

Coaching: a valuable tool to support wellbeing and resilience in the prison workforce

Vicki Cardwell is Chief Executive Officer at Spark Inside.¹ Polly Wright is a research, policy and practice consultant working in the criminal justice sector.

Prison staff have been described as ‘hidden heroes’ whose work is largely out of view from the wider public and yet there are over 34,000 (FTE) individuals employed in our public sector prisons.² The Prison Strategy White Paper states that it is this workforce ‘who hold the greatest potential to make prisons safe, secure and decent, and places that help prisoners to turn their lives around’.³ While HMPPS is ‘committed to ensuring that staff feel valued and supported to develop a long and fulfilling career’,⁴ it is acknowledged that the prison workforce faces huge challenges, exacerbated by the Covid-19 Pandemic. It is therefore essential that staff have the right support and resources in place to enable them to do their jobs well, while ensuring they are well whilst doing their jobs. Spark Inside’s professional, qualified coaching provides a valuable source of support that responds to the current challenges within the workforce, while promoting positive wellbeing and resilience.

What is coaching?

Coaching is a powerful tool that empowers people or systems, through a facilitated conversation, to find their own solutions to the challenges they face. Fundamental to the practice, is the belief that each person is the expert in their own lives. Unlike mentoring, coaching offers no advice or guidance, and unlike therapists, coaches focus on the present and future, not the past. Drawing on psychological theory, coaching uses tools and techniques, such as specific questioning and thought-provoking prompts, to

increase self-awareness and personal responsibility, and promotes behaviour change. The conclusions reached through life coaching are self-generated by the clients, making them personalised and sustainable. Moreover, the self-awareness, empowerment, and clarity of purpose gained by clients can be transformational, gaining them the mental strength they need to achieve their aims in the most difficult of circumstances.

While coaching has long been recognised in private and commercial spheres as an effective approach to leadership development, there is an increasing use and recognition within the public sector. Both the NHS and National College of Policing provide nationwide coaching programmes for frontline staff, and coaching is a key resource offered in the Civil Service Accelerated Development Scheme.⁵ The Government have identified a number of ways in which coaching can support its workforce, including confidence building, relationship management, conflict resolution, role transition and personal resilience.⁶

The HMPPS employee package ‘Looking after our people’ describes coaching as a ‘proven successful, popular and impactful learning method’⁷ and a coaching and mentoring strategy is currently being developed to extend coaching to all grades, with targeted opportunities such as Thrive (linked to the Race Action Plan), aimed at staff specifically from ethnic minority backgrounds.⁸

Spark Inside coaching in prisons

Established in 2012, Spark Inside is one of only a handful of specialist coaching organisations that delivers coaching to people who live and work in

1. To find out more about Spark Inside see: www.sparkinside.org; <https://www.linkedin.com/company/spark-inside/>; Twitter; team@sparkinside.org
2. Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service. (November 2022). *HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: September 2022*. London.
3. Ministry of Justice. (2021). *Prison Strategy White Paper*. London.
4. HM Prison and Probation Service. (2022). *Looking After Our People: The Prison Service Employee Package*. London.
5. HM Civil Service (2023 April 6) *Civil Service Accelerated Development Schemes*. London.
6. HM Cabinet Office. (2020 July 7). *Coaching: The Civil Service Leadership Academy*. London.
7. HM Prison and Probation Service. (2022). *Looking After Our People: The Prison Service Employee Package*. London.
8. HM Prison and Probation Service. (2022 August). *Guidance: Looking After Our People: The Prison Service Employee Package*. London.

prisons. As a pioneer of this approach, the charity has now worked with over 1,500 people either living or working in custody, using coaching to unlock the potential of individuals and drive culture change in the criminal justice system. Spark Inside has delivered one-to-one life coaching to over 80 prison staff of all grades including frontline officers and Governors, with 100 per cent of clients saying they would recommend Spark Inside coaching to their colleagues.

Spark Inside's team of coaches meet high quality coaching standards and are fully qualified and accredited, with over 10,000 hours of practice combined. They bring a significant amount of experience from private and corporate sectors, as well as trauma recovery, alcohol and drugs recovery, and mental health. The same coaches provide Spark Inside coaching to both young men in custody and staff, and are fully vetted, key trained, and have up to date understanding of security, safeguarding, and risk management practice and procedures. They are required to participate in professional coaching supervision. A key aspect of the coaching process is the 'coaching relationship' and as such, all coachees are carefully matched with a suitable coach. In addition, Spark Inside has robust evaluation and monitoring systems in place to continually evidence the impact of their coaching on those living and working in prisons.

Challenges facing the prison workforce

The prison workforce currently faces substantial and inter-related challenges, one of the most significant of which is staff retention. Staff shortages in the prison

service have been described by HMIP as the 'single most limiting factor to progress',⁹ and official figures show that one in seven prison officers in England and Wales resigned during the 12 months to September 2022.¹⁰ In a recent survey of 1,689 public prison staff, nearly half of the respondents said they planned to look for another job soon and more than 60 per cent said they regretted their choice of career.¹¹ The high rates of staff attrition have led to a loss of valuable knowledge and experience within the prison workforce. Over half of staff have less than 5 years' experience,¹² and around a third of prison officers have less than 3 years' experience.¹³ New recruits to the prison service are

increasingly younger, and although they have the potential to become effective members of staff, they arrive with limited experience and require additional support.¹⁴

The prison environment itself represents significant challenges for its workforce. Prison staff are often working in overcrowded, under-resourced and chaotic environments characterised by high levels of violence. In the 12 months to September 2022, there was a 11 per cent increase in the number of assaults compared with the previous year, with serious assaults on staff increasing by 6 per cent.¹⁵ A report by the Joint Unions in Prison Alliance found that almost two-thirds of prison workers had felt unsafe at work

in the last 12 months.¹⁶ Evidence suggests that prison staff who feel fear more frequently will experience higher levels of stress and are more likely to resign.¹⁷

In addition, trauma and mental ill-health are prevalent within prison environments; over 50 per cent of people living in prison report mental health problems,¹⁸ and 53 per cent of women and 27 per cent

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9. Prison Reform Trust. (2022 July 15). *New figures spark fears of a perfect storm in prisons* [Press release]. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/new-figures-spark-fears-of-a-perfect-storm-in-prisons/>

10. Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service. (November 2022). *HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: September 2022*. London.

11. Kinman, G. and Clements, A. (2021). *Survey of Work Related Wellbeing*. Prison Officer Association

12. Ibid

13. HM Prison and Probation Service and Ministry of Justice. (September, 2022). *HMPPS Workforce Quarterly: June 2022*. London

14. Taylor, C. (2022 October 11). Short-staffing in prisons must be tackled. *Chief Inspector's blog*. <https://www.justiceinspectorate/hmiprison/chief-inspectors-blog/chief-inspectors-blog-short-staffing-in-prisons-must-be-tackled/>

15. HM Prison and Probation Service and Ministry of Justice. (January 2023). *Safety in Custody Statistics, England and Wales: deaths in prison custody to December 2022 Assaults and Self-harm to September 2022*. London.

16. Joint Unions in Prisons Alliance. (2019). *Health and safety in prisons: Safe Inside*. www.ucu.org.uk/media/10304/Safe-inside-JUPA-report-on-health-and-safety-in-prisons/pdf/JUPA_safe-inside_health-and-safety-in-prisons_report_Jun19.pdf

17. Clements A.J, Kinman G. and Hart J. (2020). Chapter 10: Stress and wellbeing in prison officers. In Burke, R. and Pignata, S. (Eds) *Handbook of Research on Stress and Well-being in the Public Sector*. (pp.137-151). Edward Elgar Publishing.

18. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. (2021). *Annual report 2020-21*, London.

of men have childhood experiences of emotional, physical or sexual abuse. During the first half of 2020, there were 15,615 prisoners put on an Assessment Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT)¹⁹ care plan due to being at risk of self-harm or suicide.²⁰ Prison staff are therefore at considerable risk of vicarious trauma which is of potential detriment to both their mental and physical health.

Job satisfaction amongst prison staff has been found to be lower than other comparable public sector workers — including both the police and NHS workers,²¹ with operational managers and Governor grades described as often feeling 'unvalued, disenchanted and disengaged'.²² Staff have shared with Spark Inside that they often feel 'stuck', without the time for future planning and opportunities to explore possible solutions to challenges or aspirations for the future. It is also important to recognise the experience of staff with protected characteristics — particularly Black and minority ethnic staff. A recent HMIP review described Black staff (who represent 3.4 per cent of prison officers) as experiencing 'high levels of stress at work and discrimination that hindered their career progression'.²³

It is of no surprise that, given the high levels of work-related stressors described above, prison staff have an elevated risk of poor mental and physical wellbeing. A recent survey of prison officers found high levels of anxiety and burn-out,²⁴ and calls have been made by HMIP, operational managers and Governor grades for more to be done to support the wellbeing of staff.²⁵ Staff also highlight a lack of work-life balance, with negative repercussions for their sleep quality, personal relationships, and wider health.²⁶

The role of Spark Inside's coaching in responding to challenges faced by the workforce

In order for the prison workforce to respond effectively to the needs of the individuals in their care, they need to feel supported, safe, valued and well within their roles. A whole-systems and multi-faceted approach is required to address the many challenges facing the workforce, however coaching provides one resource that can play an integral role in contributing to the wellbeing and resilience of prison staff. Since April 2020, Spark Inside have provided professional, qualified one-to-one coaching for over 80 prison staff, nine of whom are Governor grade. Within this group, Spark Inside has recently coached 20 newly promoted Custodial Managers, where early feedback suggests there can be significant impact from coaching. The sessions have largely taken place in staff's personal time. Early findings from Spark Inside's feedback surveys are positive.

Improving wellbeing

HMPPS aims 'to create a work environment that supports employee health and wellbeing'²⁷ and acknowledges that staff are most effective when they are 'healthy, happy, and able to be themselves'.²⁸ Coaching has been linked to a wide range of positive

indicators of wellbeing, such as reduced stress and anxiety, the ability to think positively about the future and improved self-confidence. A review of the impact of coaching on employee well-being by the Institute of Employment Studies, found that coaching was effective in increasing levels of wellbeing by improving individuals' ability 'to feel relaxed, to feel useful and to think clearly'.²⁹ Evaluation of the NHS *Looking After You*

A recent HMIP review described Black staff (who represent 3.4 per cent of prison officers) as experiencing 'high levels of stress at work and discrimination that hindered their career progression'.

19. Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) is the case management approach used in prisons to support prisoners who are at risk of self-harm and suicide.
20. Allison E. and McIntyre, N. (2021 February 10). Number of prisoners in England and Wales on Suicide watch rises steeply. *The Guardian*
21. Kinman, G. and Clements, A. J. (2021). *Survey of Work Related Wellbeing*. Prison Officer Association.
22. Smith et al. (2022). *Just get on with it: a qualitative exploration of the health and wellbeing of prisoner operational managers and Governor grades*. University of Lincoln.
23. HM Inspector of Prisons. (2022). *The experiences of adult black male prisoners and black prison staff*. HM Inspectorate of Prisons.
24. Memon, A. and Hardwick, N. (2021). *Working in UK prisons and secure hospitals during the Covid-19 pandemic*. Royal Holloway University of London
25. Smith et al. (2022). *Just get on with it: a qualitative exploration of the health and wellbeing of prisoner operational managers and Governor grades* (June 2022) University of Lincoln.
26. Kinman, G., Clements, A. J., & Hart, J. (2017). Working Conditions, Work–Life Conflict, and Well-Being in U.K. Prison Officers: The Role of Affective Rumination and Detachment. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 44(2), 226–239.
27. HM Prison and Probation Service. (2022). *Guidance: Looking After Our People: The Prison Service Employee Package*. London.
28. Ibid
29. Hicks B, Carter A and Sinclair A. (2013). *Impact of coaching on employee well-being engagement and job satisfaction*. Institute for Employment Studies.

Too programme, which delivered coaching to 5,000 primary care staff in its first 18 months, found that it led to 'a significant increase in staff wellbeing and resilience'.³⁰ These findings have been echoed in feedback from Spark Inside's coachees:

This has all translated into me being better at my job, which is so important when working in a stressful environment (Spark Inside coachee).

Coaching could replace potentially damaging ways to relieve the stress of living within or working in a prison (Spark Inside coachee).

With all the stress that staff here are under having a person that they can unload some stress on and talk things over is vital for our job (Spark Inside coachee).

For prison staff who are working in highly stressful environments, amongst colleagues and prisoners who are often also stressed, having access to a Coach with whom they are able to form a connected, safe, and trusting relationship, is a valuable resource in helping to co-regulate stress and recover from trauma. The independent nature of Spark Inside coaches has been identified by prison staff as a key component of effective coaching, enabling them to feel safe enough to disclose any challenges they might be facing:

I think that opportunity to step away from day-to-day work and talk with someone independent... someone external; and to feel that I could be really honest...I liked the fact that I was able to be really honest about my current experience and what I wanted to achieve (Spark Inside coachee).

It gives you the ability to speak about things that are happening at work without the fear

of being judged or constricted on what you feel that you need to say (Spark Inside coachee).

HMPPS is increasingly recognising the benefits of reflective practice in promoting staff wellbeing and has recently introduced Guided Reflective Practice as a model of supervision into the Youth Custody estate, to support staff with the emotional impact of their roles. Creating an 'open, learning culture' is one of the key principles in the HMPPS Business Strategy,³¹ and coaching provides a valuable opportunity for staff to pause and reflect on their own practice:

Life coaching is a good way to think about your job role and to remember what worked, how did you make it work and what can you do in the future to improve it (Spark Inside coachee).

Furthermore, having the space and time to talk and be listened to, by coaches who offer a holistic, person centred, caring, empathetic and judgement free approach has been identified as one of the key benefits of Spark Inside coaching by prison staff:

[My coach] made me feel at ease and like I could trust him. He was extremely empathetic and had a great energy about him. I opened

up to him a lot about my experiences and he helped guide me to find new goals and to figure out what I wanted to do whilst getting my confidence back (Spark Inside coachee).

Studies into prison officer wellbeing have identified 'hope, optimism and perceptions of social support'³² as key elements in reducing incidences of staff burn-out. Coaching, which offers one-to-one solution focused support, is a valuable resource in providing these elements. It can also help staff to recognise what they need to promote their own physical and mental wellbeing:

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30. Carter, A and Mason, B. (2021). *Coaching for Wellbeing* [Infographic]. Institute for Employment Studies.
31. HM Prison and Probation Service (2019). *HMPPS Business Strategy: Shaping Our Future*. London.
32. Clements, A. J. and Kinman G. (2021). Job demands, organizational justice, and emotional exhaustion in prison officers, *Journal of Criminal Justice Studies*, 443.

They helped me come to terms with the fact that I need to balance my health and my work (Spark Inside coachee).

Improving job satisfaction

Coaching's solution focused, forward-thinking approach can provide staff with valuable space and time to consider new ways of working and identify solutions to existing challenges. A review of the national coaching scheme for police staff found that 77 per cent of participants felt more optimistic about their career prospects as a result of receiving coaching.³³ There is significant evidence from coaching in both public and private sectors, that coaching helps staff to feel more valued in their workplace and is effective in boosting morale and motivation.³⁴ This has been reflected by staff who have received Spark Inside coaching:

I recognised that it was a real investment in me as well. And I think that gives people a boost...I'd spoken about what I wanted to get from it, I was then matched with someone — all of that feels like investment in that there's lots of people that want me to do well (Spark Inside coachee).

Staff in receipt of Spark Inside coaching have also reported that their coaches have supported them to feel more positive about the demanding nature of their roles by helping them to feel more confident in their ability to carry out their role effectively; identify ways to manage their time and workload efficiently; recognise the value of their role and what they have achieved; and, set realistic and achievable goals. As participants explain:

It helped me believe in myself, set goals at work, and help me to become promoted (Spark Inside coachee).

Looking at things more positively has changed my whole perspective! (Spark Inside coachee).

I developed more confidence in my work, myself, and my capabilities. [My coach] made me realise that I could make a lasting difference to other people. He made me feel like I could

achieve my dreams and goals both personally and professionally (Spark Inside coachee).

Furthermore, Spark Inside coachees have noted that the development of both confidence and skills through coaching is particularly valuable for staff moving into new positions:

I think when we look at some of the retention issues, there is often stuff about people not feeling trained for the job that they're doing. And not having time to learn. I think probably one of the biggest things we are guilty of is people move to the next grade or, to the next post and almost like overnight, you are supposed to wake up the next day with the knowledge of how to do that (Spark Inside coachee).

I think it would be really helpful for first time managers. Because there isn't really a formal process for developing you to suddenly become a manager... I think actually giving people that time, I think it would help people to perhaps see where their strengths are, but actually work on some of the areas that need developing so they can perhaps build some of those skills (Spark Inside coachee).

Improving staff effectiveness

Improved staff wellbeing and job-satisfaction will inevitably impact on staff's ability to undertake their roles effectively. When staff are stressed, dissatisfied, and feeling under pressure they are less able to respond effectively to the needs of their colleagues or prisoners. A Government review of workforce burnout and resilience in NHS and social care stated that 'staff who are burnt out are at increased risk of error-making and are more likely to suffer from low engagement (lack of vigour, dedication and absorption in work), cynicism, and compassion fatigue'.³⁵ Staff in receipt of Spark Inside coaching highlighted the benefits of an approach that enabled and empowered them to find their own solutions, rather than more directive approaches to professional development:

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33. Police Superintendents Association (2020). *Police Superintendents association passes successful coaching and mentoring programme on to the college of policing*. <https://www.policessupers.com/news/police-superintendents-association-passes-successful-coaching-and-mentoring-programme-on-to-the-college-of-policing>.
34. Stewart-Lord, A., Baillie, L. and Woods, S. (2017). Health care staff perceptions of a coaching and mentoring programme: a qualitative case study evaluation. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 15(2), 70-85; Lean K. and Rees S. (2021) *Creating Space: an evaluation of bitesize coaching*, Oxford Academic Health Science Network; Richmond J. (2020). *The democratization of coaching and leadership development*, Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2020/09/29/the-democratization-of-coaching-and-leadership-development>.
35. House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee. (2021 June). *Workforce burnout and resilience in the NHS and social care*. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6158>

My experience of life coaching is that it builds people's ability to change, and helps them make better choices, in a way that just forcing the 'right' answer down someone's throat doesn't (Spark Inside coachee).

Evaluation of coaching has found it to have a positive impact on how staff work with both their colleagues and the individuals they support. Data from coaching in schools, for example, has demonstrated a positive impact on student outcomes as well as improved staff wellbeing and collaborative school cultures.³⁶ Prison staff who have received Spark Inside coaching have described the ripple effect of one-to-one coaching, helping them to become more effective at working collaboratively with their colleagues and team:

I took a step back to understand how I can be perceived if I listen and discuss instead of dictating. My team have taken well to this approach, and I am able to delegate without any complaints in my delivery of tasks required (Spark Inside coachee).

This is particularly valuable for those in leadership positions, as HMIP states that good leadership is 'one of the most important factors in driving improvement and ensuring better outcomes for prisoners'.³⁷

There is increasing evidence that compassionate leadership results in more engaged and motivated staff with high levels of wellbeing.³⁸ The Kings Fund states that effective, compassionate leadership involves a 'focus on relationships through careful listening to, understanding, empathising with and supporting other people, enabling those we lead to feel valued, respected and cared for, so they can reach their potential and do their best work'.³⁹ Coaching can model both effective listening and understanding, at the same time as encouraging coachees to recognise

the value of compassionate working practices. Equally, Spark Inside coachees have described the positive impact on their work with individuals in custody:

It had a great effect as I set goals for myself that I had to achieve in improving my impact at work, which was lacking in some areas before the coaching sessions began.

I was able to sit back and take a look at what was happening from an outside view and other people's views also. I realise that listening and taking in what people say is also a very powerful way of helping people (Spark Inside coachee).

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Addressing staff retention

While the current Government inquiry into the reasons why staff are leaving the prison service is still underway, there is evidence to suggest that if staff wellbeing and job-satisfaction can be improved, so too can staff retention rates. While coaching can only ever play a small part in addressing staff retention, it can be a valuable resource to include in wider staff retention strategies. Evaluation of the NHS's programme of coaching has found that the more employees' wellbeing increased,

the less likely they were to have intentions of leaving.⁴⁰ As the Government continues to invest significant resources in recruiting prison staff, it is imperative that evidence-based staff support, and development interventions are put into place to build on this investment.

Where next for coaching prison staff?

Spark Inside has commissioned an independent evaluation by the University of Lincoln to further

36. Hollweck, T. and Lofthouse, R.M. (2021). Contextual coaching: leveraging and leading school improvement through collaborative professionalism. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, 10(4), 399-417.

37. HMP Inspectorate of Prisons (2021 July). *Leadership Expectations*. <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprisons/our-expectations/leadership-expectations/>

38. West, M. (2021). *Compassionate Leadership in Health and Social Care*. The Swirling Leaf Press

39. Bailey, S. and West, M. (2021). *What is compassionate leadership?* The Kings Fund.

40. Carter, A. and Mason, B. (2021). *Coaching for Wellbeing*. Institute for Employment Studies

explore the impact of coaching on prison staff wellbeing, effectiveness, and job satisfaction. Given the overwhelmingly positive feedback thus far, Spark Inside will continue to offer this service where possible — from officer to Governor grade — across the prison estate.

Spark Inside is now exploring the value of coaching staff when it sits alongside other coaching interventions, including coaching people who live in prison, training both groups with coaching skills, and facilitating dialogue. Spark Inside's ambition is to create a coaching culture in prisons so that rehabilitation is possible, and it is heartening that early indications suggest a ripple effect:

That does have a value on more than just me. There is a value to the organisation in that if the seven people I manage are developed in terms of their skills, their ability to manage their workloads, their ability to do the jobs that they're employed to do, that can only be a positive thing to the wider organisation (Spark Inside coachee).

While the challenges facing the prison workforce are significant and far reaching, evidenced based interventions, such as coaching, can provide a valuable resource to support the wellbeing and resilience of a workforce, who in turn play a vital role in ensuring the wellbeing of those living in custody.