



THE PRISON OPERATIONAL WORKFORCE

Unlocked Graduates submission to the Justice Committee Inquiry

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Unlocked Graduates is working to break cycles of reoffending by identifying brilliant people and supporting them to spend at least two years working as frontline Prison Officers. During this time, we challenge them to come up with new ideas to improve the way prisons work across the country.

1.2 The terms of reference invite evidence on the retention of the prison operational workforce, their training, recruitment, continuing professional development and their diversity. Since 2017, Unlocked Graduates has recruited and trained over 600 Prison Officers, working in 37 establishments across England and Wales. We reach a third of the prisoner population and receive over 20 applicants for each space on the programme.

1.3 We recruit, train and challenge outstanding individuals to lead prisoner rehabilitation with the aim of creating high-performing leaders who will break the cycles of reoffending in prisons and throughout society. Over half of the Prison Officers (53 per cent) who we recruit, and train, are promoted or take on additional responsibilities within their prisons during the programme.

1.4 Unlocked Graduates emerged as an idea from the Coates Review of Prison Education. We are financially supported by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and are grateful for the ongoing relationship we hold with government.

1.5 Unlocked Graduates' founder and CEO Natasha Porter OBE would welcome the chance to give oral evidence to this important and timely inquiry to investigate workforce pressures in the prison system, and we thank the Justice Committee for their work.

2. ABOUT UNLOCKED GRADUATES

- 2.1 Unlocked Graduates believes that the way to change prisons and break cycles of reoffending is through Prison Officers. The Band 3 Prison Officer is the only professional who reaches every single prisoner including the most vulnerable and challenging. They set the culture on the landings and have the power to create a safe and secure environment that is focused on rehabilitation. This access and influence make it a singularly powerful role.
- 2.2 Our leadership development programme for the prison service is based on the Teach First model of system improvement. We attract top graduates into prisons to work as frontline Prison Officers for a minimum of two years while they learn to be excellent Prison Officers, develop transferable leadership skills and delve into evidence-based solutions to the problems facing prisons.
- 2.3 The existence of Unlocked Graduates raises awareness of jobs in the prison service and brings in people that would not otherwise consider this career.
- 2.4 Our participants are supported to be highly effective prison officers. The course focuses on rehabilitation and breaking cycles of reoffending through a rigorous programme of training and mentoring. This work forms part of their studies for a Master's degree, which they complete while taking on the full duties of a frontline Prison Officer. It is a model that we know can work to improve public services. Research on the Teach First scheme credited their work for a measurable improvement in London schools.
- 2.5 Unlocked Graduates recruits Prison Officers to be placed in all parts of the prison estate in England and Wales, however currently we do not place in the private or open estate.

3. RECRUITING HIGH QUALITY CANDIDATES

- 3.1** Our recruitment strategy is designed to persuade high calibre applicants, particularly those who would not otherwise consider a job in the prison service, that this is the role for them. We emphasise that the role of the Prison Officer is as an agent of change to recruit those most passionate about rehabilitation.
- 3.2** Our focus on graduates is, in part, because they are underrepresented in the prison service, and we believe that their addition will diversify the problem-solving skills needed on the frontline. It also helps to raise the status of the Prison Officer role by actively targeting an ambitious group of jobseekers that society views as our 'best and brightest.'
- 3.3** Our programme is highly competitive, with the number of applications to the programme remaining high year on year; our approach is effectively attracting many top graduates, enabling us to select excellent participants. We recently reached 20,000 started applications and feature yearly in the Times Top 100 graduate employers.
- 3.4** It is vital that the prison workforce is representative of the people it works with. This is true of all under-represented groups and protected characteristics. Our proportion of programme joiners from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME) is around one in five. The existing proportion of BAME public sector prison staff is currently one in ten.¹
- 3.5** We continue to make diverse recruitment a priority, being transparent with applicants about our wish to attract a representative cohort and actively seeking to engage with the challenging issues surrounding diversity and inclusion. We also offer coaching to all applicants through our recruitment process, and we particularly encourage those from underrepresented backgrounds to access this.
- 3.6** We know that Band 3 Prison Officers face challenges at work. Therefore, in recruitment, we conduct our own welfare survey and work with clinical psychologists to ensure that candidates are capable of facing the demands of the role. This is based on evidence from secure children's settings in Denmark and could be replicated across the system of prison officer recruitment.
- 3.7** Applicants also complete a Prison Immersion Day between receiving an offer and starting training. This allows them to gain a fuller understanding of their potential role and speak to people already serving as Band 3 Prison Officers.
- 3.8** Although we believe that the quality of staff is the most important aspect, there are serious implications in under-staffing. The more staff on a wing, the more that education, activities, work and social visits can be prioritised, as well as support for voluntary sector initiatives. For example, HMPPS' own evidence shows that maintaining family ties through visits can contribute to a significant reduction in

¹ HMPPS Workforce Statistics Bulletin, September 2022, published 17th November 2022

reoffending, which is currently estimated to cost the UK economy £18 billion per year.²

² Prison Strategy White Paper, Ministry of Justice - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1038765/prisons-strategy-white-paper.pdf

4. DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE PRISON OFFICERS

- 4.1** We believe that the right training and support can radically accelerate the time it takes for a frontline worker to make a difference. By weaving practical and theoretical learning, we support and develop outstanding individuals who excel in their roles, take on additional responsibilities, and influence best practice on and off the landings.
- 4.2** We are proud of the Unlocked Graduates curriculum. It is carefully designed to provide participants with the deep domain expertise required to be an effective Prison Officer. It is informed by Scandinavian models of Prison Officer training and draws on best practice from a range of other sectors including teaching, social work, and policing. Our training offer sits across two years in recognition of the time it takes to refine expert practice. This also recognises the necessity of training while on-the-job, rather than just before starting the job for people to become confident and competent.
- 4.3** Our initial intensive residential course (Summer Institute) compresses all standard Prison Officer training into six weeks, following the completion of our pre-learning module. In line with our philosophy of ongoing learning, practitioner skills are then further developed throughout the two-year programme. Participants receive 30 half-days of in-prison training which focuses on constantly improving specialised aspects of the Prison Officer role. This includes one-to-one coaching, group supervision, and bespoke training packages. Some training in the prison service, such as Use of Force, is already done to a high standard. We would suggest that continuing professional development is expanded and prioritised.
- 4.4** Our initial training is delivered by a combination of experienced HMPPS trainers, expert prison officers and external experts. In order to ensure the highest quality teaching for our participants, all our trainers are required to attend an intensive two-week Train the Trainer course and to engage in ongoing development through regular observation and feedback sessions.
- 4.5** Unlocked Graduates employs people with lived experience of prison to work as fully-trained recruiters and trainers. This normalises the concept that prisoners can break cycles of reoffending and gives participants the opportunity to understand in depth what Prison Officers did to positively support them. This helps our participants prepare for a role where the complexity is relational rather than transactional. It also means when they see prisoners who have been released returning to custody, they remain hopeful that it is possible for this cycle to be broken.
- 4.6** Unlocked Graduates are encouraged to see that HMPPS have recently launched a new programme of specific training for those working in the women's estate. This follows the model that we have always used at our Summer Institute, and we would encourage specific training to be rolled out for those working in the youth estate.
- 4.7** We are very thoughtful about our pedagogy, using pre-reading and lectures by experts to impart knowledge, and practice-based learning. In particular, the work of Doug Lemov in education underpins our pedagogy for Prison Officer skills.

- 4.8** We have shared these approaches with other training organisations and the wider prison sector, and elements have already been adopted by them. We are already working with HMPPS Learning and Development to share best practice for those entering the prison service by the mainstream route, and Unlocked Graduates would be keen to do more of this.
- 4.9** We second experienced, mission-aligned Prison Officers to work as Mentoring Prison Officers (MPOs) in the programme, training them to provide both intensive support and challenge to participants. The role increases recognition of those who are outstanding at the craft of being a Prison Officer and builds long-term capacity for the prison service. We believe all Prison Officers would benefit from this model.
- 4.10** We know that our MPO role works. One MPO between 2018 and 2020 took what he learned while on the Unlocked Graduates programme – particularly around practice-based learning and coaching as well as his own research – to develop a new induction programme at his home establishment. New recruits receive additional support over their first 18 months on the job including one-to-one mentoring, access to a support group chat and ongoing supervision of their practice. Retention of the current group of new recruits that he supports is at more than 90 per cent in their first year – significantly higher than the estimated national averages for new recruits.
- 4.11** A key aspect of our MPO role is fortnightly group supervision, which is inspired by a model of support designed for new social workers. This positively impacts both the retention and capability of officers, allowing them to work through professional issues together in a very structured way. We would support a wider roll out of this system and Unlocked Graduates are supporting on a pilot of this in one prison.

5. GROWING AND DIVERSIFYING THE PRISON OPERATIONAL WORKFORCE

- 5.1** We recently undertook a benchmarking exercise with a sample of 14 of our partner prisons, with representation from prisons from the north, midlands, Greater London, and the south. We were looking to compare the retention of Band 3 officers in the 2021/22 year to understand how well the retention of our Unlocked officers compared to those that entered the service via the standard route. Our internal analysis showed that the retention of Unlocked participants is currently 13 per cent higher during our two-year programme compared to those entering via the standard route. This is despite increasing numbers of participants being actively approached for other roles during their time on the programme.
- 5.2** For those who have left the operational prison service they focus on the lack of clear pathways for promotion to leadership roles following their two years as operational Prison Officers. It is also interesting that the line of sight for participants to the most senior jobs, where they believe most influence sits, are in the civil service rather than operational roles leading prisons.
- 5.3** Our Ambassadors also frequently reference quality and quantity of support from line management as crucial to their experience as prison officers. To combat this, Unlocked Graduates' new strategy launched in December 2022 includes a plan to pilot a middle leadership programme to improve the support Prison Officers get from line managers, particularly whilst completing the Unlocked Graduates programme.
- 5.4** A recent report by the Justice Inspectorate, which Unlocked Graduates participants contributed to, showed issues with racism faced by Black Prison Officers.³ This chimes with what we know from our Ambassadors, some of whom left the prison service because of poor staff culture, including incidents of racism and sexism.
- 5.5** We believe that role models who have reached impactful and senior positions will inspire lower grade staff from ethnic minorities to achieve similar career progression.
- 5.6** We would encourage a diversity and inclusion strategy that is accountable and meaningful. There are some examples of good practice, such as the equalities forums spearheaded by the Governor at HMP Manchester and the Together Against Racism initiative started by one Unlocked Graduates participant, which could be studied and potentially rolled out.⁴

³ 'The experiences of adult black male prisoners and black prison staff', HM Inspectorate of Prisons, published December 2022 - <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/inspections/the-experiences-of-adult-black-male-prisoners-and-black-prison-staff/>

⁴ <https://unlockedgrads.org.uk/news-item/together-against-racism-niyi-2020-cohort/>

6. AMPLIFYING THE WORK OF UNLOCKED GRADUATES

- 6.1** Unlocked Graduates are looking to share best practice from our first five years of placements by codifying our training model as part of our ongoing strategy.⁵
- 6.2** We have taken inspiration from the models in Denmark and Norway. This includes the work of Are Hoidal and the belief that increasing quality of frontline Prison Officers is the starting point to radically improve a prison system. We also share the belief that Prison Officers are uniquely well placed to be the agent of change in the life of a prisoner.
- 6.3** The model of Unlocked Graduates is being developed in Austria and studied by other prison services internationally, and we are happy to share best practice.

⁵ Unlocked Graduates' Strategy Report, published December 2022 - https://s28953.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Strategy-Report-2022_FINAL_Digital.pdf

7. MEASURING THE IMPACT OF UNLOCKED GRADUATES ON THE PRISON OPERATIONAL WORKFORCE

- 7.1** Of all the Governors we recently surveyed, 100 per cent would recommend Unlocked Graduates to other prisons. We hope to receive ongoing financial support from the Ministry of Justice to continue placing outstanding graduates as Band 3 Prison Officers, as we have done since 2017.
- 7.2** One Governor Unlocked Graduates works with said *“I think Unlocked is starting to influence how we recruit and support. It is also attracting some brilliant people into the prison service”*.⁶ Another Governor said *“I have to say that I was a bit sceptical of Unlocked. I was not convinced that graduates would bring any special skills and was concerned their training programme meant that the Unlocked officers would sometimes have to be off the wing when we needed them. But a number of years since I first had a group of Unlocked officers join, I am a complete convert. These officers bring a different perspective and genuinely challenge me (in a good way) with their new ideas and follow through. I’m now lobbying to get more each year”*.⁷
- 7.3** We are proud of our participants and Ambassadors and the impact they are making. One example is two Unlocked participants who co-founded the drug rehabilitation wing at HMP Pentonville, which the Governor conceived of as a bold attempt to implement the latest best practice when it comes to rehabilitation for habitual drug users. Since the wing opened in June 2020, it has been able to support roughly 60 prisoners at a time. In the last three months, there have been no incidents of violence or self-harm, and last month, just two drug tests out of 120 were failed. This is a huge shift considering that random drug test results across all other wings at HMP Pentonville have an average return of one in six failed.
- 7.4** Another example of direct impact is the work of one participant at HMP Wandsworth ensuring that 280 former prisoners received support from the Accelerator Prison Project employment service. Just under 200 (194) were released directly from the prison, and 75 (39 per cent) of them received a job offer. This compared to a national average of just 16 per cent. The participant has recently received a Prime Minister’s Award in recognition of this remarkable work.
- 7.5** Creative solutions by Unlocked Graduates’ participants have shown indications of potentially helping complex problems. One participant working on the induction wing of a high security prison observed that prisoners in their first few weeks were at a much higher risk of suicide or self-harm. Following his redesign of the induction process, there was a reduction in self-harm incidents of 37 per cent compared to the prior three-month period.

⁶ Page 26 of Unlocked Graduates’ Impact Report, published December 2022 - https://s28953.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Unlocked_ImpactReport_2022_Digital_Interim.pdf

⁷ Page 37 of Unlocked Graduates’ Impact Report, published December 2022 - https://s28953.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Unlocked_ImpactReport_2022_Digital_Interim.pdf

7.6 The majority of Ambassadors remain within HMPPS and nearly 90 per cent still work towards the mission of Unlocked Graduates in their primary role. Almost half (42 per cent) of Ambassadors who are still working in prisons are in middle or senior leadership positions. We believe that our initial and ongoing training, consistent support, MPO model and increased diversity in our cohorts have contributed to this.

8. CONTACT

For more information about the points raised in this submission or Unlocked Graduates please contact:

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