

Serving the Courts, Believing in Others Until They Believe in Themselves, and Quiet Successes

An Interview with The Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP, Prisons Minister
until November 2023.

Damian Hinds was Prisons Minister until November 2023. He then moved to the Department for Education and is now the Schools Minister. He is interviewed by Dr Amy Ludlow, Chief Executive of SHiFT, a youth justice charity.

Damian Hinds is Conservative MP for East Hampshire and was appointed as Prisons Minister in October 2022. He has held several ministerial roles, including serving as Minister for Security from 2021 to 2022, and Secretary of State for Education from 2018 to 2019. This interview took place at the Ministry of Justice in August 2023.

AL: It would be great to start by getting a sense of who you are. What's your background and what makes you tick?

DH: That's a big question! I guess I'd start by saying I'm a Dad; I'm a Dad first, to three children, and this is one of the most significant prisms through which I think about myself and the world. And then, without telling my life story, if I focus on your second question about what makes me tick, it's really about what I can do to make the world a better place. I don't think anybody does the job as a politician unless they've got something of a sense of like, 'what is my role?', 'what is my responsibility?', 'what can I do to try and make the world a better place?'. But also, hopefully the humility to recognise that there's always a limit to that and that different people can make their contribution in different ways. I decided that my way was as a politician, but some people do it by being a teacher, others by being a prison officer. Those are unique sets of skills which I don't possess, so for me it's through politics and public administration that I hope I can make my contribution to the world. So that's what motivates me, though I have to say it's quite a weird job to do sometimes!

AL: Tell me more. Why is it weird?

DH: Well, I'm talking about being a politician now – being an MP – rather than being the Prisons Minister. It's like, well, first of all, you don't know what it's like before you do it. People often ask me at events, 'is your job as you expected?' And I don't know how anybody

manages to answer that because my own answer is I had no expectations – I literally had no idea what it's like being an MP. It changes everything really about life – neither better nor worse, it's just different. It's different in, you know, where you live, how you live. We don't really have days on and days off. It's all consuming and mostly in a good way. It's an immense privilege to do and there's a long queue of people who would like to be doing it so I'm very lucky to be able to.

Then within that, being able to do this brief as Prisons Minister, I think how we deal with people who are incarcerated it's one of the most kind of pivotal leveraged things that we do in society. And this is a, you know, it's a huge privilege, also a huge responsibility and also really, really interesting as a job.

AL: Before this you were in education, weren't you?

DH: Yes, well immediately before this role I was a Backbencher, but my previous ministerial job was Security Minister and then before that I was Education Secretary and before that Employment Minister. This is quite an interesting context for my prisons role because this job is really all about education, employment, and security. There are other aspects to it as well, but those three roles are a big part of it.

AL: What experiences and ideas about prisons and criminal justice did you bring to your role as Prisons Minister?

DH: Look, I think like most people, or many people at least, if I'm just straightforwardly honest, I knew little about prisons. Before taking up this job I'd been inside one, I think, twice in my life. Once was when I was Employment Minister, and I went to HMP Isis to look at some of what they were doing to reduce unemployment, which was, you know, fascinating. The only other time I'd been in the prison was at a, you know, theatre, a musical production, which happened

to be in a prison. So, I didn't know a great deal about prisons when I came to this brief.

I often say when I'm speaking at events that many of us will see signs for prisons as we are driving and for that moment you kind of think of that's where all that happens, but then you tend to put that out of your head because you know you are generally very thankful that somebody else is thinking about it, and those people are the readers of the Prison Service Journal. So yes, for myself, I did not know a whole lot about criminal justice. And in some ways, that's good by the way, because it means that you ask questions that might seem stupid or naïve. But actually, the stupid naïve questions that you ask on day one, or month one in the job, are some of the most important questions, and the questions I have found myself often coming back to.

AL: Talk me through your first day in post. What struck you? What were the urgent problems, what were the important problems, what were the urgent and important problems?

DH: Well, the thing of course is that things that are urgent and important are the relatively straightforward ones. The ones that are that most tricky are usually the ones that are important but not urgent. Inevitably in one of these types of roles you've got a mixture of very, very sort of 'here and now' human operational issues, like there's something happening at this moment that needs ministerial sign off or an approval or something like that. You've got general kind of management questions about how the business, or the operation is run, and then you've got longer-term strategic things. And they're all always operating in parallel, all of them at the same time.

Prisons have been running at high occupancy throughout my time here and that continues to be a very, very constant matter for us to deal with. But there are also other big themes that I want to devote my mental energy to. In particular, I talk a lot about how we've got an exploding opportunity on employment – exploding because it won't be around forever. We've had great success in growing employment outcomes for people who are imprisoned, thanks to the great work that prison governors have done and some far-sighted people in industry. In the last year or two, that success has been really helped by the heat of the labour market. It's very difficult to find labour in lots of sectors in different parts of the country and, while that's the

case, our calling card to get through the door, making the case for getting people who've been in prison into employment, is just that much more impactful. So what we need to do, and by 'we' I mean everybody reading this article and everyone who is involved in the secure estate one way or another, is to use this opportunity right now, like this year - not a five year plan but a this year plan - to create as many of those relationships with employers as possible so that they can then themselves be sustained. So, the opportunity for making real inroads on employment outcomes is like a one-off thing but the benefit from it should sustain.

AL: What drives, or shapes, your particular focus on employment and driving up employment outcomes for people who are imprisoned?

DH: I think it partly comes from my experience of being Employment Minister. So much flows from employment. There are of course other things that you need to have in place in order to be in employment, like having somewhere to live and personal stability and reasonable health. But then from employment comes dignity, comes stability, comes the ability to support your family, comes better nutrition, and better ways to use your time. So, all sorts of things flow from having a job.

Another thing I learned as Employment Minister, which may sound circular but it's true, is that what holds you back from getting a job is not having a job. Once you've got a job, any kind of regularised legitimate employment, from there, you can build a career and you can develop. But getting over that hurdle, of having any legitimate job, that's the key factor. And in turn, another big thing I learned from spending a lot of time at Job Centres that the single biggest thing that holds most individuals back from making that move is confidence. And that's the word you hear more than any other when you speak to people who work in Job Centres.

AL: And if you think about some of the people you've met in prison, what do you think sits underneath a lack of confidence from your perspective?

DH: Actually, I think it's more or less what you come into contact with a lot on the outside, which is kind of variations on the sentence, 'Well, why would someone offer me a job?' It's an understanding of self-worth, knowing you've got something to give, understanding how people value you, knowing that

I learned from spending a lot of time at Job Centres that the single biggest thing that holds most individuals back from making that move is confidence.

some people like you, you know, these things are important in life. And actually, you know, in the prison context, some of the voluntary work programmes that go on really help people to develop some of this self-belief, beyond the specific jobs skills that they teach.

AL: There are so many challenges in prisons, we know, and let's come to those, but let's for now stay in this more positive space. Since you've been in this role, what are the things that you've seen that give you greatest hope? Things where you think, 'yes, we're really making a difference there'.

DH: Look, I can name you long list of initiatives, which are encouraging - drug recovery units that incentivise substance-free living, psychologically informed prison environments, and some of the specific rehabilitation and development programmes we offer. But you know, fundamentally, what really excites me is individual people more than programmes. For example, I was at HMP Manchester yesterday, and just met some extraordinarily, engaged, and optimistic, smiling staff – people who clearly have a real sense of mission in what brings them to work in the morning, which is so powerful and uplifting, especially in the context of, let's face it, what can be a really difficult job.

And the same goes for individual prisoners I've met. I remember meeting a group of men at HMP Cardiff, who had just finished a Trackworks course. They were all coming to the end of their sentences, had completed this course, and were going to be given a job on the outside on the railways. And I remember one of the guys, who was quite young, talking about the person who had trained him whose name I think might have been Matt, saying, "no one's ever taken a chance on me before". And, you know, I was close to having a tear in my eye. But there is nothing soft about that. That's a situation where there's a company that needs employees, there's guys who need jobs. These people are about to be let out from being incarcerated. They've obviously done something bad to be in there. But for that young man, he's found someone who believes in him enough to give him a chance. Yeah, that's, that's not a soft outcome. That's a hard outcome for sure. For him, and for all of us – moments like those are why we're all in this line of work.

People who clearly have a real sense of mission in what brings them to work in the morning, which is so powerful and uplifting, especially in the context of, let's face it, what can be a really difficult job.

AL: So tell me, because I totally recognise those moments, and those stories, but what I don't know is what it's like encountering those things in your shoes as Prisons Minister. When you come away from those encounters, what are you thinking about? What can you do to enable more people like Matt, or to have more mission-driven, optimistic staff like those you met in HMP Manchester?

DH: So the problem is that you can't systematise everything. We repeatedly think that we can and, of course, there are some systems and processes and programmes you can put in place, and they are important. But fundamentally people like Matt, and people like the staff I met in HMP Manchester, are unique individuals. They bring a unique sense of 'magic' which you know when you see it. There are many other people like Matt out there who I'd love to have working in the organisation, but I can't recreate Matt out of Dave, they're different people. My point being at the end of the day, one of the most important things I can do is to try to hire the best people. And, given that you can't, you know, sitting in a corporate office, let alone being a government minister, run the recruitment process for you know, the estate of this size, the thing you can do is make sure in each operating unit, you've got a brilliant person running the recruitment.

AL: Is there anything else that you see as important from a cultural perspective here? Is there something you want to create culturally in the organisation that enables more people like Matt?

DH: I think there is a bit of a tension in the prison system, because it is still quite a traditional workforce and still quite a hierarchical workforce. And, of course, the nature of the work, and the fact that you're dealing with risk does make that to some extent inevitable. But there is a bit of a tension between that and, you know, letting a thousand flowers bloom and, you know, setting people off to do their creative thing. I would like to move a bit further towards the thousand flowers blooming to harness more or the creativity and leadership of individuals who can make a difference.

The other thing I think is that it's a great privilege in my job that every week I meet incredible people who

are doing incredible things. People like me need to be supporting those people to do what they do. Sometimes just naming it and recognising it is encouraging for people, I hope. And to be honest, that's not hard to do. I mean, the nice thing about my role is that it's such an engaging industry, it's really fascinating and just sucks you in. So, you don't really need to be given excuses, or, you know, pushed out to go visit prisons and meet people. It's just a great thing to do. And you meet such brilliant people.

AL: Do you think so? I'm taking you back now to the roads where you're looking at prison signs, and so many people just think, 'oh, there's a prison'. Do you think, considering things like the increased links between employers and prisons, that the relationship between prisons and the broader communities of which they are part is changing? Would you like to see greater porosity or connectedness between local communities and prisons?

DH: There is still a fundamental divide though, isn't there - there's a wall. Most people haven't been on the other side of that wall, and most never will. In some ways, including from a recruitment perspective, you want more people to come inside and see, but there's always going to be a limit to that because of security. Our number one job is to keep people where they are meant to be to help keep the public safe. But while they're there we also want to help them to get their lives back on track and with that in mind, in the business world, from an employment perspective, I think there is definitely greater porosity. There's a lot more that I think we need to do in that same vein though. Prison education, for example, is a small, but not insignificant part of education in this country. I would love there to be more links between mainstream education and prison education - more teachers who think about doing a one- or two-year sabbatical where they come and work with us, or even teaching in prisons as a standard placement offered as part of teacher training. I think this sort of mixing people up could be good for everyone - an opportunity to share ideas and you learn from one another, as well as attracting more good people to provide education in our prisons, which we know plays such an important role in helping people make positive changes.

AL: Let's talk about some of the challenges then. So, you mentioned it already, the question of capacity and population pressures - they've been on the top of everybody's agenda. What does that challenge look like from your perspective? How have you been thinking about it and responding to it?

DH: Nobody wants to be working over an extended period with an occupancy rate that is the level

it is at the moment. Everybody who works in the prison system has done a quite extraordinary job in managing the problem. They've done an extraordinary job in creating extra places to keep track with the growth in demand. But I don't underestimate in the slightest the stresses that running at such high occupancy puts on the operation in all sorts of ways, in kind of obvious ways, and less obvious ways.

AL: And so how have you been thinking about that for now and the future? The projections suggest things are likely to become worse. How are you managing that?

DH: We will make sure there are places for people to be imprisoned when that's what the courts direct. That's what we are here for - job number one is to serve the orders of the courts. HMPPS has done a remarkable job in finding places to put rapid deployment cells and, of course, we've had two new prisons recently built, with another to come before too long.

AL: In your shoes I would feel quite frustrated about that. Because what that means is you're constantly firefighting - managing the urgent things, and perhaps not having time for the important things. Does that resonate?

DH: Yes, but I mean, that doesn't just apply to me, I think a version of that point applies to pretty much everybody working in the system at all different levels, and it's absolutely true.

AL: Is there any opportunity for you to play an influencing role with your colleagues, to think about how we could respond differently to some of the harm, without the use of prisons?

DH: The starting point of course in our system is the separation of powers. There's the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary, and it is absolutely right that those three branches are separate and independent. We, as Ministers, are here to serve the outcomes judges determine and that's absolutely how it should be.

Within this, I think we do also play a role in making sure that there are options available beyond prison and that people know about those options and can have confidence in them - things like curfews and drug desistance requirements, and mental health treatment orders. There are great things you can do through unpaid work for example, things which are punitive, but are also really doing something positive for the community. And you can blend into it training and development towards work readiness, for example.

Technology plays a huge role here. Take tagging for example. Tagging technology has improved, even just in the last few years, in extraordinary ways. The use of this sort of technology will always need careful

consideration on an individual basis but what you can do with GPS tagging is way beyond what you can do with traditional RF tagging. And, as I say, we need to make sure that these options are available and robust. Alcohol tagging is another case in point – something that just didn't exist a few years ago.

I was at the Stockport Women's Centre in Greater Manchester yesterday. I think some of the really important work women's centres do is just not seen by most people and is not known about by most people. We're also piloting intensive supervision courts in three locations - Teesside, Liverpool, and Birmingham - two of them focused on drugs, one focused on women. And again, that's an innovative approach and an option available to the judicial system. All of these things might be innovations that keep people out of prison, but more importantly, might put them on a solid path again away from crime.

AL: What are some of the other key challenges you're grappling with? People are surely up there on the list!

DH: Absolutely. It's a people business. We build buildings, and when people think about prisons, that's what they think about. But it's really all about the people. It is really remarkable when you think about it, the ratio that we have of uniformed staff to the number of prisoners under their watch. And you can only do that by having brilliant people with excellent jail craft that means they can build the right relationships with prisoners.

During Covid, people didn't change jobs very much for obvious reasons. The back end of Covid coincided with the labour market becoming particularly tight and that was a really difficult time for us. It's still difficult now, but I would say we have seen signs of improvement in prisons, and actually in probation as well. Recruitment is absolutely fundamental but the thing we really, really must focus on is retention, because that jail craft doesn't come overnight; it comes with experience. Prison officers are obviously dealing with a cohort of people who can clearly be very difficult. As somebody new in the job, just being able to bounce things off, and get informal guidance from more experienced colleagues is incredibly important. So yes, all the management development programmes and the like are important, but informal ongoing learning with peers is, I think, even more important in this line of work.

AL: But the reality at the minute is that there has been huge staff churn, and some prisons are running with very inexperienced workforces. How were you grappling that issue?

DH: Yes, you're right. You're right to say to that, it's different in different places, of course. Because I was

in a prison the other day where I met somebody who had recently retired from the Prison Service, which was great. There are also people who leave the Prison Service and have gone to work in other roles, and then maybe the other industry hasn't turned out to be quite as anticipated. In some cases, I suspect that this might be because they've missed the intense sense of mission of really making a difference in someone's life that you can get in the Prison Service.

So that's part of this that I want us to really maximise our efforts to see who we can welcome back. And then, on the other hand, I want us to get even better at keeping great people in the first place. We're trying to make the range of different career paths available within the Prison Service clearer to people. I was surprised to discover when I arrived here, for example, that we didn't historically enable lateral moves between prisons. So, if you wanted to move from one prison to another you had to apply for a job rather than being more flexible and enabling internal moves as you would do where you've got a multi-site business where you've got talented people you want to hang onto. So that's important. There's also the wider kind of criminal justice system family and career moves you can make between the Prison Service and the Probation Service for example, and vice versa. We've got people who've been through the Unlocked Programme, making a difference in prisons as well as taking their experiences of prison work into other sectors or the broader criminal justice family.

AL: What are the other problems in our prisons that keep you awake at night?

DH: If I think about this in terms of my three top priorities, number one and number two are really easy because they are capacity and employment. There's quite a lot of things after that which vie for number three. Keeping drugs out of prison is high up there. Although I keep in mind that with drugs in prison you have to get multiple things right at the same time – so keeping the drugs out, but also about having the right treatment programmes inside, and keeping people mentally and physically busy and other things – just physically keeping contraband out of prisons is, I think, for anybody who does my job a daily priority. Again, it's an area where we've made brilliant progress with the specialist scanners for example, but there's always something else and something new.

AL: Talk to me about youth justice. The story here, as I see it, is that there has been some really powerful progress – quiet success – in diverting lots of young people away from custody, but youth custody is really quite a tough place to be.

DH: So you've summed it up. I mean, that is the truth. We talk about fewer under 18s being locked up.

This has been a huge change, like about an 80% reduction over the last 12 years. Rightly you have to think about public confidence, because we are here ultimately to keep people safe. Some people will need to be locked up for public protection or as a deterrent to others. But having said that, I think most people get the idea that if, with young people in particular, if you can keep them out of prison, which is a setting where inevitably they will mix with others with a criminal past and there is a risk that you become a more hardened smarter criminal as a result of it, then most people will think that trying everything we can to avoid custody is a worthwhile thing to do. It gives the State a chance to work with them to try and put them onto a better footing for the future. What that means though is that there is a hard core of the most challenging young people who are left in the youth custody estate - not exclusively, but more and more. And that is difficult to deal with.

AL: So, if I'm an Officer working at HMYOI Cookham Wood, for example, and reading this, what would you want them to know about how you're thinking about some of those challenges?

DH: Well, the first thing I'd want them to know is that I think they do the most remarkable job imaginable. Working with these young people is one of the jobs that has most leverage in the country. Some of the youngsters coming through a YOI will be on the first stage of their journey into the adult estate because they're serving long sentences, but for others, they're serving shorter sentences and they're going to be out one way or another in their early adulthood. For those people, if he can help turn their lives around then that makes such a difference to them, their families, and ultimately the safety of our communities. I've visited Cookham Wood myself. I see the motivation, the spark, the warmth of people working there to do that. The leverage effect of their work is enormous because that person's entire life is ahead of them.

But I would also want them to know that I totally recognise it is hard, and they do a very difficult job. Although it's a relatively small population, the difficulties of dealing with 'keep apart' – young people who can't safely be together – are huge. As you'll remember from the Cookham report, the number of keep apart there was greater than the number of boys in the YOI. So, you're trying to manage that while at the same time getting people out of their rooms for a decent period of time to do stuff, like get the education they need, that will turn things around for them. That is really hard.

AL: Is there any appetite for radicalism? Numbers are now so low in the youth estate.

Could we do something radically different? Smaller, local secure units, like Barton Moss?

DH: Absolutely. That is absolutely a legitimate debate. We do have some smaller YOIs and of course options for young people that are not YOIs. And within that we also have to remember that young people have lots of different needs, including very different ages. The small numbers make that even harder, right? So, you're taking what's already a small population, and then you're sub-categorising it into different types of people, and still trying to make them relatively accessible to where their families are living for resettlement purposes. It's all complex but definitely an important debate.

AL: What else is on your mind?

DH: Safety, yes, self-inflicted deaths and self-harm. It's really harrowing for colleagues who work in the Prison Service and tragic, you know, everyone who deals with it and is impacted by it. And it's incumbent obviously on all of us. It's trying to learn as much as we can from when these tragedies happen and try and do what you can to minimise the likelihood. But, you know, recognising that very sadly, you will probably never be able to get to a situation where that never happens.

AL: One of the things that we know can make managing violence and creating the sorts of environments where self-harm is less likely, or better managed, is population pressure. So if you've got lots of people in prison, and high churn through the local estate where we know that risk of self-harm or suicide is particularly high, that can set up a context that makes work around violence prevention or reduction really difficult. What are your thoughts on that?

DH: Yes, I agree with that. Population pressures do make it harder for us to keep people safe, as does not being busy in prison. Without wanting to claim some sort of clinical insight, if you're working full time, and by the end of the day you're mentally and physically ready to go to bed and properly nourished and so on, it strikes as pretty obvious that you'll have less motivation and opportunity for violence to yourself or other people.

AL: You touched on regime and that's also made me think here about education. We know post-Covid that there are ongoing challenges in providing adequate regimes. In some prisons we know some people are barely getting out of their cells, let alone getting access to really meaningful high quality activities. What's your thinking here?

DH: So, we often talk about regime in the context of pre- and post-Covid and kind of 'getting back from Covid'. And the first thing that strikes me about that is that I wouldn't talk in those terms anywhere really outside this building. If I talked to my constituents about getting back to normal from Covid, they would be like, 'what, this is 2023', you know. Covid changed everything for everybody, but I think most people now think of that as something in the past, and that we're now in a new phase.

I think it's always worth coming back to the remarkable job that prison staff did during Covid. The projections of how many people were likely to die in the pandemic were just terrible. And of course we did tragically have staff and prisoners die during the pandemic, but nowhere near the number projected and that is just the most remarkable tribute to the work that people did.

We've got quite a few staff now who because they joined during that period, a Covid regime was and is their norm. That has difficulties. There is some understandable nervousness about moving away a Covid era regime, which obviously had many downsides, but was also associated with lower levels of violence. You can understand a reluctance to revert, and in truth, I think it would be wrong to say, 'just revert to what you were doing before'. In the private sector, the small businesses were the ones who, when Covid came along, changed everything and then, when it was over, they didn't go back to what they were doing before; they had a new business model.

That isn't a perfect read across to the prison estate, but I think individual prisons and the system as a whole did learn things as a result of doing things differently during Covid, and it would be short-sighted not to learn from that.

All that being said, I want more prisoners doing purposeful activity, and having access to really high-quality activity that will set them up for success as contributing citizens when they leave prison. And again, if I go back to my experience as Minister for Employment when I was talking to employers, that does mean learning specific job skills, but more importantly it's about teaching what some people would erroneously call 'soft skills'. Employers have told me they can teach someone how to lay a track, for example, but what they can't easily teach them is how to turn up on time, or look me in the eye, be appropriately dressed, or be able to take criticism. And so obviously acquisition of skills is important, and some people come to us without formal recognition of skills they've developed. Being able to certificate things alongside having basic English and Maths in particular, is super important. But to my mind, the experience of

being in work, which feels like work on the outside, is what we should aim for, though I recognise doing that within the constraints of a prison isn't straightforward.

AL: That's made me think straight away about the idea of normalisation.

DH: Yes, one of the things the Prison Service does brilliantly is give people routine and discipline. So obviously, ideally, what we want is for people to have a routine that they carry on with when they get out, that keeps them on track. So, getting as many people to work as possible, I think, is really important from that perspective. I don't want to sound like I'm totally obsessed with work, but I do think it's just so, so important. Obviously we do that with ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence) in a big way, and that really is the work you'd be doing on the outside. That is a quiet success story in prisons. ROTL is a real success story for prisoners in the open estate, but also actually for some of those employers.

AL: ROTL requires a bit of bravery doesn't it on both sides – both someone to say we're as confident as we can be that you're going to be safe in the community, and also someone from the outside to say I'm going to give you a chance, which includes a chance that sometimes it will go wrong.

DH: Yeah, that's very true. And also bravery on the outside employer and company. I think what people quite often overlook is that companies don't employ people; people employ people. And we talk about an organisation being good at such and such. In reality there was, at one point, an individual in that organisation who had to persuade somebody that it was a good idea to take a risk that they didn't have to take. That individual is one of the great heroes or heroines of our story.

AL: What's the message you'd like to leave readers of the Prison Service Journal with, especially the staff who work in HMPPS?

DH: Please know how exceptional you are. The work you do is unique. It's takes someone very, very special to work in prisons and very, very skilled to be able to take that opportunity to leverage change. Having those skills to be able to help people to turn their lives around benefits everyone – we all rely on you, and yet so few of us could actually do the work you do every day in our prisons. What's amazing about what you do is that it's about keeping us safe now, but also about breaking cycles of crime for the future: stopping future generations coming into custody.