

IT'S MORE THAN JUST A JOB

Below is a transcript of the feedback from the breakout session following Helen Arnold's talk entitled "It's more than just a job". Delegates were asked to reflect on the job of the prison officer, the demands they face, and the knowledge and skills required to perform their roles effectively.

Group 1

We said that a prison officer is somebody who wears many hats and encompasses many skills such as: discretion, accountability and being a good role model. Prison Officers must be passionate and resilient and must be able to build proactive and constructive relationships.

Group 2

Prison officers must be able to communicate, must be able to deal with budget cuts, be able to train, look at prison dynamics and how they have changed, deal with gang affiliations, deal with staff and look at various other issues such as demographics.

Group 3

We covered a couple of questions about how it's more than just a job and what motivates people. Everyone had said that they *do* think it's more than just a job: you don't just go to work, fill out a spreadsheet, turn around at night and switch your brain off and it's done. You learn skills which you take home with you that people use to help with their children and with all sorts of different aspects of life, dealing with any crisis management you may find, like a gentleman had said about you know whether he is around and there has been a car crash, even if he is not involved in it you just tend to go in and go: right, come on then, what happened, let's sort it out.

So you end up with the job itself ending up a huge part of your life and how you conduct yourself when you're not at work. We asked about what motivates people, I think a lot of it still, as difficult as it is, is most people want to try to rehabilitate people or help them as much as possible. We all know that we deal with very damaged - what's the best word for saying, you know, they've had a really rough life a lot of the time - and sometimes they do just need a little chance, it doesn't have to be anything big: if it's just a phone call home, if it's just a little bit of trust that they haven't ever had experience of in their life before; it's the little things that you can do that 10 years down the line might have just started the ball rolling.

And we spoke to people about how that's changed once they have been in the job, do they still manage to keep the same views on that? Some of us have been in the job a number of months, some of us have been in the job for years and are you still actually able to come away at the end of the day with the same thoughts that tomorrow I'm still going to try to do that and it is a difficult thing to do but at the same time, with us all being the "best of the best," that seemed to be the running theme is that we are all still trying to do that regardless of how long we have worked there.

One of the other things that we covered was about 'Porridge' - can you be firm or can you be soft - we all really agreed that it is really dependant on what you are dealing with and I think to be a really good prison officer you have to be able to do both in the right scenario at the right time, and that generally when prisoners get used to the idea that you will be firm but you will be fair, you tend to get a lot more out of them back in response. I think it's also just learning the skills and how you want to deal with that situation that's come in front of you, which side of the fence you want to be on at that time and how you're going to react to it.

Group 4

We asked: what gets you out of bed in the morning to come to work? And I think, especially with all the uniformed staff, it's each other that gets us out of bed in the morning because we care for one another and we want to keep each other safe, especially now there's times when we look at our job and it's not the same as it was 5, 10 years ago but the camaraderie and the sense of team work and the love we have for one another is still there and if you tie that into things like: I know a girl up there who said she was POELT (Prison Officer Entry Level Training), and she'd been in the job 11 months with other POELTs on the job as well, and I think what we need to do is pass on our skills, to make those prison officers that are the ones who get that balance right between the hard and the soft, the prison officers with experience and empathy and humanity and common sense and jail craft: they're (POELTs) only going to learn how to do that by people like us who are sat in this room now, so we need to pass that on.

Group 5

We said that what makes a good prison officer is that first and foremost we are role models: sometimes the first and only role models that certain individuals have. We are the first people that they come into contact with that might give them boundaries and sometimes that can create a big difference in their lives. What motivates us is that sometimes you'll get a message that a prisoner has done well, that the work you have put in has paid off and made a positive step outside of prison.

But also sometimes there are prisoners who come back and that can be frustrating, but it's the little things that we can then do with them: we can see them changing even if it's sentence after sentence, they are changing bit by bit and sometimes they're the ones, the ones that are the hardest to reach, they are the one that need it most.

We looked at the fact that staff adaptability and flexibility are some of the key factors that make people good officers, but it's not just one or two things that contribute, it's a thousand little different things that make up being a good officer and that sometimes it's good to have a cross section of skills, people working in units need a cross section of skills that all come together to create a team that can support the prisoners in their care and that those staff then also take support from each other.

So it's wanting your managers to recognise what you do and what you go through but your colleagues are the ones that know it best, so it's them that you look to for support, you can give each other support. We also looked at the fact that prison life has become harder because society itself has become harder and that's being played out in our prisons which create fresh challenges which are added to the challenges which we face as a service, things like the budget cuts, things like newer younger staff with less experience and all of those challenges for the people who are in this room, are the things that keep us going every day because we want to change that, we want to help that and we want to have an impact on that which is what we are doing every day.

Group 6

What makes a good prison officer? Well at the top of our list was a sense of humour and banter, which is what gets most of us, I think, through the day. The fact that we just do the job, if there is an alarm bell or an incident we pull together and we come together, we don't worry about getting off late, we just do what we've got to do.

We volunteer for jobs: things like ACT assessing which tends to go unnoticed. We don't get paid extra for all those things that we do additionally to our role that goes unnoticed.

The motivation for being a prison officer: top of the list again was banter, and a number of other things: dealing with incidents and teamwork and supporting each other, and one of the things we did discuss was what made your day was knowing who you were going to work with that day as well, so that was a big thing.

Group 7

We didn't actually come up with a definitive answer as to what makes a good prison officer, our discussion started off with how to keep positive with all the things that are going on at the moment, all the changes and all the cuts and all the issues they we're facing. We talked a lot about frustrations, the frustration staff feel in trying to do the best that they possibly can faced with the circumstances we are all living with on a daily basis that lead into issues such as cross deployment and not working with the same team and the same group every day, and how staff overcome that - how they try and do the best that they possibly can to work together and to make the little things work.

And dealing with prisoner's issues on a daily basis, just simple things such as applications that don't get done and the frustrations that that leads to for prisoners, and then your colleagues have got to follow you on and deal with those frustrations.

We spoke about the number of prisoners with mental illnesses in prisons these days and how we are dealing with that and where we're going with helping those prisoners and the frustrations we feel when you're locking a prisoner up who's seriously mentally ill, and you feel that you've not been able to provide as much care as you possibly can for that person.

That led into what motivates us to come to work, why do we come to work when we are facing all these frustrations? And again it went back to, as my colleagues have said, the teamwork and it went back to the camaraderie and it went back to the pride of actually doing the job because believe it or not, we are *proud* to be prison officers and we do feel that we do a good job and we can make a difference when we all pull together.

Then that led into talking about the new staff, the new starters, how do we help them? How do we support them? And it's the role of the staff with a bit of time to try and mentor and support, to pass on the right way of doing things (or what we feel is the right way of doing things), and hope that they pick up on that, because we don't seem to be getting that from senior management or its not coming down the line unfortunately. There is not a lot of support coming that way. But we still do it, we're still proud to do it and that was the theme of our discussion.

Group 8

A lot of people have said things that we echoed in our discussion. In our group we had different prison officers from different prisons and we found that affected our experiences and what we thought. I work in quite a settled prison, its high security and our staffing levels haven't been affected as much so my experience is different from a guy who's at Nottingham who's had his nose broken twice - and that can affect how and what you think about the job, but we all agreed that we care, we all agreed that we wear different hats, that laughing and banter with prisoners and staff keep us going.

You have to be a problem solver and it's good that we come from a range of experiences and different backgrounds. You have to be able to fit in a team and find your place within that team because that's what gets you through your day. You have officers who are good at lugging mattresses and going to and from stores and they love doing that, then you have people who like talking to prisoners and we all have our roles and we find them and that's what we found makes a team and gets us through.

We said that it's really important that you are able to speak to people even though you're busy, those little five minute chats, saying hello, asking how somebody is feeling, that gets you through. Completing your job as well to save other staff from hassle sometimes is really important – like to think that you've saved your night officer from having a horrible night because you've done your job well. Banter, again. Not being fake and false, not lying, prisoners can see through that. Being honest to yourself.

What keeps people doing their job? We found that individuals have different motivations and it can be that some people still want to get out there and rehabilitate and change people. But other people feel that they just want to retire, and there were other people who felt quite trapped... so there was lot of things going on in our group.

Group 9

We spoke about a lot of the things that the other groups did, but we just said that, to be honest, when we started the role or certainly the newer members of staff said that we were quite 'stand off-ish' to begin with, but over time learnt to take the mickey out of ourselves and laugh at ourselves and we definitely agreed that laughter was a massive role within the job.

We are a lot more than just security, it's about the attitude you have towards the job. Listening, making sure people are feeling like they are being heard and that you are approachable. We spoke about personal resilience, being able to make a mistake and reflect on that, then learn and bounce back from that.

We also spoke about our proudest moments; one member of the group said just maintaining their own personal integrity throughout their long career was their proudest thing. It's hard to pin point one thing. Someone said that he read a feedback form from the prisoner stating: "thank you for keeping me alive" and obviously this meant the world to him. We also just spoke about being able to have people skills, being a positive role model, recognising which hats to wear when, and being able to identify triggers within prisoners as well - so knowing how to read situations.

Group 10

The common theme from our discussion was that the satisfaction of being a prison officer largely depends on the environment in which you work in. So we had people from varying prison settings - from sex offender settings to therapeutic communities where I work to working on an island - all sorts of settings - and we started with a lady who said that when she joined the prison service she knew she didn't want to do anything else, to a guy who is very close to retirement.

There was a clear theme of some of the problems that affect the service and the frustrations that brings. I was probably put in that group to be the sort of, I would say "the diamond amongst the rough" (!) but I'm going to say that I was there to unsettle it slightly as I was the positive one and I said, well, actually I do the job because I actually love the job and you know I try not to get involved with all the politics that goes on because it's going to happen regardless.

But for me the clear theme that I'm going to pick out was that diversity is what makes a prison officer or the prison service so great because we're all different and by our differences we grow stronger. All of our prisoners are different and it's their differences that we recognise and that's what makes us stronger.

Group 11

We were talking about what made us join the service, and for me, they were saying how I was a bit mad to be honest, I've known since I was 13 that I wanted to join the prison service, so it was the only thing for me. But a lot of them were saying like it was either police or security that was their background and it was a sense of: "I'll give it a go".

After that we were talking about our motivations and how motivation to keep you going every day has changed from the motivation that made you join the job in the first place. A lot of it was based on teamwork like others have said. Something different every day. It's getting to know the prisoners and understanding their background and how you can help them.

We were talking about the traits to be a good prison officer. There were quite a few things we came up with for that because there is a mixture of things that are required, so we thought: basically being straight with them, telling them how it is, also giving them a bit of like optimism and enthusiasm because the other lads won't do that for them, if there is something they want to do they will just say: "ah no you'll not do that" so it's just basically like giving them something to go on.

Regarding the prison service, it's like it catches you and you can't really explain why you do the job to other people that don't do it, it's just that you do it and you're there. Most of us love it.

Group 12

Our group focused on providing a rehabilitating environment, which we work in. I first joined the job nine years ago from a catering and hospitality trade, when I came into the job my first thought was I'm going to come and teach prisoners how to cook and how to be a chef... that went out the window straight away! Very soon, very quickly I realised that there is a lot of different things that we all do in the job every day that make changes to prisoners lives and the people that we work with.

What I got from the group is that there is a very diverse group that work in different establishments doing different roles. All of us are proud to do the job that we do, all of us work hard every day and all of us make a difference. Small things that we do with prisoners every day, whether it be to help with an application, to help with a prisoner having difficulties in family relationships or whether it be someone's lost a loved one. Engaging prisoners and offering support is the key role and the key job that we all do every day and I think basically our group was all about those small things, those small bits of work we do every day help to rehabilitate prisoners.