

IMPROVING STAFF MORALE AND JOB SATISFACTION: FINDINGS FROM TWO GOVERNING GOVERNORS' SYMPOSIUMS

Introduction

The Butler Trust has convened two Governing Governors symposiums in recent years – the first in December 2022, and the second in December last year.

The two events saw 41 and 49 Governing Governors, respectively, come together over two days, at Oxford University's Keble College, to look at how some of the key challenges they face might be addressed.

Among the key challenges they considered at both events, were staff attrition and absenteeism, and what Governors might do to help bring rates down, focusing in particular on boosting staff morale and job satisfaction.

The combined recommendations from the two events are summarised here.

Building on the positives

There are positives to working in prisons, as Nixon and Woodward detail in their book *Role Exit in Prison Officers* (Routledge, 2025).

Chief among the positives mentioned by staff were camaraderie with colleagues, and a sense of pride and purpose.

Camaraderie

While traditionally seen as strong, bonds between staff have been affected by high turnover and a large influx of new staff.

Suggestions on building camaraderie included:

- sporting events, bingo & quizzes – and competitions between groups/across establishments;
- charity fundraising events and staff social events (Christmas lunch, summer barbeque),
- organised walks and cycle rides;
- team building “away days”;
- including team activities in the annual #HiddenHeroes Day celebrations;
- setting up a staff social committee to help organise activities.

Shared spaces where staff can mix informally, such as rest rooms on the wings and staff messes, were another recommendation, as was providing a space where staff could take breaks together, while having access to their phones (instead of spending breaks alone in their cars).

Pride and sense of purpose

As with camaraderie, pride and sense of purpose is seen as a positive aspect of working in prisons for many – but again may be less strong than it was.

Suggestions on boosting staff members' feelings of pride in their own work included:

- formal staff recognition schemes;
- written 'thank you's from the Governor for a job well done;
- nominations for awards (including the Butler Trust);
- encouraging and supporting colleagues and residents to show their appreciation.

Ideas for building staff pride and sense of purpose across an establishment's workforce as a whole included:

- inviting local figures (e.g. High Sheriff), and former prisoner 'success stories', to address staff;
- using #HiddenHeroes Day to thank staff, and reinforce the importance of their roles;
- extending long service recognition to include five and ten years' service.

Developing a sense of pride and purpose was seen as particularly important with new recruits. Recommendations on this included:

- reinstating "passing out" parades for Officers;
- and holding welcome events for new staff;
- including a stronger focus on 'pride and purpose' in new Prison Officer training.

Families can play a significant role – positively or negatively – in relation to their loved ones' sense of pride in their role. Suggestions on harnessing their potential positive impact included:

- staff-family days – allowing families to see where they work and better understand their roles;
- inviting families of new staff to tour the establishment, and attend staff "graduation" events;
- inviting family members to attend staff recognition and long service celebrations;
- involving families in social events (e.g. staff barbeque);
- a newsletter for staff families, sent to their homes;
- a forum for staff families (similar to the resident family forums in many establishments).

Addressing the negatives

Common complaints and reasons given for leaving the service include: the pressures and sometimes distressing nature of the role, and its impact on mental health; work-life balance and the impact of shift working in particular; and the nature of the working environment.

Support for staff

In addition to regular wellbeing days and existing support such as Care Teams, TRIM teams, mental health allies and PAM Assist, suggestions included:

- giving staff and residents the chance to talk and reflect following a death in custody;
- a dedicated space for staff support, outside the establishment if possible;
- guidance for staff on the range of support services available to them.

Additional suggestions for supporting staff in their roles included:

- having experienced SOs on each wing to support and supervise staff in their work;
- regular group reflective-practice sessions with managers;

- mentors and individual supervision sessions for new staff;
- training and guidance for managers and supervisors on supporting and supervising staff.

Improving work-life balance

While opportunities to work from home are limited for staff, especially for those in a front-line role, there are ways of helping to improve work-life balance, including:

- offering working-from-home opportunities for those whose roles allow;
- four-day shift patterns for uniformed staff (as in some establishments already);
- allowing greater flexibility on rostering for those caring for young children and others;
- (re-)introducing team-based self-rostering;
- allowing people to work part-time and/or fixed hours (e.g. weekends only);
- allowing staff to bring their dogs to work, with a dog walking service provided by prisoners;
- providing creche facilities for staff with very young children;
- offering gym access and classes - potentially (as in some jails) to family members too.

Working environment and facilities

Recommendations on improving the workplace itself included:

- supervised work parties to deal with minor repairs and refurbishment;
- plants and greenery inside establishments as well as out, using artificial plants if necessary;
- improving lighting, and refurbishing windows to bring in sunlight and allow views outside;
- holding inter-wing and workplace cleanliness competition;
- providing litter bins in cells and around the establishment to reduce rubbish.

Recommendations on facilities for staff included:

- rest rooms on the landings;
- a staff café/mess, offering hot food & drinks, ideally including at breakfast and on weekends;
- a staff room away from the landings;
- staff gardens.

Management and leadership

Previous Butler Trust symposiums for officers found staff want four things from their managers:

- to be cared about; and to be valued;
- to be listened to; and to be kept informed.

Showing staff they are cared about and valued

Staff want to see and be seen by their Governors, but it can be difficult for them to find the time to get out and about. Recommendations on this included:

- blocking out a set time each week to tour the establishment and see staff at work;
- drawing up a schedule to ensure they visit each area once a month (for example), if they were unable to do so more often;

- placing themselves in areas, such as in the gate/centre, where they can be seen by, and speak to, many staff at once.

Other recommendations for Governors included:

- contacting in person anyone assaulted at work, and visiting anyone hospitalised;
- sending flowers and cards on the death of a loved one;
- sending personalised birthday cards to staff;
- recognising good work through formal staff recognition schemes (local and national);
- thanking individual staff members and teams personally for a job well done;
- making use of #HiddenHeroes Day to show staff they are appreciated.

Listening to staff and keeping them informed

Suggestions for Governors on showing staff they are listened to and heard included:

- producing a regular staff newsletter (in hardcopy for wing staff);
- holding regular full staff briefings;
- holding regular team-level meetings (to consult as well as inform);
- setting up a staff forum (mirroring resident councils);
- breakfast / lunch / tea with the Governor;
- “ask the Governor” and “staff suggestion” box, with responses published in the newsletter.