

The Future of Prison Staff

Steve Gillan, General Secretary of the Prison Officers Association (POA) and **Tom Wheatley**, President of the Prison Governors' Association (PGA), are interviewed by **Karen Harrison**, a Professor of Law and Penal Policy at the University of Lincoln.

The interview took place on 23rd June 2025.

KH: Could we start by you introducing the organisations that you represent?

SG: The POA was founded in 1939, so we're heading towards 90 years of being a trade union. We have over 35,000 full and retired members and we're growing, so we are the largest trade union in the criminal justice system. We represent all prison officer grades and currently our membership is approximately 88% of the criminal justice sector.

TW: The PGA is a much smaller trade union and much younger. We represent operational managers, bands 7-12. The vast majority of those will have been prison officers, so many of our members will have also been members of the POA. We currently have around 1,100 full members with our membership growing steadily over the past year or so.

KH: How would you describe the current prison workforce?

SG: I would describe the current prison workforce as resilient and professional, under resourced and not recognised for the magnificent job they do on behalf of the general public. Clearly, it's changed from my day. I was a prison officer from 1990, right up until 2010 when I left to become General Secretary of the POA and I would suggest there's far more challenges today for the prison

service workforce than there was during my time. And I don't say that loosely because it had its challenges in the 90s and noughties as well, but I was a prison officer, a senior officer, a principal officer, and I served at HMP Chelmsford, HMP Bullwood Hall and HMP Pentonville. I take my hat off to the workforce today because I think violence and the challenges that they face is nothing like what I faced as a prison officer way back in the 90s.

There's a reason for that and I'll be quite bold in saying that this is due to a lack of respect from successive governments. The workforce in the prison service, we're out of sight, out of mind, until something drastically goes wrong, such as the horrific recent assaults at HMP Frankland, HMP Belmarsh and HMP Long Lartin. The general public don't get to necessarily hear about us because within the media we're competing with the police, with the NHS, with education. Over the last 30 years, prison staff have been treated as

second class citizens when they quite frankly do a magnificent job on behalf of society, keeping society safe, in very difficult and challenging circumstances, when budgets have been slashed, the workforce numbers have been slashed, and the prison service population has drastically increased. When I started in 1990, they were talking about overcrowding then and the population was 43,000. We're now up to 88,000, with less staff now than we had when we were looking after 43,000 prisoners. I admire the workforce today. It has problems, there's a lot of inexperience for example, because the service got rid of experienced staff in their droves way back in 2012, and in fact we are still trying to recover from that now.

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Steve Gillan is the General Secretary for the POA and has been involved with the union since 2000. The son of a shipyard worker from Greenock, Scotland, he is married with two adult children and lives in Basildon, Essex. Steve left school in 1979 and had a variety of jobs including banking and with the Ford Motor Company before joining the Prison Service in 1989 as a Prison Officer at HMP Chelmsford. He was promoted to Senior Officer in 1997 and transferred to HMP Bullwood Hall. He held positions on the local branch committees at both prisons as the POA Branch Secretary. In 2001 he worked at HMP Pentonville as a Senior Officer and Principal Officer. Since 2000, Steve has held a number of POA positions including Assistant Secretary, National Vice Chair and National Finance Officer.

Tom Wheatley is the President of the PGA. He is a prison / corrections professional with thirty years' experience in both public and private sector organisations. He has experience of managing large scale (700+) public to private employer TUPE and of leading the mobilisation and transition of critical public services in the policing sector. He has governed five public sector and one private prison and also have Trustee/ NED experience in the Voluntary and Community Sector. Tom is proud to be a trustee of both Unlock and Life Skills Education.

TW: I joined the service as a prison officer in 1994 and was first promoted into the Governor grades in 2000. I was a prison officer for a short period of time, working at HMP Hull and HMP Full Sutton, where I worked with a vastly experienced workforce at every level and was always able wherever I was to turn to a colleague for support or advice. It felt like an environment where we operated effectively as teams where there was an awful lot of looking out for each other and supporting each other. The environment did have its challenges, but prisons are undoubtedly now more challenging for people to work in. With the introduction of benchmarking and in order to get down to the staffing number that we thought at that point was the right number, we let all that experience walk away. Steve put it as we are still trying to recover from that. I don't think we're anywhere near recovering from it. We have never managed to rebuild some of our prisons. And as a consequence, some of the excellent people that we recruit at prison officer level, they don't stay because we're putting them in environments that are not sufficiently safe and where they are not surrounded by experienced staff. They are surrounded by other people like themselves, all trying to do their best in what is a far more challenging environment. From a management point of view, a much greater proportion of time is now being spent managing people and processes than ever before, so our members, good prison governors, aren't doing the same job that we were. As a Governing Governor in 2006 I probably spent about 20 to 30% of my time managing staff issues, with the other time managing the operation of the prison, being out and about talking to people, being visible, being present, a bit of coaching, a bit of setting standards, a whole lot of assurance. In 2023, that had flipped. So, I spent about 70 to 80% of my time managing staff issues through disciplinary process, sickness management and other methods and only about 20 to 30% of my time out and about in my prison talking to people. The other thing that has changed is that when I started as a prison officer there was a great deal of variation in the job. There were all sorts of work that you could do as a prison officer that took you away from the coal face. You could have periods of time when you were away from that, working on the gate or in the control room doing a variety of different jobs, but we introduced the Operational Support Grade (OSG) rank as a way of saving money and that took a lot of those roles away from officers. So now, if you are a prison officer working in a prison you are working with prisoners all day, every day, without respite, without a break, in a far more challenging,

far higher paced and far less safe environment. Is it any wonder that we don't hang on to those people?

KH: You've both talked about the current challenges for those working in prisons today. What about the opportunities that are available for prison staff?

TW: Do you want to be more specific about what you think those are, because I'm struggling to think of things that I would see as opportunities that are distinct from opportunities that have always existed for prison staff.

KH: Are there career opportunities or development opportunities, or ways in which prison staff can achieve job satisfaction?

TW: Those kinds of opportunities are fewer than they once were. We (TW & SG) both joined a service that was far more time bound in terms of progression. Now you can move much more quickly, the extent to which that is desirable is different, but the opportunities that previously existed for people, we now struggle to provide.

SG: It's dead easy to identify all the current challenges that the modern-day prison officer or Governor faces, but you've got to work on the positive to see what opportunities can arise. When I was a prison officer, I couldn't become a senior officer until I had done four-years of service. At that time, it was right and proper that

you had a full understanding of the basic grade job of a prison officer and gained that experience, and so the opportunities now are probably more accelerated for prison staff. I still think you should be able to walk before you can run and, in my view, people getting opportunities far too early has led to some of the problems that exist today. Some custodial managers that I have spoken to who have only been in the service for 12/13/14 months openly admit that sometimes they are struggling because of the lack of training and support, so the opportunities are there, but not the training and support.

KH: So, what you are saying is that there is insufficient time for officers now to develop their jail craft before they are expected to take on management roles and make decisions.

SG: Absolutely.

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TW: I think that's right. We have always relied on people being able to learn their roles, by sort of osmosis, but earlier on in our careers, we were surrounded by a really experienced workforce. When I joined it was quite novel having a new prison officer wandering around. I got loads and loads of input from people and if I didn't know something I always had someone to ask. We relied on that mechanism to upskill people, but over time that experience has gone and we haven't put anything in place to replace it. We need ongoing methods of training, supporting and upskilling of our prison staff that helps them properly develop, and develop in the right way because it's much more difficult to do that now because you can't always find out from your colleagues. Part of that is because line managers don't know their staff as well as they used to. In the pre fair and sustainable world, I was a principal officer in a dispersal prison and had four senior officers who worked for me and a group of 36 prison officers. My senior officers were line managing 9 people each and maintained a relationship with them in terms of appraisal, so they knew them because they worked with them every day. I knew them. I knew their family. They knew me. They could build relationships with me; they felt a loyalty to me. We were a team. And then the structures changed. So, the relationship between frontline staff and their line manager has become far more distant, some custodial managers are now managing 30 staff. So, in effect we broke that relationship, yet we are demanding so much more of those first line managers which takes them away from being able to coach their own staff. I think we are missing at least one potentially two tiers in our management structure within prisons.

KH: In an ideal world, what would a future prison force look like?

SG: If I had a blank piece of paper I would go back in time because if something was half decent in the past, you don't just throw it away. With fair and sustainable came the threat of privatisation and the PGA and the POA had to make concessions and along the way, we lost those managerial ranks such as the senior officer. That is a major, major issue. So, in the ideal world for a future workforce, I would get rid of the bandings and bring back the principal officer and the senior officer roles and give them managerial responsibility. The Prison Service used to be a disciplined service, and I think we need to bring that discipline back and have a workforce that's more structured and professionalised including a proper pension

age instead of expecting prison officer grades and management to work to 68, which is unrealistic in the prison setting. I would also not employ officers until they are 21, rather than 18, so that they have some life experience first. I also don't think the training is adequate. It wasn't adequate when I joined, but they usually advertise it, as no experience necessary. What sort of impression does that give about a professionalised workforce?

And I'm not saying that you need qualifications coming out your ears because I've met some magnificent prison officers and indeed Governor grades who didn't have many qualifications, but they knew how to deal with people and they had absolutely brilliant interpersonal skills, but there needs to be a balance. We have the situation at the moment where prison officers don't have a face-to-face interview, so a Governor doesn't actually know who they are getting until they come from the training school and a minority are not up to it and they would have been weeded out at the very beginning if there had been an

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interview. We can toughen up on that and become more professionalised. So, we need to get the management structure 100% correct, making sure we're getting the right people into the job, paying them a decent salary, decent hours at work, so they're not overworking, and not working till the age of 68. If we can then get the prison population down to a reasonable level, prisons will actually be doing what they're supposed to be doing, rehabilitating people and making them better people upon release.

TW: Something that I agree with in the Rademaker review is that it's about making sure we get the right people in the first place. I joined as a 21-year-old. I was very young. If you'd have recruited 50 of me at the same time, that would not have done the prison any good. All those young people starting at the same time together would have destabilised the staff group. We need to make sure we get people with the right attitudes and approach, and I think face-to-face interviews are a really important part of that. Also, not all of our prison environments are the same, but we advertise prison officer jobs in an area or in a specific prison that people don't know. They don't know what happens there. They don't know what makes it different from anywhere else. And they get through a generic assessment that says they're fit to be a prison officer, but at no point does anybody say, but are you the right fit for here?

That means that we get some people who would make really, really good prison officers if only they were placed in the right environment. Building a team is also important because if you get identical people that doesn't help because you need diversity of thoughts and approach, and you can't get that unless somebody is working out who you are recruiting to your specific team. And that doesn't happen at the moment. Moving onto training, it is currently short and very generic. So it teaches you the basics of being a prison officer, but prisons are very different, so we need to be providing time to teach about the type of prison you're going into and what kind of work is higher priority in that environment. We need to provide a supportive environment, so there is time for reflection and continuing professional development, which is aimed towards making you effective in the role that you are in. And if you choose and if you have the talent for it, to think about how you might develop yourself to make yourself ready for future roles, whether that is management or specialist prison officer roles. Some prisons are trying to help staff through, some rely on a particular colleague, but it's a postcode lottery. We shouldn't be putting people in the position where we promote them or move them into specialist roles where we don't give them a fair shot at success because we haven't effectively prepared them for it. We also need to account for differences in our workforce. Irrelevant of gender more people working in the Service now have childcare responsibilities and so are tied in the locality more. Also, the 18-year-olds of today don't necessarily want to be in one job for 40 years. We need to allow people to go and work somewhere else if that's what they want to do and then come back. And when they come back, we should consider the experience that they left HMPPS with and the experience that they've gained elsewhere. Currently, if you decide you want to come back to the Prison Service after you've been out for six years, they make you start again at the beginning. Reflecting on the past, prison officers had long pay scales, so basically, they had 10 years of pay rises and then you had some long service increments that came in the future, which meant that if you stayed, you got more money. That was when we had a really experienced workforce because lots of people who were exceptional prison officers stayed. They didn't want to be managers, but there was progression for them in terms of pay and reward and they would take on different responsibilities and roles within their prison officer work and they would be the kind of people that I would look to as a brand-new prison officer for advice. Now, although we've managed to drag our

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prison officer entry point up to the point that we can recruit just about enough people, we've done that at the expense of the top of the scale. Now it's only about three or four years to get to the top of the prison officer scale, so you've either got to go into management or leave.

SG: We mustn't forget that there are lots of prison officers that actually are quite content in never going for promotion. They're quite happy doing what they do, but that doesn't mean to say that we should just take them for granted. We should continually work at developing them professionally like other countries. I'm not saying that's for everyone, but the choice should be there. I've been around for 35 years now and I'm very proud of what we achieve in

this country against all the odds, quite frankly, because there's lots of countries that come here to look at our systems, whether it's control and restraint, whether it's search and techniques, and they are impressed when they leave and take it back to their countries so we can all learn from each other. On the whole we lock up too many people and that makes the job harder. But that's a political issue and obviously we need to get to grips with that.

KH: Thinking about this future prison workforce, what training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) ideally do they need?

TW: We need to do some needs analysis about what the job of a prison officer is going to look like in the future. We're going to have to look again at the kind of regimes that we run in our prisons, because carrying on doing what we're currently doing means that we will just carry on down the same road with increasing violence, increasing substance misuse, and decreasing, reducing re-offending. So, I think the future of prisons might look a bit different and there might end up being different types of prison that demand a different workforce and that potentially demands different CPD for that workforce. So, when I look back at my career, setting up a new unit to do something really difficult, or working with a really challenging group of people, if you could pick your team, to do that, anything becomes doable. If you're able to pick the right people to do a job and give them the appropriate support and training and trust them to deliver that job effectively, you get good results. But our ability to pick is currently limited, so we're not picking the right people in the first place on occasion, so we need to get better at picking the right people.

We also need to identify what they need as individuals to make them effective, because that won't be the same for everybody. So, for instance, I joined at 21, I had been to university, I didn't need to do stuff that was about my ability to think critically about a subject, but one of the things I wish I'd been taught to do at Newbold Revel was to shout properly because when I started in a local prison it was about shouting, not at people, but shouting to get people to come to you. And if you stand on the ones on a wing with four landings, your voice doesn't carry properly and then you can't get your job done. I'm not sure we'll ever get to the point where it's completely bespoke to the individual, but there needs to be a range of CPD activities that staff can pick for themselves or can be directed to do by their managers who spot that they could do with support or improvement in a particular area.

SG: I agree with Tom. We need a bespoke package for every single officer or manager or Governor. So basic training on control and restraint, equality, i.e. the basics of being a prison officer, but then a bespoke package to develop staff, although not every member of staff wants to be developed. So, a pathway for them to develop, if that is what they want, that has the full backing of the Service. I think we can get better, we can make it more professional. We can make the training far better than it is, more meaningful and with less prisoners, staff could actually see the light of day because when I was on landings I knew my prisoners. Some of these poor people on the landings now don't get to even speak to a prisoner, let alone understand if they've been bullied or if they've received a dear John letter or anything like that. The modern-day prison officer doesn't get that time, I don't think.

KH: Would having regular appraisals help with this?

TW: In the past we've had a number of different appraisal systems. Have any of those been fantastic? No, they're all just a variation on a theme. The fundamental thing is having a good relationship with someone who holds managerial responsibility for you, so that you can get developed and supported in the right way. And I think those relationships with line managers are really, really important. I'm not bothered about the formality of the appraisal system, but having a line management relationship that is meaningful for both the line manager and the person being line managed is really important. I would much rather have an appraisal system that you could opt into. So, if I've got 10 staff to manage a couple of them might say, I'm not bothered about an appraisal this year, Tom, because there's nothing that I think I need

it for. You know, I don't want to change roles. I'm happy doing what I'm doing. I think I'm effective. But there might be someone who says I'm interested in going for a promotion next year. And they want an appraisal doing this year so that they can prepare themselves. Or it might be that the line manager says I want you to have an appraisal this year because I want you to look at promotion or I want you to look at specialising or I'm concerned about your performance. Having a system that allowed us that structure for building those relationships is useful, and that would probably mean that even if you did have a lot of staff to manage you could concentrate your efforts as a line manager on the people where that would have most impact. So having something like that I think would be better than not having anything at all, but it would also be better than having a sort of sheep dip solution that you just run everybody through.

SG: I think the staff appraisal system is something that probably does need to happen. During my probation at HMP Chelmsford, they did it religiously. If you weren't performing in an area, they would set you targets in order to raise your standard and support you. But after I passed probation, I didn't have an appraisal for another 5 or 6 years. I think a lot of people in the Prison Service have lost faith in staff appraisals because it's a bit meaningless. But that's not to say there shouldn't be one, because if there's a proper one that's taken seriously and the managers have the actual time to do it, it can be useful. When I was a group manager, I got to know my staff. I got to know their weaknesses. I got to know what made them tick. It didn't matter if you went to play golf with them or whatever. Everyone was treated the same and that's why I welcome the Rademaker report because it's getting back to basics again and I think that's what we need, quite frankly.

KH: We could talk about this for much longer, but in one sentence, what would be your takeaway message for the Government and policy makers?

SG: For the government of the day, I would say you must fund the Prison Service properly and give prison staff the respect that they deserve.

TW: Mine is also around funding, but that they need to fund the Prison Service effectively for the number of people they choose to send there. So, it's not always about extra money. We could make different choices and send fewer people, and that would give our members the ability to invest in their colleagues effectively, so that we could deliver a fit for purpose workforce.