaucratic process for handling these issues should be considered as it would provide governors with more time to manage a prison.

Question 2: What are the qualities needed to be a successful governor?

6. To be a successful governor requires leadership. I am concerned about the lack of mandatory leadership training for grades across the prison service, but especially for senior officers and governors. I have repeatedly raised this issue with stakeholders. In November 2024, Lord Farmer asked the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) what leadership training was routinely provided to officers moving up the ranks in the prison service.² As the Committee may be aware, the response provided examples of leadership training available to MoJ staff. The training described is not mandatory. We believe that leadership training should be prioritised and made mandatory. We would also question the quality of some of the training on offer. The response mentions a '*wealth of free online resources*' and the '*HMPPS People Manager Handbook*'. We would suggest that, without proper and consistent training, these resources do little to truly nurture the leadership qualities required to run a prison.
7. We also feel that leadership training within other organisations is more comprehensive. Staff within the police and the military complete leadership training in their mandatory training prior to starting their role. The College of Policing has developed a National Centre for Police Leadership. This includes a 5-stage leadership programme consisting of tailored leadership training dependent on seniority.³ Military training consists of courses and modules on leadership within the mandatory training to help soldiers move up the ranks.⁴

² [Written questions submitted by Lord Farmer - MPs and Lords - UK Parliament](#)

³ [College of Policing, Leadership Training](#)

⁴ [British Army Training - Preparing for Service | Army Jobs](#)

8. Throughout an individual's career within the prison service, and particularly at more senior levels, mandatory leadership training should be provided. We believe that a particular focus should be on reflective leadership. Throughout our investigation casework, we often see a reluctance to take ownership and accountability for failings of service provision. I feel an increased focus should be placed on leadership which prioritises reflection and continuous learning.

Recruitment, training and retention

Question 2: Should prison governors have greater autonomy over recruitment in their individual prison?

9. In conversations with prison governors, many have expressed that they would value the option to be able to recruit locally. Candidates currently apply through the service, as opposed to the individual prison, and in some cases have not had any interaction with the prison prior to working there.
10. This can cause difficulties as the officer is unfamiliar with the community local to the prison. This can mean the officer struggles to meaningfully connect and build strong relationships with the prisoners. The importance of relationships between staff and prisoners is something we cannot over-emphasize and something we see throughout our investigations. We would suggest that a blended system should be considered which would give governors the option to recruit (at least some of their workforce) locally.

Question 4: What are the barriers to retaining the prison workforce?

11. Retaining prison officers remains a problem. In the year to September 2023, almost one in seven (13%) employed officers left the prison service.⁵ Data shows that there is growing inexperience. The number of staff with less than three years' service is high (roughly around 40%) whereas those with 10 or more years is declining (around 28% and the lowest it has been since 2010).⁶ With the lack of experienced staff available, it is even more crucial that officers receive high quality and frequent training. In response to the Justice Committee Prison Operational Workforce Survey in 2023, 7 in 10 Band 3-5 staff said they felt stressed a few times a week or more at work. Half of them said they do not feel safe at the prison they work in. Only 25% of Band 3-5 staff say they receive regular training that is relevant to their role.⁷ We do not

⁵ [Prison Reform Trust 2024 FactFile](#)

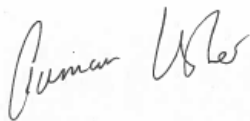
⁶ [Prison Reform Trust 2024 FactFile](#)

⁷ [Justice Committee Prison Operational Workforce Survey](#)

think that the number of officers who feel unsafe and the lack of relevant and regular training is unrelated. From our investigations, we appreciate the highly stressful, difficult, and demanding situations officers are presented with. To retain officers, especially in light of current staffing demographics where the service lacks experienced officers, it is vital that better and more regular training is provided to staff.

12. The PPO is also concerned with the increasing prevalence of staff falsifying records (including suicide and self-harm welfare checks and security roll checks) and what this indicates about the culture at a prison. We are concerned that the growing issue of record falsification may be compounded by staff inexperience, new staff learning from inexperienced staff members and a lack of consistent training that includes the importance of following procedures correctly. We understand that prison capacity issues coupled with recruitment difficulties are likely to have increased the workload for staff and led to cross-deployment and uncertainty about responsibilities, but one of the tests of a healthy staff culture is whether staff feel empowered to raise concerns with managers if they feel unable to complete their tasks – and indeed the guidance managers give them in these circumstances. As mentioned earlier (paragraph 8), a focus on leadership, reflection and continuous learning should be embedded within training to lower the risk of staff falsifying records, being charged with misconduct in a public office or being dismissed.

13. I hope that this is helpful. Please contact me if you require any additional information.



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