

Promoting Staff Wellbeing within HMPPS

Chris Jennings, Executive Director Wales for HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and Chair of the HMPPS Wellbeing group, is interviewed by Dr Lauren Smith, a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Lincoln.

Chris joined HMPPS Wales as the Executive Director in January 2019 and in May 2020 took on oversight of the national Public Protection Group. He has worked in the Ministry of Justice for over 15 years in a broad range of roles including operational, programme, corporate and more strategic roles. Most of his senior level experience has been in leading large-scale operations and delivering change into operational environments. He has done this across different elements of the justice system and in varied geographies. He has also spent time on broadening his experience on a secondment into devolved regional Government in the Southwest of England. He balances his professional time with spending time with his family and is a proud dad of three children.

The interview took place on 31st August 2022

LS: How would you describe the health and wellbeing of people working in prisons?

CJ: I would describe it as a real challenge. I think the role that our staff have got working in prisons is one that's very challenging, although it's a fantastic role, you get the chance to work with people and change their lives and keep the public safe, so it's wonderful, but that does come with its challenges. So, with respect to their health and wellbeing, I would say it's something that we're very alive to from both a physical and mental angle.

LS: What are the main challenges to the wellbeing of prisons staff, and have you got a sense of how that might differ depending on factors like grade, the prison setting, length of service and so on?

CJ: I think the wellbeing of staff does depend on the type of role you do and the challenges that you would face in relation to your wellbeing. And because it will be different if you are working in OMU [Offender Management Unit], or if you are an OSG [Operational Support Grade], or if you're a governor, and it might be different depending on how long you've been there, too. I would split the challenges into two broad areas, there's a physical element to it, as well as a mental element. And that, again, will depend on the type of role that you do. So, for example, we do have fitness

tests for certain roles within our organisation, because physical fitness is an important part of being able to fulfil some of our roles. But that's less true for some of our other types of roles. So, it does depend. But if we focus on the mental side of things, the challenges do vary depending on what sort of job you're doing. So the job of a governor, will be carrying a lot of weight and responsibility on behalf of their teams, which will feel different to the job of an officer working on a wing, which will feel much more physical, be in a much more physical environment and be working much more day to day with prisoners, either young people, male or female, or transgender prisoners, and so the risk factors to their wellbeing will be different. What I think is important for us to think about, when we're trying to put in place the right support for people is to recognise that people's roles are different, and their wellbeing needs will be different. And of course, aside from the different roles that people do, everyone is a human being and their personal wellbeing needs will be unique to them as a person aside from the role. So, I don't think you can be too generic and say, officers need this type of wellbeing support, governors need this type of wellbeing support, because really, it is about the individual, we know, that is the best way for us to think about it.

LS: What are some of the key differences in terms of wellbeing and the challenges to wellbeing when comparing prison environments to perhaps some other working environments?

CJ: I've worked in the criminal justice system for 20 years, although only in HMPPS for three, so I can think about other parts of the criminal justice system to make some comparisons and undoubtedly, in prison is where you're spending the most time day to day with people in the criminal justice system. In a court setting you spend a lot of time with victims and witnesses, defendants, and lawyers, but prison is a 24/7 service. We're unique in that, aside from the police perhaps. So, the nature of working in a 24/7 organisation with people on a day-to-day basis is unique and you've got the residential nature of it, which again makes it a unique environment to work in. And we've got a wide range of physical environments that our staff are working in, from headquarters type buildings, right the

way through to several one-hundred-year-old Victorian built prisons, and everything in between, with different sizes and shapes. So, the physical environment is also unique. And I think the nature of the fact that we're working so consistently with people in our care on a day-to-day basis makes it a unique challenge. The balance of what all of our staff are doing, and again, depending on their role, between the public protection and changing lives part of our job, that's a really interesting challenge to make sure we're getting the balance right with our decency and respect agenda, and keeping everyone safe, who's in our care, but not going too far past that important professional boundary that we need to maintain in terms of order and control. And I think that, again, is a unique aspect where we're trying to help people because we've got a lot of vulnerable people who need our help, but we've also got to keep everybody safe at the same time and maintaining that balance is a real skill.

LS: So, with all those challenges going on in the background, where does staff health and wellbeing lie in terms of HMPPS priorities?

CJ: It's right up there. I think everybody who works in our system is aware that they've got responsibilities to themselves and their colleagues around the wellbeing agenda. So, I think it's right up there, and, in our strategies and our plans, it features very heavily. But more importantly than that, it features highly in people's consciousness on a daily basis, and the sense of camaraderie and wanting to look after each other is something that I think it's hugely impressive and hugely important to us as a service to deliver what we need to deliver. People do have each other's backs and looking out for each other in a way that demonstrates to me we've got a positive culture around wellbeing and wanting to look after each other. So, there are formal things that we can do as an organisation, for example, the training for Mental Health Allies is something we've done over the last couple of years. We also need to make sure that we've got care teams in prisons who are properly allocated the time they need to do their jobs and we're rolling out TRiM [Trauma Risk Management] training. So, there are things we can do formally as an organisation to make sure we're putting in place the right support and giving people the skills, they need to look after each other. But there's a whole

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level of it, which is less formal, which is about a sense of when you're working in a high-risk environment, with some very challenging people, some very vulnerable people, there is a sense of everybody's got to help each other out to deliver the outcomes we want.

LS: What steps have been taken to identify what support prison staff might need in relation to their wellbeing?

CJ: I think there's probably a variety of ways we look to get staff insight as to what we need. Again, there are formal things that we do, such as the staff survey, and the Staff Quality of Life Survey, which is done by our audit function on a regular basis. There's the wellbeing survey, which is a bigger survey, and we've targeted that at a number of prison colleagues as well. So, there are formal data capture things that we can do to get the evidence as to what interventions we might need to put in place, but I also think a lot of it is driven at a local level, and it's not necessarily about those national data sources. And actually, it's through staff forums, and through the morning meeting, where, staff are having a conversation with the senior officer on their wing about what they're worried about that day or that week, or what's going on or how they're managing it, that also makes sure that at a very local level, local support can be provided at a very individual level, in a way, that is

not really an organisational thing, because I can't possibly know from a staff survey, that officer X on a wing is having a bad day, because they've got some complex things going on in their life, and they need a bit of help. So, I think you've got to take the national stuff to make sure we're doing those national things, but we've also got to make sure that the right culture exists at a local level, to ensure appropriate support is in place. One size isn't going to fit all. So, I think, we've got to keep trying to capture those national level things, but we've also got to keep encouraging people to be having those conversations at a more local level, because you need both, you can't have one without the other.

LS: What policy exists to support prison staff in relation to their wellbeing?

CJ: We've got a Wellbeing Strategy and a People Plan, both of which incorporate the wellbeing agenda

and set out what it is we're trying to do. Over the last couple of years, we've also set ourselves wellbeing priorities which has been approved by the HMPPS leadership team; we refreshed those again, only a few months ago, having set them at the beginning of COVID. We've tried to simplify those a little bit. So, we've got a set of priorities, and beneath that an action plan, which sets out what we're trying to do in this space.

LS: How does wellbeing impact on staff retention?

CJ: Well, I think it has the potential to have a huge impact on retention. If we're not getting wellbeing right, that could absolutely be driving people to ask questions about whether they want to stay doing the job. So, it has the potential to have a huge impact on retention, and if we're doing it well, maybe more people would stay, and if we're not doing it well, maybe more people would want to leave; we do try to look at it through that lens. So again, in our exit surveys and the data that we capture from people who have chosen to leave, we do try to understand what the wellbeing angle to that might be, and there are some things that we've learned through that process. Some of that is not about wellbeing; some of it's about people wanting a different career, and they want a different job, and it's got nothing to do with wellbeing, but some of it's about how well we supported people whilst they've been with us. That's again, a really useful data source for us to think about, are we getting it right? Are we putting in place the right support to people? We've had a real focus over the last few years, in particular, on new staff joining us, and making sure that we're putting in place robust support for people coming into the environment for the first time and over those first couple of years, where, you know, they're still adapting and getting used to the demands of the job and the environment. But, however good our POELT [Prison Officer Entry Level Training] programme is, there's nothing like doing the job for real and we really want to make sure that we're wrapping the right support around that cohort of people who are joining us, so that they can thrive in the job, and retention doesn't need to become an issue. It's about career development, that is the conversation we want to have, not retention, it's about how we can support people to develop.

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LS: Looking at it from the opposite side, how does retention impact on wellbeing?

CJ: Across all grades, if people leave, then, that obviously puts more pressure on other colleagues, whether you're in a management grade or not. So, we have got some sites around England and Wales where retention is an issue and that has undoubtedly put a bit more pressure on to other colleagues, and that's where the camaraderie and the looking after each other and 'we're in it together' kind of attitude really comes into it, because people have to double their efforts in relation to that to really make sure we are continuing to provide a good service to those in our care, despite the fact that we've got some staffing challenges. So, it can work that way round too.

LS: What plans are there to improve retention in HMPPS?

CJ: There's a huge amount going on in this space and I'm not the retention expert, but we're putting in place mentors and buddies for new members of staff, we've got a new pay deal that was announced recently, which we hope will make a big difference, we've improved pay across the board, which we hope will help. We're doing more to support managers who have a key role to play in supporting people's wellbeing and tackling retention issues, to give them

more support and more training to enable them to do their jobs, because that's such a key role. So, there's a wide range of things that we're doing across the piste to try and improve retention, and, fingers crossed, we're starting to see the green shoots of success in that regard, even in our most challenging sites.

LS: What other initiatives have been implemented to support wellbeing? And have they been successful?

CJ: The support we've got in place ranges from our care teams, which we've had in place for quite some time, and continuing to make sure that the people in care teams get the time and the training and the support they need to carry out their functions. We've rolled out over 1,000 Mental Health Allies across prisons over the last couple of years, these are volunteer members of staff, who receive some training and are on the ground to support their colleagues. They're not trained counsellors, but they're there to help spot signs, and work with colleagues who might want to come

and have a chat with them and help signpost them to some more formal support if that's what they need. We've got a formal contract with Pam Assist, which is our occupational health support, where people can access professional counsellors and training for a wide range of needs that they might have. And then other things we've got in place, not formally run by HMPPS, but we will always try and signpost people to for support, such as the Charity for Civil Servants, which provide really good support to people; trade unions have got a really key role to play in supporting their members, always really keen to remind people of the benefits of that, and our staff networks are fantastic. We've got three staff networks focused on providing tailored support to colleagues from different protected characteristics groups, and those that cross different protected characteristics groups as well. So, I think there's a huge amount in place. For people, we've rolled out TRiM training which is particularly useful when staff experience a particularly traumatic event. So, there's a huge amount going on. The remaining challenge for us is whether we're doing enough of that in a proactive way. We are good at reacting when things don't go so well; we're really good at looking after our colleagues and making sure that we put in place support, but the next bit of the journey for us is to challenge ourselves as to whether there's more we can do on the proactive side.

LS: Do you have a sense of, in terms of some of the things that you've talked about, how successful they are and how that success is measured?

CJ: Some of this is quite tricky to measure. So, things like Mental Health Ally rollout for example, we have sought feedback from the Mental Health Allies, and we've had some absolutely brilliant heart-warming stories where support has been provided to colleagues that wouldn't have been before, so I've got anecdotal evidence that suggests that's been a brilliant thing to do and totally worth us continuing to invest in it. But I haven't got a 'because we've rolled out Mental Health Allies, we've improved wellbeing by 4 per cent' kind of metric. We're not able to measure it in a kind of quantitative way, but qualitatively, we can collect

feedback on whether some of these things are working, and the way we do that is through those data capture mechanisms I talked about earlier, whether they're formal, or informal, to check with people that what we're doing is working. So, it's harder to prove some of it in that sense, but we do ask people whether they've got the support that they need, and generally, I think we're reassured that the things we're doing, like the TRiM training and the Mental Health Allies, are

being really well received and are delivering real benefits to staff. Given what we are talking about here is so personal and is down to individuals about how they feel about things, trying to capture that numerically is going to be a really difficult thing. I want to make sure we provide, and we think about it enough so that we've covered all the bases, we've covered all the different angles, so if somebody's got a particular need, they know where to go to get help with that need. Whether it's through a formal or an informal route, that depends on the need, but making sure we've covered all bases, and if we've done that, hopefully people will feel like we're doing our job in making sure the right support is there.

LS: Apart from being more proactive, is there

anything else that you think would help increase success?

CJ: I think the other thing that we need to do more of is celebrate the successes that we've had. So, there's a communications piece for us to do, really bringing to life how a care team has wrapped around a colleague going through a difficult time and how they've provided good support, or a Mental Health Ally. It's about the individuals who work for us, who are providing this actual, genuine, brilliant support to their colleagues and friends. I think the more we can do to celebrate it, the better that will be for people to know that they work in an organisation that cares about this stuff and invests in it, and I think there is more we could do to talk about it to promote the successes.

LS: What do you hope will change in the future in relation to prison staff wellbeing?

CJ: What I hope will change in the future is that we've achieved the aim that everyone can come to work and thrive in their roles, and that where they need

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additional support, we are either providing it, or signposting somewhere where they can go and get it. I think the important part of that is realising that people aren't just their role, that people bring a lot with them to work from outside work, and our duty of care to them as an employer doesn't just stop at 'have we provided support post traumatic incident at work?', because people carry a lot in their lives, they've got caring responsibilities, or other things that might be going on in their lives, and if we stop at the prison walls and think we're only responsible for supporting people's wellbeing at work, I think that's a bit short sighted. Success, to me, would be we've got a broad enough, and good enough, range of support in place to enable everybody to thrive. I think we're a good way there, but there's more we can do.

LS: Have you got a sense of anything else that is particularly needed to support that goal?

CJ: I'm really excited by the new colleague mentors that we're rolling out now across sites. I think that's a new initiative that is bedding in as we speak, and it's building on things we've done before, we've had POELT mentors before, so it's not a completely new idea, but we're really giving it more resource now, more effort, and I think that can make a huge difference to support particularly those newer colleagues who are in the system. So, I'm really excited by that, and I think there are then things like finishing the rollout of TRiM,

continuing to make sure we put in place an ongoing continual professional development approach to Mental Health Allies and some of the things we've done, so we don't launch these initiatives and let them wither on the vine, so making sure that we're honouring people's time and effort by continuing to invest in them. So, I think that there's definitely some things I'm really excited about and some more that we've got to do, that gives me real hope that we're going in the right direction.

LS: Is there anything else that you would like to add in relation to prison staff, prison governor health and wellbeing?

CJ: The thing I would like to add would be just a huge 'thank you'. My role as the Wellbeing Champion, for HMPPS means I chair some meetings and try and have these sorts of conversations, but the real heavy lifting is being done by hundreds of colleagues, if not thousands, out there across our system on a daily basis: line managers, Mental Health Allies, Care Teams, TRiM Practitioners, Chaplains, Trade Union colleagues, a whole wide range of colleagues who are really doing the heavy lifting, to make sure that they're really supporting their colleagues to enable them to thrive at work and get the outcomes we want. So, my final comment would just be a huge 'thank you' to all those colleagues that are committed to supporting each other, in recognising that we've got a difficult job to do.