

AMELIORATING THE PRESSURE ON GOVERNORS: FINDINGS FROM TWO GOVERNING GOVERNORS' SYMPOSIUMS

Introduction

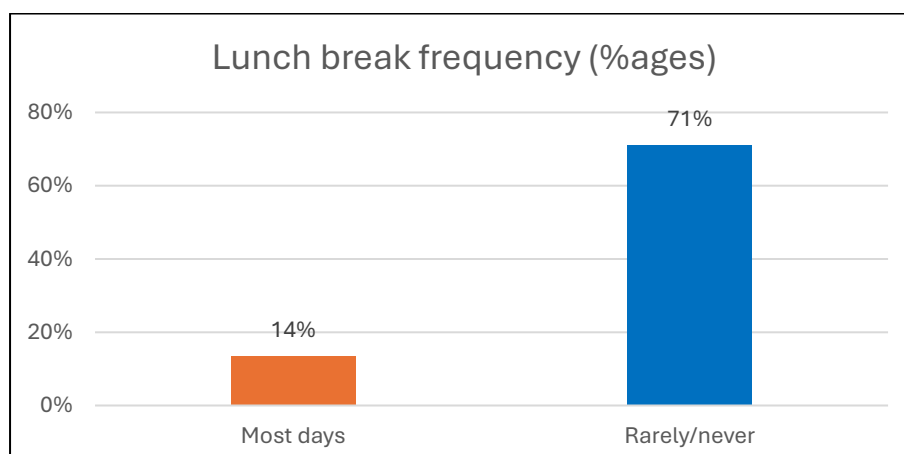
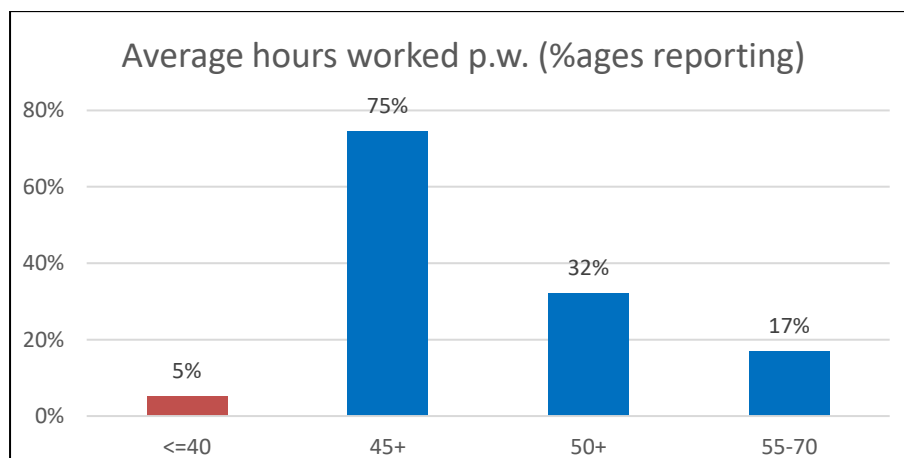
The Butler Trust has convened two Governing Governors symposiums in recent years – the first in December 2022, and the second in December last year. The two events saw 41 and 49 Governing Governors, respectively, come together over two days, at Oxford University's Keble College, to look at how some of the key challenges they face might be addressed.

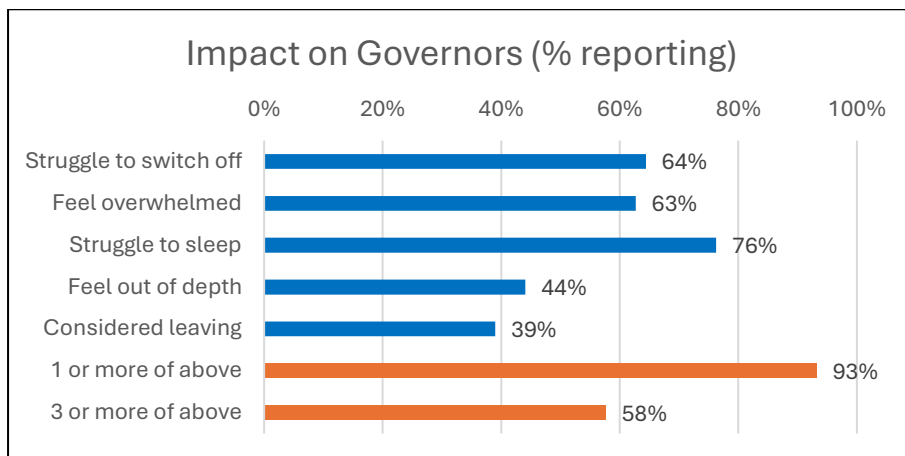
Among the key issues they considered at both events, was the pressure Governors are under, and how that might be ameliorated. This report summarises their recommendations for Governors. [Their recommendations for HQ and HMIP were shared with them separately.]

The pressures of governing

Ahead of the 2025 event, the Governors completed a short questionnaire about their workloads and the pressures of the role:

- three-quarters reported working at least 45 hours a week, almost a third said they worked more than 50 hours a week, and one-in-six worked between 55 and 70 hours;
- fewer than one-in-seven said they took a lunch break of at least 20 minutes most days, with more than 70% saying they rarely, if ever, did so.





In addition:

- almost two-thirds of respondents reported struggling to “switch off” from work, with a similar number saying the pressure of their role can sometimes feel overwhelming, and three-quarters reported struggling to sleep because of work related worries;
- more than 40% reported feeling out of their depth, and a similar number said they had considered leaving the service because of the pressure they are under;
- well over a half of respondents reported at least three of the above, and almost all reported at least one;
- and 86% said they worried about the pressures on their senior team too.

Sources of pressure

The Governors noted that their role is inherently demanding, compounded by:

- some of the key challenges currently facing establishments - including staffing issues, drugs, and violence;
- pressure and expectations placed on them from outside their establishments - including their headquarters, politicians, and the media;
- the demands they make on themselves - to secure the best possible outcomes for their establishments, residents, and staff.

Governors’ advice for Governors

The Governors considered what general advice they would give to a new Governor on managing their workload and reducing the pressure they are under.

Their recommendations, most of which would be relevant to existing Governors and senior managers too, are summarised below.

Limit your hours

Working too many hours can impact your wellbeing and effectiveness, as well as your family life. It can also place pressure on your senior team to work longer than they should too.

Take a lunch break, and time off

As with limiting your hours, and for much the same reasons, it’s important to have a “proper” lunch break every day, and take regular time off (including all your annual leave).

Reduce your workload

“Do only what only you can do” and delegate to others where you can; only attend meetings you really need to be at, and ensure they don’t take longer than necessary.

Prioritise what you do

You can’t do everything, and certainly not all at once. Prioritise tasks and goals by importance and level of urgency, and don’t be afraid to say “no” or push back on unrealistic deadlines.

Ringfence time in your diary

Block out time for essential tasks, such as touring the establishment, talking to staff and responding to emails – and stick to it.

Close your door sometimes

While it’s important to be open and accessible to your staff, when you need some concentrated time on something, make it clear you’re not to be disturbed.

Manage your return from leave

Work will inevitably back up while you’re away, block out your first day back to catch up on what you’ve missed.

Make use of your Management Coordinator

Your Management Coordinator can play a key role in organising your diary, making sure you’re not disturbed when required, and helping to manage and sift your emails.

Listen to your colleagues

Your managers and staff value being consulted, and can be a helpful source of ideas and suggestions for improvement.

Don’t try to reinvent the wheel

Find out what’s going on elsewhere – visit other jails to see what they’re doing, and check out TheKnowledgeExchange.uk – and encourage your functional leads to do likewise.

Utilise existing support and development opportunities

Many Governors have found the reflective practice sessions, professional coaching and mentoring, and CPD opportunities provided centrally to be of real benefit.

Reach out to fellow Governors

Don’t be afraid to seek the support of your peers, and consider joining (or setting up) an online peer support group – they understand the role and the pressures involved better than anyone.

Focus on the possible

Be mindful of the constraints under which you operate, and aim for what is realistically achievable rather than striving for perfection.

Remember, it’s not all about you

Try not to take things personally if your establishment is criticised, or hold yourself personally accountable for matters that are beyond your control.

Look after yourself

Be mindful of your own wellbeing; watch out for warning signs; take some leave if you need a bit of respite; and talk to your manager, and consider seeking professional help, if you’re struggling.