

(How) Can prisons be run using the principles of evidence-based practice?

Ian Bickers (at the time of the interview) was the Prison Group Director for the London prison group. He was responsible for six adult male prisons across London. He had worked for the Prison Service for 20 years, starting in Learning and Skills, then switching to operational work, and had worked at every grade across seven different prisons over that 20-year period. After having governed two very different prisons, HMPs Wandsworth and High Down, he started his role as Prison Group Director in London, before leaving HMPPS in late 2023. Prof. Rob Briner is Professor of Organisational Psychology at Queen Mary, University of London and Associate Research Director, Corporate Research Forum. He has a long-standing interest in evidence-based practises in a number of fields, including human resource management, management, and general organisational psychology. He is a widely published and award-winning scholar, but in his own words he'd say he's 'been banging on about it for about 30 years now'. They are interviewed by Dr Ruth Armstrong, is a Doctor of Criminology at the University of Cambridge and Director of Justice Matters, a consultancy working with criminal justice sector charities and leaders to put evidence at the hear of action for change.'

This interview took place in two sittings, in July and September of 2023.

RA: Brilliant to have you both here today. Rob, can I please start by asking you whether, after 30 years of work, you've come to any kind of definition of evidence-based practice?

RB: Well, I now define it very differently to how I would have originally. So originally, I would have had quite a technocratic definition. And I think one of the main issues with evidence-based practice across different fields is that evidence-based practice has been defined in ways that are quite off putting. People working in the fields don't like the definitions, and so they can actually be quite unhelpful. So now I tend to define it as basically a process for gathering and using good quality data and information to answer two basic questions: 1) What is going on? What is happening? And if you ask this question and you find something going on or happening that is either bad or presents an opportunity, then using a similar process to answer the second question: 2) What can we do here?

And crucially I think there are three principles which help to explain evidence-based practice better than some of the models. The first principle is using multiple sources of evidence. Never use just one source, always use multiple sources, multiple types of evidence. The second thing is taking a structured approach, and by structured, I mean you ask a question, and you systematically go through trying to collect evidence from different sources to answer it. So structured in that sense, but also structured in that you always make sure to start with the diagnosis. One thing that is similar across many professions is that people leap to solutions,

to doing stuff, without taking the time to understand what is going on. And the third basic principle is just pay more attention to the multiple sources of data — it should be the best quality information you've got. And you should try to ignore poor quality unreliable stuff. So, I think that's a relatively simple definition. Evidence-based practice is asking 'What is the problem? What can we do about it?' and following this set of principles in the way you do both.

RA: Ian, what do you see as the strengths and challenges of evidence-based practice in the Prison Service?

IB: I was very privileged in 2014 to go to Cambridge to do the Masters in Criminology, Penology and Management. I wrote a dissertation which I then subsequently went on to publish around procedural justice, and one of the things that struck me about Cambridge was that over the 10 years I'd been working in the Service up until that point we did loads of good things but didn't really realise why we did them, and what Cambridge taught me was that we did some of those things because there was some really good evidence behind them. I left school at 16 with no qualifications. Then I did a degree with the Open University in Psychology in my mid 30s and that introduced me to what 'evidence-based' meant. But really going to Cambridge opened my eyes further and challenged me to think about how we can bring evidence-based practices to life in the prison space.

But I love what Rob has just said, and I haven't heard it put this simply before. And sometimes what we see in the sector I work in, the Criminal Justice System, and in prisons in particular, is the absolute

1. www.justicematters.org

opposite. Something bad happens and there are people throwing solutions at you quicker than you can actually action them in order to deal with things in an appropriate way. And it might be great people offering all this stuff up, and it might even occasionally be someone who knows some of the research in the area, but no one is stopping to work out what the problem is before we jump to putting a solution in place. And so often the answer to what the problem is will actually be quite simple, it will be human error. But we get this whole system response about what we need to do, changing so many things, when actually what was needed was just a bit of training, a bit of reinforcement of processes that are already in place. If people had followed those processes, so often whatever the problem is would not have occurred.

One of the challenges for evidence-based practice in prisons is that historically we have relied heavily on what I call our 'spidey senses' — I can go onto a prison wing and I can see and feel how things are. I can walk around the prison and see what good work is going on and what is not so good. My professional intuition really allows me to get a grip of that stuff. I think when I first joined the service 20 years ago, that was so heavily relied upon that we didn't really think about evidence-based practice in any way, shape or form to really inform what we did. We did it

because 'the Prison Service knows best' and actually, I think maybe that wasn't true. Maybe it was and I just didn't see it. But a lot of what we did was intuitive. It was based upon what we had done historically. It was based upon what we thought might work. It took me two years at Cambridge studying to understand, as I am walking around the prison seeing things and spotting problems, what is good and has evidence behind it and what needs to change, and how we go about that change, rather than just making it up as we go along.

One of the challenges in prisons is the hierarchy, if the Governor wants it, it gets done. Evidence-based practice asks, 'What does the Governor want it for? What is that based on? Where is the evidence that working in these ways is going to be effective for what we are trying to achieve?' So, I think there is a real challenge for us around how we manage the intersection between professional practice and evidence-based practice that enables us to be able to do both things really, really well to bring good

outcomes to bear. And one of the things I think we need to do to achieve that balance is to simplify systems. We have created very complex systems, often in reactionary ways, before we have stopped to really identify and diagnose the problem. And I think we may have over-engineered some of the systems and processes, and we might need to get back to simple truths, like the fact that how you talk to people really matters, that one-to-one relational-based contact between a personal officer and a prisoner matters, and that new prison officers really need time with experienced staff walking the landings and learning their craft. We can have all of the systems in the world, like the OMiC (Offender Management in Custody) model through which the key worker aspects are meant

to be delivered, but when new officers are learning their craft from officers that have only been in post a year themselves, no matter how much evidence is behind your systems, you have lost some vital expertise.

Fundamentally I think Rob's definition is absolutely right, you know, from a practitioner perspective, but we're in an operational environment where often we are not given the time to either think or to explain what the evidence on the problem is, what we are doing is reacting very quickly to public perception, or to ministerial perception, or to the public perception of the ministerial perception! I've been

in this job long enough that I understand the political dynamics around it, but we do have to think about how we balance this with real leadership around evidence-based approaches to what the problems are, and what the solutions could be. I worry that what we have created, (and when I say we, I mean the whole of society, media and politics and public attitudes) is a society that asks very different questions. It asks 'Who is to blame? Who is at fault? Who's going to pay the compensation? Who do we sue for this?

RA: Rob, if you reflect on these strengths and challenges of using evidence-based practice in the Prison Service, how do they relate to the use of evidence-based practice in other industries? What do we know about when using evidence-based practice makes more, or less, sense?

RB: Well, I think Ian's done a great job of outlining quite common challenges across industries actually, in both the big 'P' and small 'p' of politics. And working from my definition of evidence-based practice, the

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politics is part of it. For example, if you've got a CEO who's decided that he or she wants to implement some really cool new management fad, you might be a really diligent manager and say, 'You know, I think that's kind of rubbish because I've looked into the evidence and there's nothing behind it'. But actually, that probably isn't going to help either your organisation or your career if the CEO just wants that to happen, so you're just going to have to do it. The evidence from your stakeholder — the CEO — has trumped, has overridden, all the other evidence you might get from other sources. It doesn't mean trying to follow the principles of evidence-based practice is useless, it just means you are able to recognise that of all the evidence you've gathered, the politics with certain stakeholders is overriding it all. Similarly, there might be ethical issues to consider. So maybe you're making a decision and you're collecting all the evidence together and the evidence is all pointing to a particular kind of problem and a particular kind of solution. However, ethically, you know what, we think that solution is wrong. Well, then we're not going to do it. Or it could be that the evidence points to not doing something, but we think it's the right thing to do for other reasons. So, I think one of the real challenges is building in other kinds of data and information and taking them into account and understanding that doing so is not giving up on evidence-based practice, you're still doing it, it's just that in some circumstances, some evidence will trump other evidence.

Like for example what Ian was talking about with spidey senses. For me, professional expertise is one of the four main sources of evidence. But the key thing for any source of evidence is that you submit it to a couple of questions. One is, 'Is the evidence relevant to understanding the problem or understanding the solution?' and the other is 'What's the quality of the evidence?' And one of the real challenges with spidey senses, intuitions, and gut feelings, is that they are very likely based on experience. But the question is, have you got enough experience, and in this moment, are you remembering it accurately? Have you thought about it critically, or could it just be prejudice? Is it just a view you've come to because you don't like something, or because you do like something?

A familiar challenge across many professions is that if you look at the conditions for building professional expertise, they are not present. Good examples of building professional expertise are activities like cooking or playing an instrument or a sport. There are certain conditions through which you learn if you practice. You need to do the same thing again and again and again. You need to do this in a fairly stable environment, and you need to get fairly quick and accurate feedback. Think about playing the guitar — if these conditions aren't present, it's really very difficult to learn. So, an example from my field about how this is a challenge for relying on professional practice as good evidence, is that if someone who is a change manager is going to rely on their spidey senses in how they manage change, the reality is maybe in their 30 year career they might have only overseen something like six big change programmes. So the question is, 'How much can they really learn from experience?', because each of those six big change problems were probably very different, so the conditions aren't really there. That doesn't mean you discount your spidey senses about what's going on, to me it could be an important clue that says, 'let me investigate further'. And it may turn out you're right, or maybe you're wrong. It may be reliable, and maybe not. But absolutely one should not ignore that, because it might be accurate, but one should always be aware that it might be prejudiced. You build it in like you build in the politics — it is a part of the evidence.

This brings up another common aspect people struggle with in using evidence-based practice, and that is, in lots of everyday decisions we're presented with multiple sources of evidence and often they are contradictory, and that is just normal. It's not weird. What is weird, and makes me suspicious, is if every single source, ever single type of evidence, is saying exactly the same thing. It's like following a sat nav, sometimes we need to build up our tolerance for saying 'Well, the sat nav says X but my experience says Y'.

RA: Rob, you've mentioned four main sources of evidence, can you tell us what they are?

RB: Sure. These sources stem from when evidence-based practice first originated in medicine about 30 years ago and they are in no particular order of

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importance. The first source, as Ian mentioned, is your professional expertise. What do I think as a practitioner with experience? What does my professional experience tell me is going on here? What can we do about it? The second source is data from the context or the organisation. So, it might be numbers. It might be measurements, it might be surveys, it might be other things you collect from the context or situation. The third area is the preferences and views and perceptions of stakeholders. What do they think is important? What do they think is going on? What do they think you should do about it? And the fourth area, but by no means last, is the scientific evidence. So, if you look at the scientific evidence, what does it tell you about the nature of the problem? And if there is a problem, what evidence is there about potential interventions or solutions? So, they're the four main sources. There will be others in some circumstances, but they are the four main ones: What do I know? What does the scientific evidence say? What do most stakeholders think? And what's going on in the context?

RA: As you're listening to that Ian, what do you think about the extent to which prisons use evidence-based practice?

IB: If I'm honest I'd have to say I think we are overly reliant on the first source, professional expertise. I think it mixes in with the hierarchical nature of prisons, where we expect the governor is the 'all-knowing one' with all the answers to all the questions. I don't think that's true. It's an old model for a different society and I'm not sure it's working any more. We are now running much more complex organisations than we used to. I do think we are now using data better than we have ever used it before, but I still think we could invest more in that space. I also think we overly rely upon the preferences of our stakeholders, and that can start with big 'P' Politics. As Rob says, take that into account when you're making your decisions, but take it into account alongside your professional expertise and alongside scientific evidence. I don't think we have ever really looked at things scientifically. The reality is, you know, we don't have a chief scientific advisor to HMPPS or the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), but if we did, we really could have dealt with some problems differently, both in terms of understanding the problem and identifying

solutions. For example, the problems of spice,² and how you counteract it being transported into prisons. A good scientist might have been able to inform us far quicker than we came to the understanding of the plethora of ways it could be brought in, and then we could have been well ahead of the curve in dealing with it.

RA: Your answer surprises me a little Ian, because when I hear people talk and write about evidence-based practice, I always hear it relate to only one strand of Rob's sources — the scientific evidence. Do you think I'm way out on that because in many ways I'm looking in from the outside and as an academic over the last 20 years that has been one of the main lenses through which I've engaged with prisons, and as Rob admitted right at the start, academics can veer towards more technocratic definitions and ignore the other important sources of evidence?

IB: I do think that's a fair observation, and it may be because I'm getting old and am further on in my career, but I do think we undervalue and undermine the value of professional expertise. What is really interesting at the minute is that we have a cohort of people, very bright intelligent people, who have joined our organisation

as Unlocked Grads, perhaps since about 2016.³ So maybe they have five, six, or at most seven years of experience under their belt, two of which will have been in uniform as a prison officer. And these people have found themselves getting into senior positions quickly, they are now functional heads in charge of departments and sometimes they bemoan the experience of their colleagues around them who have worked in uniform for 30 years and have perhaps only made it to a deputy head of function post.

And I don't sign up to the idea that you have to have done something or have lived an experience to be able to lead, I myself am an example of that, but I do think you have to be able to recognise as a leader that you do not have that experience and get some of those people around you. Because actually, as Rob describes, those people who have been around for 30 years have practiced things, they have lived and been immersed in similar things for many years. Their experience is very,

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2. A synthetic psychoactive substance.

3. <https://unlockedgrads.org.uk/>

very different to someone with just a few recent years of service. And it's not about saying 'oh, we've always done it this way so we should carry on doing it', but it is about learning from history, because actually history is often right and can tell us something, it can be another piece of evidence about what we do or don't do. But right now, we have people with a few years of experience who will be governors before their colleagues with many years of experience, and that worries me. We have lost so much professional expertise in recent years, and our prisons are suffering as a result. Perhaps it's one of the reasons we emphasise scientific evidence so much because we are losing the ability to draw on that professional expertise alongside the research.

So much of the stuff we used to do as a Prison Service when I joined it 20 years ago, has now been outsourced. For example, all our human resources and finance processes are outsourced to the MoJ. We don't do that stuff ourselves anymore in the prisons we run, and I think we underestimate the impact all those processes have on people. We don't have an established process of Continued Professional Development for staff. We don't really deliberately grow people or build in time to learn. You learn to be a governor by watching other people do it. And if you have some good examples then that's great, but if you have some poor examples then what you see is a continuation of poor leadership.

RB: And if I can just pick up on this point here Ruth, about people thinking evidence-based practice stems from 'the ones with the science' — this is a whole problem across every single field, including medicine. Medicine was the first field to really adopt evidence-based practice, and it has had some successes, but it hasn't spread as fast as people thought it would. One of the reasons for that is because the people promoting it were really saying 'what you think as a practitioner is rubbish, here, read this randomized control trial, read this meta-analysis, just use this, and push that practice stuff to the side'. And I used to be like that — I was a sinner! And in the last 10 years I've really changed, firstly because I realised it just completely offends people and that's not how to do change, and secondly because the more you learn about science, the more you realise a lot of it is unreliable! A lot of it is irrelevant! And actually, the

strength of evidence-based practice is combining different sources, so you shouldn't automatically decide one source of evidence is better than another, you need to put them together. It may be your expertise is the best, or it may be organisational data is the best, or maybe the stakeholders' opinions are the best. It depends on the question.

RA: Thanks Rob, I think many people leading and working in our prisons will really recognise that. Ian, in terms of London prisons, what are the current preoccupations in terms of organisational realities and work with people in prisons? If you had a magic wand, what evidence would you love to get your hands on to help develop the strategy and operational approach moving forwards?

IB: One of the challenges Governors' face today, and this has been highlighted by Charlie Taylor the Chief Inspector of Prisons, is that we have loads more data than we did 20 years ago. We've built really good datasets that can help us, but some Governors don't know how to use them. Perhaps more than new data, what we need is a way to equip operational staff to collect and use data in a way that builds evidence and informs practice. As Rob said, they need to be able to assess it and understand its value.

But one of the things we do know at the minute about our current prison population from the data, is that there is a lack of access to meaningful activities which are important for rehabilitation. The population is growing and growing, and we have no experience in running prisons for 86,000 people and rising, so we are spending all our time focussing on keeping people locked up in cells. This is a real challenge, moving beyond the basic task of keeping people in prison safely to serve their sentence, and doing the other equally important part of our job, which is offering access to rehabilitative activities so people have the chance to build futures that are different from their pasts. And not having access to meaningful activity has immediate as well as long-term consequences. I worry about people in prison. I worry about self-inflicted deaths. I worry about self-harm. I worry about violence. And from a staff perspective I am genuinely worried about the culture, and how working in this environment with a lack of access to rehabilitative activity damages the culture.

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On top of this is the fact that in society at large there are currently some important cultural shifts at play. Society is changing. Prisons are a microcosm of society. There are unwanted behaviours that have been rife in society that are now being challenged, behaviours of sexism, of misogyny, and of racism. And the Prison Service is not immune to this. It is a challenge as a Service that we have to rise to in this cultural moment, to set the highest standards all the way through our organisation. This requires a focus on addressing grievances and appropriate discipline to expect the highest professional standards of everyone. But I worry about how a focus on grievances and disciplinaries impacts staff culture and ultimately can impact the people in our care. So, I guess if I had a magic wand, I would want access to the evidence around how you strengthen and support staff cultures that have the highest professional standards, but do so in a way that doesn't take your eye off the ball, that doesn't shift your focus to grievances and disciplinaries rather than focussing on supporting rehabilitation and resettlement.

This problem is especially acute for those on remand. Because of the backlogs in the whole Criminal Justice System, we have more and more people in prison on remand. We have more and more people who leave prison immediately once they are sentenced because of the time they have already served on remand. And whether or not you get sentenced — you are innocent until proven guilty — that won't stop you losing your job, your house, your contact with your family. I'd love to have access to evidence that could inform the dynamic of how we deliver work with the remand population, because it is growing, and I think there's a massive gap in the research evidence here.

So, I think we need evidence to support us to make the sociocultural shift with staff, but also a shift in how we think about our workforce in ways that will enable us to get better outcomes for staff as well as for prisoners. We need staff who want to come to work and do a good job so that we are not spending all our time in grievances or attendance management or disciplinaries. I've got an occupational psychologist that is trying to help me unpick what those issues are, but I think we may need to be looking at evidence from industries beyond the closed prison system to really improve things here. I want things to change so that

there is an expectation from staff that their work is going to get better outcomes for prisoners. I want people to care more. I'd love to know what evidence I could get my hands on to help us do that better.

I think people genuinely do want to care, but they just don't know how to because we're firefighting and dealing with crisis all the time, and sometimes that's crises that we're creating because of our ways of working. We know that people who come to prison have caused harm. But we also know that every single person that spends time on a prison sentence or on remand is going to have harm done to them, and that anybody who works in the system is going to have harm done to them as well. That's a known fact. We know that is a fact through lots and lots of research

evidence and all the other sources Rob mentioned. So, if that is the problem, the question is then what can we do to try to fix that? How do we build a culture where we are looking out for each other, where we are not all so burnt out that we can't see what burn out looks like in someone else and reach out? How do we grow a learning culture underpinned by care so that when a Governor is responding to a serious violence, self-harm, or self-inflicted death in their prison, someone goes to see them and wraps their arms around them and asks are they OK? These things are hard. How do we move to a culture where we learn rather than where we point the finger and accuse?

How do you make an open culture in a closed institution, where instead of talking about 'hidden heroes' we recognise people in the Prison Service as the fourth emergency service, and some of the good work they do can be seen and praised.

RA: It sounds to me like you're asking 'how do we build evidence into policies in ways that are likely to contribute to an organisational culture of care?' Rob, are there established ways of helping frontline practitioners understand and use evidence-based practices in their work that might do this? If you had to give a step-by-step guide to a new prison Governor about how use an evidence-based approach to developing a vision and strategy for where they want to move to, and how to move that direction, what would you advise?

There are unwanted behaviours that have been rife in society that are now being challenged, behaviours of sexism, of misogyny, and of racism. And the Prison Service is not immune to this.

RB: What you need to be clear about is what incentives are people working under? I've worked with so many different industries, from the Police to HR people in corporations, and they all say 'this is a great idea! I get it — but I haven't got time, and I won't be rewarded for it'. What you often see is that at work people get rewarded for 'doing stuff'. Think about promotion systems, often what they do is they count how much 'stuff' you did, rather than asking was that stuff useful? Was it valuable? Was it helpful? No one really knows — but 'Well done you, you did loads of stuff! Here, have a promotion, get a pay increase.' So the major challenge is recognising the incentives that you give your staff, and considering whether you are incentivising them to invest in evidence-based practice.

More often than not, the incentives actually get in the way. And if you can sort your incentives, the second thing I say to people is to give your people a real sense of what it means to use evidence-based practice. Model it. I use a lot of everyday examples to give people the idea of how to use those principles, and multiple sources, and use that structured approach to assess what is the best quality evidence.

What you'll find is that most people tend towards evidence-based practice anyway. But maybe they use two sources and not four, and not in a systematic way, but it might be somewhat structured. So, what we are talking about is taking what people do anyway and just doing it in a more systematic way. You give people a feel for what it is, and then the best way to start an organisation or function or profession on this track is to start doing it. Pick the one thing that's going on now that you think is important, and take the time to try the process with a group of people. Clip multiple sources of evidence. Give yourself chance to think about it. What's going on? What's the problem? Stop yourself from going into 'solution mode'. Just don't go there. Keep your focus on answering the question 'What's the issue? What's going on?' with the evidence. And once you're reasonably clear about that, then move on to look at the evidence about what you could do about it. Then just try it. Review what you did, and after you review it, ask people 'What was the process like?' And then do it again. And pick your battles. If you quickly work out that stakeholders are just going to make you do something, there's no point in going through the

whole process, because you are going to have to do what the stakeholder wants.

But if you just start it, you will find that the more people use this approach, and are rewarded for it, they get better at it, they learn the skills, they realise it's not as hard as they think, and they also realise you could spend months and months doing it, but equally, you could spend a day doing it. And I'd argue, even if you can only spend a day, if you ask 'What is the problem here, what are we dealing with and what can we do about it?' you are more likely to get accurate answers to those questions than if you don't do it at all. So, I think one of the keys is to make it manageable and everyday doable.

RA: In your experience Ian, how can we help leaders in the Criminal Justice System to understand and use EBP in their work? What do you think evidence-based leadership looks like?

IB: Well, I think what you don't do is walk about wafting research papers around, but you can take the evidence and support the important aspects of it in your practice. For example, I'm really passionate about the evidence around procedural justice. There are four tenants of procedural justice: voice, respect, neutrality and trust, and there are a myriad of ways we can build those four elements into our systems and processes and into our interactions with staff as managers, and with prisoners.

So, when we're doing a disciplinary or attendance management process with staff, is it procedurally just, and when we are doing an adjudication process with prisoners do they have a voice to give their evidence and can they genuinely do that in a way that makes sense to them? And you can tell if processes are procedurally just by how well the outcomes are accepted. I don't get appeals where people turn around and say, 'this wasn't fair, I didn't get to give my evidence'. I get appeals about something being missed or part of a policy not being followed — so the nature of the appeals and the response to these processes helps me to know the culture is shifting on how we do these things.

But if I think specifically about how we help leaders use EBP in their work, I'd have to honestly answer that I don't think we do. We don't develop our Deputy Governors and Governors. You know, you're a

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functional head on Friday,⁴ you're a Deputy Governor on a Monday. You're a Deputy Governor on a Friday, you're a prison Governor on a Monday. You're a prison Governor on a Friday, you're a Prison Group Director on a Monday. I don't think we really take time to look at what we mean by evidence-based practise for our prison Governors and give them time to think about the reasons why we do this stuff, and how evidence might suggest we could shift our approaches.

You know, Charlie Taylor [the Chief Inspector of Prisons] constantly talks about how Governors need to be better with data. They do. He's absolutely right. I don't disagree with that at all. But Governors need to be better with evidence as well. And they need the headspace to be able to sit and search and find it, and read it and reflect on it, and go and ask some experts about what that might mean and what they might do in their prison at that time. You know, if I think about one of the Governor's I know today, who is dealing with four attendance management appeals this week and a disciplinary appeal, and has just lost their Deputy Governor and is trying to run one of the biggest prisons in the country; if I go to them and ask 'where's your evidence base for how you're approaching this'? She would turn around and laugh me out of court. Literally.

So, if I had to say something to a prison Governor, I think what I'd say is 'don't try to do it all by yourself'. I'm a great believer that the prison system can't do this stuff all by itself. You know, we have to go through the process of being able to bring in others to help us. And often this is free of charge consultants, academics, or in-house experts from the HMPPS Evidence-Based Practice Team.

I learned the value of this back in 2015 when trying to lead some prison reform. You know, I'd governed at HMP Highdown and really tried hard to go through the process of doing a lot of internal stuff. What I learnt when I went to HMP Wandsworth and we began trying to implement reforms was a load of people came forward and said 'we can help you do this'. And actually, that was the first time in my career that this had happened, and it made such a difference. I saw the real value of different stakeholders coming in

to help us do what we do. And there is an interesting intersection that happens when you work with different stakeholders, because they may have different values to those held within the Prison Service. You often see stakeholders adopting the prison's values, but I think sometimes, especially with work that is funded independently, you can see stakeholder values influencing a prison environment — but that is at a very institutional level, not a corporate level, which is much more challenging for the Prison Service.

Its also challenging for your individual prison Governor because they are managing multiple stakeholder relationships. That is difficult, and there may be competing evidence in different areas. They may have to make choices between priorities based on prevailing political climate or economic or social pressures. For example, right now there is lots of focus on population management. That might mean that we are not paying enough attention to family services and where people are located, which we know is important in terms of better outcomes, because there is an overwhelming imperative to house a burgeoning prison population and not enough spaces in which to do this. The pressure of this focus might mean that we think less about families than perhaps we should.

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RA: Yes, certainly one of the main challenges to evidence-based practice I hear from people on the frontline is about workload: they are

too busy getting through the day to think about how to do things better or implement changes. Rob, how does an an EBP approach take workload into consideration?

RB: OK, so I think in terms of carving out time, as in all things, it depends on what you make a priority as a leader or as a line manager. It goes back to what I said above about the incentives and reward systems. You're asking the people you manage for help with stuff, and you can show, by how you manage and what you say, that you are less interested in all your activity, how much you've done, and more interested in what decisions you have made about what you think the issues are that get your time. What do you think the

4. A functional head would be a member of the senior management team and in charge of one aspect of the prison, for example, security or reducing reoffending, or operations.

problems are? Show me the data, show me what you found and how you chose the interventional solution you came up with. Show me what evidence you use. If people understand they are being rewarded for making better quality or more informed decisions, it suddenly completely changes the conversation from talking about outputs 'look at all the stuff I've done, aren't I clever?' to talking about process 'here's an audit trail of evidence I collected and how I took those decisions'.

So, what you reward is one big thing, and in terms of time, again I think it comes back to incentives, what people are rewarded for, but there is an intersection with the time horizon people have. One of the things to be aware of is that if we are not using evidence-based practice, we are likely to be making the same kinds of mistakes again and again and again. It's like fixing a leaky pipe by just keeping on wrapping tape around it. It'll just come undone, and it will keep leaking eventually because you're not stopping the water flow. You're not understanding the problem. So that's when we have to offer people incentives, do you want to keep doing quick fixes that won't work over the long-term, so this problem keeps reappearing? Or would it be nice if we actually found a more sustainable kind of intervention or solution, so we don't have to keep fixing the same things again and again and again.

And here the leader is crucial because it's about what they model. People might not know exactly what their leader is doing, but if the leader can model talking to people about what they are doing, and model how you are getting data, information, evidence to inform what you are doing, and admit that you're not always certain, that there is uncertainty and there is contradiction, but nonetheless, here is what I think. And then ask people, what do you think? Model getting evidence from them to inform your assessment of the question, the problem, and the potential solutions. People can then see the way that you want them to do things.

RA: Ian, how do you think that is likely to land with practitioners, and politically? What would it feel like to say, well, I've looked at all the evidence and I'm just not sure either what the problem is, or what the solution is, what do you think?

IB: I listen to this, and it all makes sense, but it just feels so far away from what is possible. The thing for me is that we expect people working for us to do too much. And I don't think this is just a 'prison thing', I think it's a societal thing. What we've done is that we want more and more and more, and that requires us to do more and more and more. We say to Governors 'Key workers are really important. Activities is really important. Making sure people are safe is really important. Reducing violence is really important. You need to make sure everyone gets to their health appointments because we're trying to do equivalency of health and that's really important. And education and qualifications are really important'. And it goes on and on and on.

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When I joined the Prison Service it was much simpler. It wasn't layered with all these expectations. And it's partly the way the political process works. It's a bit like Rob described, because of its short-term nature, so you end up putting different kinds of bandages around the same pipe. Charles Clarke describes this in his book 'The too difficult box' — many crime and justice decisions are just too difficult to get politically expedient solutions in place in the term of one Government, never mind the term of one Secretary of State. So, the Prison Service becomes responsible for implementing short-term solutions of specific administrations, even after they have moved on.

I think one of the things you learn when you work in the Prison Service, is that we have a very long corporate memory, and

that includes the sense of what we think prison should be, and what we think working in prisons should be like. Sometimes I do wonder whether or not we have become so entrenched in what we remember that we have lost the ability to take a clear look at what we need today, for staff and for prisoners. And actually, what we need today is good healthy colleagues, well-educated colleagues, we need good work colleagues who want to be the best they can be. And work colleagues who are stressed and exhausted and stretched beyond capacity are unlikely to be at their best.

I've been turning around to Governors over the last year and saying to them 'I've got you, and I just

want you to do some really simple stuff: keep your prisoners safe, keep your staff safe, make sure we try to minimise self-harm and self-inflicted deaths by making sure where we can we do our best to give people meaningful ways to stay busy so they don't sit in their cell ruminating. Let's just focus on some basic core fundamental services.' And this has reduced the number of self-inflicted deaths we've had. It has reduced the amount of self-harm. For me, it's about trying to make the complex as simple as possible and trying to give Governors enough top-cover that with very low staff numbers they can run decent regimes and do what they have the scope to do well, because you can't stuff absolutely everything under the cordon without burning people out.

RB: I just want to pick up your point here, Ian, about people doing more and more stuff, because I think that is true in lots of fields. It is almost as though quantity is becoming a substitute for quality, so we don't really know what we're doing, and it's very difficult, so let's just do lots and lots of it because then it looks like we're busy and things are happening. And one really microcosmic example of this is people that work in Learning and Development in organisations, and they provide training for employees. One of the criticisms of some of these functions is rather than asking: 'What are the learning needs for the organisation and business, what do people really need to know?' What some organisations do is just to buy in more and more and more training so that they can say to their employees, 'look, you can now do two and half thousand online courses if you like!' And there's lots of activity, but how is this helping anything? It's almost like some sort of substitute for evidence-based practice I think.

RA: Ian, there is lots of evidence around 'what works', both in terms of achieving the aims of HMPPS relating to public safety, and of shifting organisational cultures/staff behaviours — it makes me wonder, can you really use EBP in an industry with limitless demand, limited resource, and where practices and policies are so political and emotional?

IB: I think it depends on the extent of the evidence you draw from. I came to Cambridge and spent two

years reading prisons literature. I spent two years reading criminology. I spent two years immersed in that space. But I came to the Prison Service in my mid 30s and I came to it from the private sector. So, I think I've always been keen to look at evidence and values beyond the world of criminology. I think there's a lot we can learn from Health. There's a lot we can learn from Education. There's a lot we can learn from the corporate world. There's a lot of stuff that we can learn, which isn't all just about how we hold people in custody, that would enable us to run our prisons better. We need up-to-date HR policies and practices that realise the world has moved on in the almost two generations since I started work in the Prison Service, and how we do recruitment and things like grievances and disciplinaries hasn't really kept pace. We need to look at evidence about how to work effectively with millennials and generation Z. We need to think about what flexible working arrangements and part time contracts mean for how we run our prisons.

So, I think there is a real sense that while criminological evidence may be static, there's a lot of other evidence around the way that the staff groups, middle managers, and senior managers are supported, and how our policies impact on the way things get delivered and ultimately on the outcomes for the people in our care. Sometimes I think it's not all about criminological evidence, but about the way you run your organisation, and that's what I think we sometimes miss out. Some of us are lucky, I

consider myself lucky that I got to study at Cambridge, but we are few, and as I said before, we could really do with looking beyond criminological evidence to really support our institution to do the best work, and to support our leaders to be the best they can be.

RB: There can be arguments made that some of the evidence-based practice process is sometimes better if it is outsourced because there is some quite technical stuff which not every practitioner in every field will know how to do in terms of both diagnosis and actually implementing solutions. But the danger is that there are a lot of providers and suppliers who promise to diagnose 'the thing' and offer solutions on 'what works' but they just don't fit with your organisation,

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your business. So, while it can make sense in evidence-based practice to outsource some aspects, really practitioners still need to understand for themselves what the issues are and what can be done about them. And this is one of the problems with the 'What Works' movement — it can sometimes feel like you're outsourcing your thinking to a group of people who will tell you what works. You go, 'OK, that works, we'll do that'. But actually, as we've discussed, that isn't evidence-based practice, and there is a danger in bringing in others unless, in principle, you really understand what's going on.

And speaking more broadly, I know a little bit about organisational culture and while I'm not an expert, I find it a very problematic idea. I know it's very popular and people like it, but I think it can be an unhelpful shorthand. For example, as you know, the Met Police keep talking about their problem with culture, and for me, often it seems like a way of kicking the can down the road. Culture sort of means something, but it means everything, and it also kind of means nothing. Usually when people talk about culture change, like with the Met, they don't really mean 'we need to change the culture'. What they mean is some people are behaving in ways that are absolutely unacceptable and we don't want them to behave like that. So how is it useful to invoke this vague concept of culture if you want to change behaviour? Understand what the behaviour is. Understand what's causing it and why it's there. Think about solutions for stopping it or preventing that thing from occurring. In lots of contexts, lots of different kinds of organisations, lots of sectors, people tend to evoke this concept of culture as though it's a diagnosis of every single problem, and that changing the culture will fix everything, but I've never come across a case where people actually want to do that. What they want to do is fix very specific problems that are a bit hard to deal with, so they vote 'culture'.

If you remember the situation in the City, where there were various financial crises and problems with the way traders were operating unethically, and there was a big thing about how they needed to change the culture of the City. But you don't change the culture, you change behaviour. And if you focus on culture, I'm not sure how helpful it is, because a lot of evidence says culture is actually formed by behaviour, not the other

way around. So actually, if you can change behaviour, whatever value culture might have, you'll see a change in it, but if you chose to try to change culture, in a way, you're choosing the wrong target.

IB: That is absolutely what I've found, I can't change the culture of the Prison Service, but I can stop people inappropriately touching each other at work by just making it absolutely clear that it is not acceptable and if it happens, it will be disciplined.

RA: Well, this has been fascinating, but we must draw to a close, so as a final question I'd like to ask you both, if you had one plea or wish relating to the use of evidence-based practice across the Criminal Justice System, what would it be and to whom would you address it?

RB: So, my one thing, actually in any context, is to spend more time thinking about the problem, what is the issue, and don't ever for a moment think that by taking time to understand what's going on that means you're not doing something important. It really irritates and puzzles me when people say 'we've done one thing so now we have to do the next thing' as if 'doing things' is the only part of your job that matters, and it isn't important to spend time understanding what's happening, to gather evidence to make sense of it, and to make more informed decisions. So, my wish would be to think more about what the issues, problems,

and opportunities are. The leadership is obviously important, but you want to signal to everyone in the whole organisation that if they think there is an issue or a problem, or they have spotted something, or there is something they think it's worth getting further evidence about, they should feel they can do that and talk to their line manager or others about it. So, this idea of taking time to look around, look at what's happening, what's going on, should be the place everyone starts, rather than just jumping to 'here's a solution!'.

IB: For me it would be to increase our ability to look across all industry sectors to be able to do much better evidence gathering and to test that, and to give space to people in practise, practise based jobs, the ability to be able to test and learn and fail, and provided it's not causing significant risk to public safety, to learn and move on from it rather than having a rigid culture

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that is so fearful of bad things happening that we don't ever do anything differently.

So, create a bigger Research and Development department, allow Governors the time and the space to be able to utilise that knowledge and grow a better learning culture that enables us to share best practise when it happens. And actually, you know, just providing that time. If I look at Governors across London right now, they haven't got the time to do their day job as it currently stands, let alone building, you know, the excellent stuff Rob's been talking about. I think we need to change that dynamic by the way in which we run our organisation, by thinking about what we reward.

We need to create a culture where learning is shared across the whole system automatically, so if one thing goes wrong in one prison, instead of just punishing who ever made the mistake, we learn, and we share that learning. We don't do that. And the other thing I would say is that all aspiring Governors

need to do two years of university-type of learning, like the course I got to do, because I think that experience made me a much, much better Governor than I ever would have been, for lots of reasons. And it hasn't got to be an expensive Cambridge course, but I do think having the ability to go through the process of doing that type of learning when you're a Deputy Governor and you're aspiring to be a Governor is absolutely what we should do, so we create a culture that knows how to understand and do academic research, knows how to access academic journals, knows how to use an academic database.

RA: Well, my sincere thanks to you both. This has been an absolute pleasure, and I am so grateful to you both for your time and expertise. **And happily, the Prison Service Journal is available on prison wings and open access on the internet, so everyone will be able to access it whether or not they've ever set foot in a university!**