Crisis Point Reached

The Pressures Facing Scotland's Prison Officers Uncovered

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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UNITY CONSULTING

UNITY Consulting Scotland for the
Prison Officers' Association

POA SCOTLAND

"During my 34 years working as a Prison Officer I have never felt as under-valued as I currently do. Opportunities for both staff and prisoners is at an all time low, as is staff morale. The majority of issues within my establishment is, in my opinion, a direct result of understaffing."

"There is a perfect storm brewing. The level of staff that are being employed is somewhat scary. That, coupled with losing experienced staff, there is becoming a void of knowledge and capability within the service. You then have the added pressure of prison population numbers, and the types of narcotics prisoners are consuming are making prisoners more violent and dangerous than ever – all issues on a scale that has never been seen before, all converging to a single point. It's a ticking time bomb."

"If there is one thing I would ask policymakers to do to improve Scotland's prisons it's listen to those working on the frontline."

Executive Summary

The Prison Officers' Association (POA) is an independent, democratic trade union representing uniformed prison grades and staff working in Psychiatric Care with over 35,000 members in the public and private sectors. It is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC). The POA in Scotland represents around 4,000 members working in the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and the State Hospital at Carstairs.

Unity Consulting Scotland has been commissioned by POA Scotland to provide this "state of the nation" report into the Scottish Prison Service. The report's findings follow extensive consultation with POA members which has informed a series of demands to improve services and make Scotland's prison system fit and able to meet the demands of the 21st century.

This report is based on desktop research, a literature review, focus group interviews and surveys of serving POA members working in prisons across Scotland. These are the workers who know and understand the Scottish Prison Service best.

Prison Officers are proud of the job they do and the difference they make, but their morale is low with some reporting feeling burnt-out, unsupported, at risk, and prevented from doing the job they are employed to do. Their voices are heard throughout this report.

The key demands contained in this report come from them and if implemented would deliver very significant improvements to Scotland's prison system.

This report comes at a time when Scotland's prisons have reached breaking point, with the Scottish Government forced into the early release of convicted prisoners before their sentence was complete. This was as a result of record prisoner numbers, a lack of space and overcrowded cells.

In the weeks prior to the release of this report it was reported that despite the Early Release Scheme the number of prisoners in Scotland's jails was higher than they were before its introduction.

POA, while supportive of the Early Release Scheme, believed it was a sticking-plaster approach. Addressing overcrowding in the longer term will require a combination of sustained investment in staffing and the prison estate, action to address problems within the service and wider justice system, and a strategy to address the social and economic determinants that are at the root of much criminal behaviour.

he list of issues addressed in this report is extensive but not exhaustive. This report outlines the priority concerns identified by PAO members interviewed and surveyed.

The POA will be campaigning relentlessly over the coming weeks and months to ensure that the working conditions members experience every day are improved and Scotland's prisons system is fit for purpose.

The Prison Officers' Association's Demands

Budget

- In the absence of any meaningful strategy to significantly reduce the prison population, SPS capital and revenue budgets should be increased to ensure the service can meet the demands placed upon it, employ more staff and deliver a prison service fit for the 21st century.

Recruitment and retention

- The recruitment process for Prison Officers is not fit for purpose and should undergo a major overhaul, taking account of the views of the people who work in the system and the demands placed upon them.

- Recruitment promotional material should be more balanced, reflecting the realities of the job.

- There should be a return to significant in-person interviews and assessment.

- The interview and assessment process must involve Operational staff who have experience of working on the frontline.

- All applicants who make it to interview should have the opportunity to visit a prison prior to progressing through the recruitment process.

- The vetting of staff must be more robust, with assessment of an interviewee's character a key element.

- English language skills must be at a level to maintain safe operating standards.

- Opportunities for promotion should only be for those with relevant skills, training and experience.

- SPS must reassess the way it recruits and retains Officers from abroad, including visa sponsorship.

Training

- The 6-week foundation training period is inadequate. Trainees must be equipped to meet the demands of the job.

- Training must be recalibrated to create a balance between policy, the law, psychology, etc., and 'jailcraft', such as the management of prisoners, maintaining discipline, court attendance, cell searching, etc.

- The training variable for all operational staff needs revisited in light of significant changes in the working environment.

- Tutors with frontline experience must play a major role in the education and training of new recruits at the SPS college.

- All new staff should have the opportunity to take part in a formal mentoring scheme throughout their initial years in the role.

- Training must equip staff with the skills and knowledge to identify coercion and manipulation by prisoners.

Pressures on staff

- Sustained increased investment is required to address overcrowding and understaffing and reduce the number of times prisons are placed on restrictive regimes.

- Action must be taken to address rising attrition rates.

- Safe staffing must reflect rising prisoner numbers.

- Effective systems must be introduced to prevent contraband from entering prisons, including anti-drone technology to stop drone incursion in and around jails.

- Action must be taken to protect staff from the influence and threats from organised crime gangs operating inside and outside of prisons.

Health and wellbeing

- SPS must recognise that as people age their physical health declines and additional effective support is required.

- Effective support must be put in place for staff experiencing poor mental health, often as a result of prolonged exposure to their working environment.

- SPS must provide high quality support to staff who are off work sick.

- Staff must be protected from ingesting drug fumes, with appropriate PPE provided to those who are expected to enter cells where fumes may be present.

- SPS should commission research into the effect of exposure to drug fumes on prison staff.

Retirement age

- Prison Officers should have the Normal Pension Age of 60.

- Meaningful and fulfilling alternative opportunities should be provided for those who are under the Normal Pension Age but who are unable to continue in their present role as they get older.

Pay

- Pay restoration is required to make up the amount lost when pay awards were below inflation.

- Pay needs to reflect the entirely unique and incredibly challenging daily working environment our prisons present to the staff who work within them.

- The SPS needs a new job evaluation system that properly measures and recognises the differences between Non-operational roles and roles on the Operational frontline of the service.

System change

- There should be a comprehensive independent inquiry into the purpose of prison and a root and branch review of sentencing.

- Action is needed to reduce Scotland's prison population and address the root causes of offending, such as poverty, alienation, substance misuse, relationship breakdown, etc.

- Non-violent offenders who can be dealt with in the community should not be sent to prison and those with addictions or mental health problems should have their condition treated in the community.

- Investment is required to improve prisoner access to rehabilitation programmes, education and training.

- Privatisation has failed – prison services should always be provided by the public sector with the GeoAmey prisoner transfer contract brought back in-house and Addiewell prison transferred to the public sector.

- The Throughcare system should be reinstated.

Culture

- The Scottish Government should commission an independent review of the culture of the Scottish Prison Service.

- There must be a change in SPS management culture, with all staff shown respect and treated fairly.

- A representative of the joint trade unions should be appointed to the SPS board.

- SPS must record and publish a wider range of management information in the interest of openness and transparency.